

Excerpt: Mike Davis Philippines

In the Philippines, drought again brought famine to Negros's infamous sugar plantations in 1896-97, then returned to devastate agriculture on Luzon, Panay and other big islands from 1899 to 1903. Climate stress was alloyed with warfare, poverty and ecological crisis. Thus the first phase of drought-famine coincided with a national uprising against the Spanish, while the second overlapped patriotic resistance to US recolonization. The independence movement itself, moreover, was spurred by the growing crisis of food security since mid-century, when Spain (prodded by Britain) had launched an ambitious campaign to develop exports and commercialize agriculture. Traditional forms of communal land ownership and subsistence-oriented production had been violently dismantled in favor of rice and sugar monocultures operated by pauperized smallholders and debt-shackled sharecroppers. . . . Moreover, as the export boom generated a demand for new plantation land, Luzon's interior foothills were rapidly deforested, leading by the 1890s to the silting of river bed, more intense flooding, and gradual aridification of the lowlands.

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. . . Beginning with the outbreak of war in February 1899, military authorities closed all the ports, disrupting the vital inter-island trade in foodstuffs and preventing the migration of hungry laborers to food-surplus areas. Then, as drought began to turn into famine in 1900, they authorized the systematic destruction of rice stores and livestock in areas that continued to support guerrilla resistance. As historians would later point out, the ensuing campaign of terror against the rural population, backed up by pass system and population "reconcentration," prefigured US strategy in Vietnam during the 1960s. "All palay, rice, and storehouses clearly to use by the enemy soldiers," writes De Bevoise, "were to be destroyed. That plan would have caused hardship for the people even had it been implemented as intended, since guerrillas and civilians often depended on the same rice stockpiles, but the food-denial program got out of hand. Increasingly, unsure who was enemy and who was friend, American soldiers on patrol did not agonize over such distinctions. They shot and burned indiscriminately, engaging in an orgy of destruction throughout the Philippines." As one soldier wrote back home to Michigan: "We burned every house, destroyed every carabao and other animals, all rice and other foods." As a result, "agricultural production was so generally crippled during the American war that food-surplus regions hardly existed."

As peasants began to die of hunger in the fall of 1900, American officers openly acknowledged in correspondence that starvation had become official military strategy. "The result

is inevitable," wrote Colonel Dickman from Panay, "many people will starve to death before the end of six months." On Samar, Brigadier General Jacob Smith ordered his men to turn the interior into a "howling wilderness." Famine, in turn, paved the way for cholera (which especially favored the reconcentration camps), malaria, smallpox, typhoid, tuberculosis "and everything else that rode in war's train of evils." In such circumstances, of course, it was impossible to disentangle the victims of drought from the casualties of warfare, or to distinguish famine from epidemic mortality. Nonetheless, De Bevoise concludes, "it appears that the American war contributed directly and indirectly to the loss of more than a million persons from a base population of about seven million." ... [1]

References:

[1] Late Victorian holocausts :El Nino famines and the making of the third world /Mike Davis. ,1859847390 (cloth), page 197-199