

The three major famines of Japanese history. Alan Macfarlane

The first well-described famine in Japan, known as the Kyoho famine, occurred in 1732. There are various theories as to what caused this. One author suggests 'swarms of locusts appeared in the Inland Sea area, ruining much of the rice crop of western Japan.'¹ In the resulting period, rice in Edo and Osaka 'cost five to seven times as much as it had during the glut of the previous years.'¹ Another states that it was caused by a series of poor harvests, which 'culminated in 1732 when the winter crops of wheat and barley were damaged due to heavy rains from the second month on...This poor harvest was followed by a disastrous rice crop. Rice insects (**unka**) ruined the fields and reports say that only 10 per cent of the fields were unharmed.'²

It is estimated that in northern Kyushu, something like 20 per cent of the population in the Fukuoka Domain died during this famine. The effects were particularly bad in fishing villages, where up to a third of the population died, whereas in other villages it was under 10 per cent.³ This would mean about fifteen thousand people. Two things are worth noting. Firstly, that the famine was largely restricted to northern Kyushu. It does not seem to have led to a serious famine for the vast majority of the population who lived on the larger island of Honshu. (see map) Even southern Kyushu is not described as being seriously affected. Serious though the famine was, it was limited to a small part of Japan. The death of some tens of thousands would have only a limited effect on the total population of approximately twenty-five to thirty million persons at this time.

Secondly, this was the last serious famine in this area. Afterwards, 'some people may have starved, but it seems that most managed to survive somehow.'⁴ In the data for this area 'there are very few traces of either the Temmei famine (1783-86) or the Tempo famine (1836-38).'⁵ Thus, with one exception, the crowded island of Kyushu seems to have been free of famine.

The second of the three major famines, the Temmei famine of 1782-5, occurred in some northern parts of the main island of Honshu. The events are described by Sansom. 'In 1778 there were floods in

¹4:451

²Kalland, *Famines*, 40-1

³Kalland, 47

⁴Kalland, 51

⁵ibid, 32

Kyoto and in parts of Kyushu, and an eruption of the volcano on Shima Island, followed by an eruption of Sakarujima, the volcano near Kagoshima, in 1779. The great famine of Temmei began in 1783. In the following year from spring to harvest rain was incessant, and during that period an eruption of the volcano Asama caused great devastation.⁶ It is agreed that the shortages of the 1782-5 period 'were caused by summer cold spells...due chiefly to the large amounts of volcanic ash thrown into the atmosphere by an eruption of Mt. Asama.'⁷

'No-one knows how many people died in the great Temmei famine' and there is considerable dispute about the effects. We do know that the shogun's land-tax revenue fell by more than a half.⁸ We also know of terrible suffering. Sugae Masumi, an itinerant scholar, travelled through the northern villages in 1785 and came across mounds of bleached bones. A peasant came up to him and explained that 'These are the bones of people who starved to death. During the winter and spring of the year before last, these people collapsed in the snow....Their bodies blocked the road for miles and miles, and passersby had to tread around them carefully....We also used to catch chickens and dogs running around in the open and eat them. When we ran out of animals, we stabbed and killed our children, our brothers, or other people who were on death's door with some disease, and ate their flesh.'⁹ Another Samurai observer noted that the suffering was restricted to the northern provinces, yet it was terrible nonetheless. 'Although the shortages in the Kanto did not amount to a great famine, the loss of life through starvation in the northern provinces was dreadful. There was nothing to eat but horse-flesh or, when this ran short, dogs and cats. Once these were consumed, people died of sheer starvation in great numbers. In some villages of thirty, forty, or fifty households not one person survived, and nobody could say who had died or when, for the corpses were unburied and had been eaten by beasts and birds.'¹⁰

On the other hand, Hanley & Yamamura have argued forcefully that the mortality has been seriously exaggerated. They made a study of one of the central areas hit by the famine, the Morioka domain. While the local authorities, arguing for a reduction in rice tax, assessed a domain-wide total of some 64,000 deaths, a study of the local records suggests that the actual totals were less than one tenth of this. The authors believe that the samurai diary of Haruyama Kichisaburo was probably more accurate when it suggested that the crop failures were 'relatively limited' and that the famine was 'not so severe'

⁶Sansom, iii, 184-5

⁷4:496

⁸4:466

⁹Hane, 8

¹⁰Sansom, iii, 184

because of large quantities of goods brought in from outside 'thanks to the developed commerce'¹¹ They conclude that 'despite the dire picture of the famines drawn by Takahashi and others, the merchants were still allowed to speculate in rice prices and, unlike the famines in a truly subsistence economy, a 'social margin' of sorts existed in the warehouses of these merchants even in the depth of the famines.'¹² Of course, as we shall see later, speculation in rice can be interpreted as a cause of famine, rather than a sign of its absence.

It is again worth noting certain features of this famine. Firstly, it was restricted to the northern quarter of the northern island of Honshu. This is a cold mountainous area with short summers and long winters and with poor communications. Even in the best of years agriculture was hazardous. When cold was increased very considerably by the volcanic eruptions and possibly by a change in climate during a 'little ice age',¹³ the situation became very serious indeed. The vulnerability of this particular area continued until the 1930's. In many ways it was the Japanese equivalent, in terms of climate and agriculture, to the upland areas of northern England which, as we have seen, were the one area of that country which suffered from serious famine after the fifteenth century. It is also worth noting that the deaths, horrific as they were, were limited to the tens of thousands. Again we are dealing with something rather different from the hundreds of thousands or millions recorded as dying in the Chinese or Indian famines.

The third serious famine was the Tempo famine of the 1830's. 'It was unusually cold during the spring planting of 1833, exceptionally so during the summer growing season ...and the autumn saw abnormally early snow falls...the summer was, unfortunately, wet...the result was a general crop failure...' This affected both rice and the other crops of wheat, barley and even bamboo shoots. The worst areas were again those hit by the Temmei famine, that is northeastern Japan, the Tohoku. In 1833 only about a third of the normal crop was grown. Nevertheless 'one bad season was an irritation rather than a tragedy.' The next two years were 'only marginally better, and the harvest of 1836 was infinitely worse.' It 'rained almost incessantly throughout the summer. It was cold, into the bargain...' Once again 'the effects of this extraordinary weather were felt chiefly in the Tohoku...'¹⁴ The harvest "was estimated to be only 28 percent of normal".

It is once again difficult to estimate the effects. We know that there was terrible suffering not only on the northern tip, but along the western coast down to Echizen. (see map XXX) For instance, Griffis described in 1871 how 'Returning on the other side of the crematorium, I saw a great heap of skulls, bones, clothes, bowls, utensils, and other relics of the dead. It was the monument of a famine which

¹¹Hanley, Economic, 150

¹²Hanley, Economic, 153

¹³Hayami, Population Growth (xerox), 36

¹⁴p.118

ravaged Echizen some forty years ago, during which time the poor and the beggars died in such numbers that they could not be consumed or inhumed in the usual manner singly, but were cremated by scores on heaps of brush-wood.¹⁵ We know that there was mass suffering. We also know that the tax rice received by the Tokugawa government fell from 1.25 **koku** in 1833 to 1.03 **koku** in 1836 and that rice prices were three times higher in Osaka in 1837 than they had been in 1833.¹⁶

It is less easy to know the number of deaths caused by the famine. One author gives the following estimate. 'In 1836, we are told, over 100,000 starved to death in the Tohoku, and in Echizen the following year the death rate was three times the normal figure. In Tottori, officials were claiming that of a total of 50,000 people in distress, 20,000 died.'¹⁷ As the same author warns us, however, 'these figures were all too often thrown together.' It was in the interests of the officials to exaggerate the crisis in order to get aid. On the basis of a detailed study of one area, Bizen, south of Kyoto, we are warned of the dangers of accepting the crude estimates. We are told that '...the figures for the population of Bizen compiled by the Bakufu dropped by just over 8,000 between the years 1834 and 1846.' This decline of about 2.5 per cent, the authors believe, 'reflects the magnitude of the Tempo famine on the domain population' more accurately than later reports. (Source - Hanley ?) When the recent **Cambridge History** speaks of 'tens of thousands of persons' dying, we must put this in the context of a total Japanese population of over 30 million at this time.¹⁸

It is worth looking at the area of the famine. Again it was worst in the cold northern area, but this time the effects were felt down the north-eastern coast of Honshu to the middle of Japan. This was without doubt the most widespread of the Japanese famines and also the last.

¹⁵Griffis, 513-4

¹⁶5:120

¹⁷Ambs. Hist. 119

¹⁸4:495