War and Famines[*]

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War is one of the last bastions of famine in the contemporary world. Almost every famine in the last thirty years or so has been connected with armed conflict of one sort or another. The connection is particularly evident in sub-Saharan Africa, where conflict-related famines have struck country after country – Angola, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda, to name a few. The two main food crises of the 1990s outside Africa, in Iraq and North Korea, were also related to military hostilities, if not (in the latter case) active combat.

One reason why famine is strongly associated with armed conflict is that most countries are now able to prevent famine in peacetime. This is a relatively recent development. During the twentieth century, major famines have occurred in India, China, Russia, Brazil, Bangladesh and many other countries even in the absence of armed conflict. This happened at a time when large numbers of people lived in conditions of extreme poverty and vulnerability, and when public assistance systems (national as well international) were also poorly developed. In both respects, the situation has considerably improved in many countries, making them much less vulnerable to peacetime famine. The political compulsions to respond to an impending famine are also much stronger than they used to be, especially in relatively democratic societies. In most countries today, it would take a major economic and political crisis for a famine to occur in the absence of war.

In wartime, however, it is easy for the normal economic and political safeguards against famine to break down, even in relatively affluent countries. In economic terms, armed conflicts may contribute to "entitlement failures" (i.e. a breakdown of the ability of households to acquire the commodities they need to survive) in at least five distinct ways.[1] First, there is often a "recession effect": aggregate output and income decline as the physical, legal and administrative basis of productive activity is destroyed or disrupted. Second, even when there is no recession effect (war economies sometimes do quite well in terms of

[1] The "entitlement approach" to famine analysis was pioneered by Amartya Sen (1981). On the debates surrounding this approach, see Osmani (1995).

aggregate output), entitlements are often threatened by a "composition effect": the composition of output shifts towards the production of military supplies, leading to severe shortages of civilian goods and sharp increases in the prices of essential commodities. Third, there is a "distribution effect": the burden of wartime deprivation tends to fall heavily on underprivileged families, as the latter have to cope with forgone earning opportunities, rising prices, reduced public services, and sometimes also the direct destruction or appropriation of their possessions. Fourth, the vulnerability of underprivileged households is further enhanced by a "risk effect", associated with the breakdown of ordinary insurance arrangements (e.g. reciprocal credit, patronage relations, labour migration, and various forms of state support). Fifth comes what might be called an "environmental effect": the epidemiological and health environment deteriorates due to population displacement, water pollution, the collapse of health services, and related processes. Broadly speaking, it is typically through some combination of these different effects that vulnerable households are driven to destitution or even starvation in situations of armed conflict.

Turning to the political factors, one major issue is that armed conflicts foster authoritarian regimes that are not accountable to the population. This makes it easier for a famine to develop, as there is no guarantee that remedial action will be taken in the event of a food crisis.[2] In some conflict situations, unaccountable leaders may even stand to gain from the emergence of famine conditions in specific areas.

It would be inaccurate to say that the political leadership is always indifferent to the plight of the civilian population in times of armed conflict. In fact, there have been interesting instances where the role of the state in protecting and promoting the well-being of the citizens expanded in wartime. Here a useful distinction can be made between inter-state conflicts and civil wars. Inter-state conflicts, particularly "patriotic wars", often involve an increase in social cohesion and an expansion of the role of the state (indeed, the historical emergence of "nation-states" has been closely connected with this process). In some cases, this process also includes an expansion of social provisions, and possibly even an improvement in the living conditions of disadvantaged sections of the population. In relatively democratic societies, in particular, the expansion of social provisions in wartime sometimes plays an essential role in

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[2] On this issue, see particularly Sen (1992); also Drèze and Sen (1989).

sustaining popular support for the war effort. This is one reading, for instance, of Britain's experience during the first world war.[3]

The situation is radically different in situations of internal conflict ("civil war"), which typically involve disintegration rather than consolidation of the social role of the state. The catastrophic breakdown of health and education services, for instance, is a well-documented feature of many civil wars in the contemporary world. In many cases, this breakdown has been intensified by direct military attacks on schools, health centres and the civilian infrastructure in general. The food economy, too, is a common target, damaged through means such as destruction of crops, disruption of transport networks and looting of relief supplies.

Thus, the political antecedents of famine vulnerability in wartime include not only the possible abdication of state responsibility for the prevention of famine, but also the active use of food (or famine) as a weapon. In many countries, for instance, the disruption of food supplies by the ruling government has been used to cut the lifelines of rebel forces or their supporters.[4] Inter-state conflicts, too, have frequently involved the deliberate undermining of food entitlements. One recent example is the creation of quasi-famine conditions in Iraq in 1990-1, when the combination of intensive bombings and draconian economic sanctions (even involving food imports) caused widespread hunger and a dramatic increase in mortality rates.[5] Restrictions on food imports were relaxed in mid-1991, but widespread hunger persists to this day as general economic sanctions continue to paralyse the Iraqi economy and undermine food entitlements. A recent UNICEF study estimates that economic sanctions on Iraq have caused up to half a million excess deaths among children alone in the 1990s (UNICEF, 1999). This is one of the worst cases of the use of food as a weapon in the gruesome history of conflict-related famines in the twentieth century.

Helping to force the opponent into submission is only one example of the possible "uses" of famine in a context of violent conflict. There are also other ways in which particular classes or groups (e.g. traders, speculators, warlords, political leaders) may derive

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[3] See Winter (1986), Bourne (1989) and Marwick (1991); for a related analysis with reference to the second world war, see Titmuss (1950).

[4] See e.g. Sanders (1982) and Macrae and Zwi (1994).

[5] On this, see Drèze and Gazdar (1992).

economic or political benefits from conflict-related famine. While sectional advantages of this type exist in most famines, war situations often provide exceptional opportunities for particular groups to take advantage of famine conditions, e.g. by seizing the property of displaced persons. In some cases, these "benefits of famine" can even be seen to play a crucial role in the causation of famine itself. This is, for instance, a plausible interpretation of the politics of famine in southwestern Sudan in 1985-89 (Keen, 1994).

Famine relief operations initiated by third parties in situations of armed conflict, particularly civil wars, tend to generate serious moral and strategic dilemmas. The basic issue is that there is no "neutral" space in which to conduct such operations. Famine relief may even end up fuelling the conflict in question, as when humanitarian aid becomes a military resource or an object of contention for the parties involved. Some authors even view the "disaster relief industry" as a major cause of continued war and famine in Africa (de Waal, 1997). While this sensational interpretation may not do justice to the genuine dilemmas faced by humanitarian agencies in conflict situations, it is a useful reminder of the potential dangers of ill-considered intervention. It also points to the need for integrating humanitarian concerns with political analysis and pressure.[6]

Recent research on war and famine has done a great deal to clarify the issues, and also to bring armed conflicts closer to the focus of attention in development studies. Let us hope that this will help to prevent war-related famines in the future. However, given the intrinsic economic as well as political fragility of food entitlements in situations of armed conflict, war-related famines are likely to continue as long as wars themselves persist. Ultimately, the safest way or eradicating the former is to abolish the latter. This may sound utopian, but it is even more utopian to think that the human race can survive much longer without achieving on a world-wide basis the "pacification" that has already occurred to a large extent within specific countries.[7] Human beings are way behind most other species in this field: one has to look rather far in the biological scale (e.g. among some species of ants) to find anything resembling the institution of war in the animal world (Andreski, 1992). There is no reason to

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[6] On this point, see particularly Keen (1994) and Keen and Wilson (1994). For a candid account of the moral dilemmas involved in humanitarian emergencies, see Vaux (forthcoming).

[7] For an illuminating discussion of the prospects of eliminating war as an institution, see Anatol Rapoport (1992).

think that we cannot catch up with monkeys, dogs and rats in this respect. If we don't, our days are numbered.

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<u>Suggested further reading</u>

de Waal, Alex (1997), <u>Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa</u> (Oxford: James Currey).

A thought-provoking analysis of the politics of famine relief in Africa.

Drèze, Jean, and Sen, Amartya (1989), <u>Hunger and Public Action</u> (Oxford: Clarendon).

Part 2 discusses famines and famine prevention, building on the entitlement approach developed earlier by Amartya Sen. It is short on war, but the general framework may be of interest.

Keen, David (1998), <u>The Economic Functions of Violence in Civil Wars</u>, Adelphi Papers 320 (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the International Institute for Strategic Studies).

An insightful essay on the political economy of civil wars.

Macrae, J., and Zwi, A. (eds.) (1994), <u>War and Hunger: Rethinking International Responses to Complex Emergencies</u> (London: Zed).

A useful collection of papers on the dilemmas of humanitarian intervention in conflict situations.

Rapoport, Anatol (1992), <u>Peace: An Idea Whose Time has Come</u> (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press).

The scientific case for revolutionary pacifism. Essential reading for anyone concerned about the future of the planet.