

# The Pomeranian Potato Famine

Hunger was widespread in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe. While the cities were provisioned reasonably well in most years, the peasants often faced famine. France had 40 nationwide famines between 1500 and 1800, more than one per decade. This is an underestimate as it ignores the hundreds and hundreds of local famines. France was not exceptional; all the nations of northern Europe had many national and regional famines.

In Pomerania, the farmers grew largely wheat and rye in their sandy fields. This area is much like Michigan in that the glaciers scraped off much of the top soil leaving mostly sand and rocks with occasional islands of top soil. So the farmer had little choice in his choice of crop. It had to grow well in sandy soil and be able to cope with varying weather of northern Europe. The wheat of that era was very sensitive to weather conditions so it was risky to grow wheat. Rye was more reliable but it gave coarser grain and coarser flour for baking.

Rye was the most common store of nutrition for the peasant family. It kept well and could be easily cooked. Also the rye could be taken to the miller who would make it into flour. Various levels of coarseness could be requested. The miller normally took part of the grain (usually 10%) for his services. The resulting flour could be used for cooking and baking. The peasants also usually had a small vegetable garden and a cow. The cow's milk also provided daily nutrition as well as stored nutrition in the form of cheese. For most peasants the cow was their most valuable possession; the cow often shared the peasant's housing and often had a room of her own.

The potato was introduced to Europe by the Spaniards; the first potatoes arrived with Francisco Pizarro in 1532. Pizarro noticed the wide spread use of potatoes in Andes during his conquest of the Incas. Within three decades Spanish farmers in Europe were exporting potatoes to France and the Netherlands. But only one type of potato was introduced rather than a variety of genetically different potatoes.

Unlike rye and wheat, potatoes are not grown from seed. Instead new potato plants are grown from chunks or sprouts of a previously grown potato. Consequently all of the potatoes grown in northern Europe were genetically identical since they all came from

the single potato variety introduced to Europe. This will turn out to be crucial at a later date.

The use of the potato as a crop spread slowly. In Germany, there was widespread agreement between Catholics and Lutherans that the potato should not be farmed. Pastors and Priests agreed that if God wanted Germans to eat the potato he would have mentioned the potato in the Bible. In England in the eighteenth century, farmers denounced the potato as an advance scout for hated Roman Catholicism. “No Potatoes, No Popery!” was an election slogan in 1765.

When Pomerania was hit by famine in 1744, King Frederick the Great, a potato enthusiast, had to order the peasant’s to eat potatoes in order to overcome their resistance. Soon potatoes were being grown everywhere in Pomerania; the potato spelled an end to famines in Pomerania. Here is how. Every year, many farmers left fallow as much as half of their grain land to rest the soil and fight weeds (which were plowed under in summer). Now even smallholders could grow potatoes on the fallow land and control weeds by hoeing. Compared with grains, potatoes are inherently more productive in terms of nutrition produced. Also since they grew underground, potatoes were much less vulnerable to variations in the weather. Because potatoes were so productive, they doubled, in terms of calories, Europe’s food supply. They also stored very well.

By mid-nineteenth century, potatoes had become a staple in much of Europe. Roughly 40 percent of the Irish ate no solid food other than potatoes; the figure was between 10 percent and 30 percent in the Netherlands, Belgium, Prussia and perhaps Poland. Routine famine almost disappeared in potato country, a 2,000-mile band that stretched from Ireland in the west to Russia’s Ural Mountains in the east.

The so-called “potato blight” preys on the nightshade family, especially potatoes and tomatoes. Scientists believe that it originated in Peru. Probably it was taken to Antwerp as the potato blight first broke out in early summer 1845 in Belgium. The blight was soon destroying potatoes in the France, Netherlands, Germany, Denmark and England. It was reported in Ireland on September 13, 1845. Recall that the potatoes were all were genetically identical. As a result the blight was able to destroy almost all of the potatoes plants in northern Europe.

The Irish Potato Famine is well known in America. It resulted in massive Irish immigration in the years following 1845. The famine did not wind down until 1852. A million or more Irish people died; this was one of the deadliest famines in history in terms of the percentage of population lost. Within a decade, two million more people had fled Ireland, almost three-quarters of them to the United States. Many more would follow.

Lesser known are the consequences of the potato famine on Pomerania. Like Ireland the potato famine destroyed the main source of nutrition for millions of subsistence farmers. They too starved as did the Irish. In 1846 and 1847 the rye and wheat crops also failed. This period was known as the “Hungry Forties.”

It is worth noting that other events in Ireland and Pomerania were also stimulating the immigration to North America. One important one was that when the peasants left it was possible to mechanize farming and consolidate farmland. Consequently, the land owners may have made it difficult for peasants to return to the land. So food production rebounded but the farming population did not. Meanwhile the homesteading policies of the American and Canadian government made it easy to acquire farm land and in many cases travel subsidies were provided.

On the great estates of Pomerania, the mix of workers changed. People who could repair and use farming equipment were needed. Many of the estate workers with traditional skills were no longer needed. These displaced Pomeranians moved to the emerging industrial cities in Germany and North America. Part of the reason for this movement to the cities was that many of the peasants in Pomerania that worked on estates and did not have the skills to be independent farmers. Instead they had skills like working leather or blacksmithing which could be used in industry.

Immigration to North America grew rapidly in the 1850's and states like Wisconsin were populated by people from Pomerania. Usually this wave of immigrants to North America were financially supported from the sale of their assets in Pomerania, from family support, and from work contracts in North America where they were committed to typically five years of work after they arrived.

Details of the potato's introduction and the potato blight draws from the book *1493: Uncovering the New World Columbus Created*, by Charles C. Mann, published by Vintage Press in 2011 and from his article titled "How the Potato Changed the World" in the *Smithsonian Magazine* of November 2011. Both are worth reading for more details and other interesting related topics.