



Blowing from Guns in British India.

1857 Indian Uprising

By Whitney Howarth

In 1857, uprisings and rebellions ended the British East India Company's (EIC) control in India, then it became an official British colony. Historians continue to debate the nature of these uprisings.

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In 1783, Great Britain was stinging from its defeat in the American Revolution (1775–1783). It had lost its 13 promising colonies there. Afterward, the British turned its attention to the Indian subcontinent. The British East India Company (EIC) had been in India since the 1600s. By the late 1700s, it was seizing control of the region.

The EIC was a business that conducted international trade. However, it also conquered and ruled over a growing number of territories in India. In other words, its “business” was imperialism. Imperialism is when one country takes control of another territory and rules it. The EIC expanded its power over India’s resources and people. Any resistance to its control was met with force. The EIC used British troops to stamp out resistance. They were aided by locally recruited Indian soldiers called *sepoys*. Then in 1857, the EIC’s policies and actions caused a backlash.

Sepoy Soldiers

For a young man in India needing a job, joining the EIC army would have been appealing. However, sepoys faced racial and religious discrimination. Whether Muslim or Hindu, they were expected to adapt their religions and culture to the needs of the army. Promotion was out of the question. Command positions were reserved for British officers. Still, sepoys were needed for controlling native peoples. They also were shipped abroad to expand the British Empire elsewhere.

By the mid-1800s, many Indians were upset with EIC control. High taxes, racist regulations, and disrespect for local customs became unbearable. In 1857, uprisings broke out at several military bases.

The spark that lit the fire

The first of these uprisings began in May 1857. It started at a military base about 40 miles outside the capital city of Delhi. Interestingly, the most heated issue had to do with ammunition the Indian troops had to use. Stories had spread that new bullet cartridges were being greased with animal fat from pigs and cows. The greased cartridges had to be opened by biting off the top. However, nearly every sepoy was either Muslim or Hindu. For Muslims, their religion forbids eating any part of a pig. For Hindus, the same rule applies to cows. Some of the sepoys disobeyed orders. They refused to sink their teeth into the fat-greased ammunition and were sent to prison.

Some sepoys rose up to free their comrades. Several British officers were killed in the fighting, and the violence quickly spread. The next day, the sepoys reached Delhi and mobbed the British arsenal. Rebel soldiers and anti-British civilians also rallied at the house of the former Mughal emperor. The Mughal Empire had controlled the region in the 1600s and 1700s. Rebels called for the Mughal ruler to reclaim power. He reluctantly agreed.



English engraving from 1857 showing mutinous sepoys dividing up spoils. Public domain.

News spread fast. More fighting broke out across northern India. By the end, over 50,000 sepoys had died or were later executed. Another 100,000 civilians were killed by British efforts to put down the rebellion and take revenge.

Not all of India rebelled. Many sepoys and their units remained loyal to the British and helped to put down the uprising. However, people of different religions and languages joined the rebellion. When the Mughal emperor's sons were captured by the British, they were executed without a trial. Such acts of vengeance continued across India. The EIC and its British troops set out to punish the rebels. They also terrorized communities that had protected them.

It took a full year for the British to re-establish control over Indian society. By 1858, the East India Company no longer governed India. The British Empire took India as an official colony instead.

Mutiny, revolt, or war of independence?

Many historians still debate the causes and consequences of the Indian rebellion. Some Indian nationalists say it was an organized revolt of colonial subjects against foreign imperialists. However, many scholars of Indian history see these events differently. They argue that India wasn't a nation yet. It had never been a fully unified state with a central government. It did not have a common national identity. In truth, Indians rebelled for a number of reasons, including high taxes, treatment of poor peasants, and opposition to Christian missionaries.

British responses to the uprising were often racist. They characterized Indian troops as inferior and violent. British accounts from the period often painted Hindus and Muslims as religious extremists. They also regarded Indian violence as a primitive impulse, and not as a response to British oppression.

Outcomes and legacies

The East India Company lost its authority after the rebellion. Britain, though, then ruled India directly. In 1858, Britain's Queen Victoria issued a proclamation. It promised its Indian subjects that there would be no more interference in religious traditions and other matters. Still, British distrust of native peoples was deeply felt.

New colonial authorities created rules that insured inequality. They supported racist justifications for colonial rule, or more accurately, misrule. Whites and native peoples were segregated. Policing and oppression of Indians increased. The British deemed India's native peoples as "savage" at worst, and at best "unworthy" of self-governance.

India would not gain independence from British rule until 1947.



A political cartoon from the British magazine Punch from 1857 showing the British perspective of the 1857 uprising with "Britannia"—representing Great Britain—killing the natives, justice as revenge! Public domain.

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A political cartoon from the British magazine Punch from 1857 showing the British perspective of the 1857 uprising with "Britannia"—representing Great Britain—killing the natives, justice as revenge! Public domain. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_Rebellion_of_1857#/media/File:JusticeTenniel1857Punch.jpg



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