

6.20 Sepoy Mutiny: India's First War for Independence (1857-1858)

Sources: <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1857greathed.asp>;

http://webs.bcp.org/sites/vcleary/modernworldhistorytextbook/imperialism/section_4/sepoyuprising.html

Background: Sepoy was the name used by the British army for Indian infantrymen. The term probably comes from Persian. The British empire depended on foreign troops and enlisted colonized people into segregated national divisions. This facilitated a British policy of “divide and conquer,” or more accurately, “divide and control.”

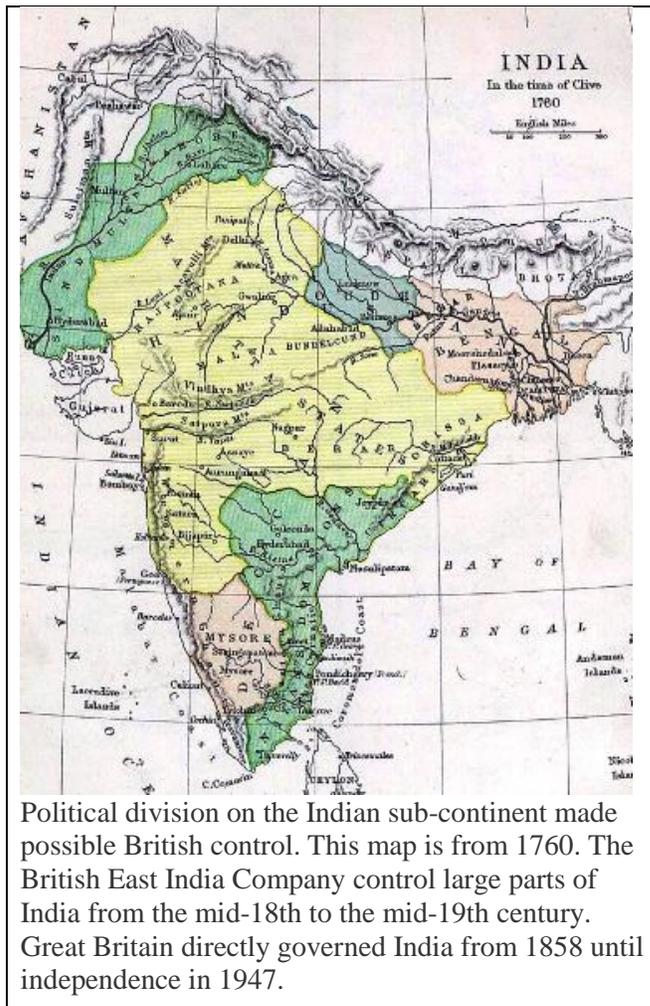
During the 19th century over 95% of the British East India Company's 300,000-man army were Indian natives or sepoy. The East India Company recruited Muslims from Bengal to enlist in its Bengal unit and Hindus to serve in units from the northern provinces. Many of the Sepoy were Sikh.

Before the 1857-1858 Sepoy Mutiny, Indian Army units served along side regular British troops, but were employed by the British East India Company and paid out of corporate profits. After the mutiny and its suppression, Great Britain took control over India away from the Company and placed Indian Army units under direct British military control.

During the 19th century British control over India was often tenuous. In 1848, Lord Dalhousie, the British Governor-General for India explained, “In India one is always sitting on a volcano.”

Questions

1. Lord Dalhousie compared the British occupation of India with “sitting on a volcano.” What set off the eruption?
2. What tactics did the British use to control India?
3. In your opinion, why did the mutiny lead to atrocities committed by both sides?



A) The Sepoy Mutiny

In May 1857, Indians serving in army units under British command mutinied. The immediate cause of the mutiny was anger over new breech-loaded Enfield rifles. The tip of the Enfield cartridge had to be bitten off before the rifle could be loaded. Hindus, who considered cows sacred, feared that the rifle's cartridges were greased with beef fat. Among Muslims, rumors spread that the cartridges were greased with pork fat. Eighty-five Hindu and Muslim soldiers who refused to use the new weapons on religious grounds were arrested by British officers and placed in irons. Other soldiers in their units freed them and executed the British officers. The rebelling soldiers then marched on the city of Delhi where they were joined by other local Indian troops. Within days there was a full scale rebellion in India against British rule. Some peasants and landlords also joined the uprising.

Fortunately for the British, they were able to use other Indian army units, many of whom were Sikhs, to defeat the mutiny. Fighting was brutal and both sides committed atrocities. When British troops retook Delhi, they massacred both soldiers and civilians. The British deliberately defiled captured sepoys. Hindus were smeared with cow fat before they were hanged. Muslim rebels were forced to chew pig fat. At the Bengal town of Cawnpore, rebels captured a British army encampment and attacked unarmed British prisoners as they were being boarded on a riverboat. The sepoys then joined a local mob that massacred two hundred British women and children. About 15% of the 40,000 British living in India died during the rebellion. At last 800,000 Indians died in the uprising and from resulting food shortages.

B) First Hand Accounts of the Sepoy Mutiny

Questions

1. How was the Greathed family able to survive the rioting that accompanied the Sepoy Mutiny?
2. What did British soldiers do in response to the mutiny and riots?
3. In your opinion, why did Sepoy massacre civilians at Cawnpore?
4. As an historian, how would you explain the intensity of the response to the introduction of the Enfield rifles?

An Account of the Opening of the Indian Mutiny at Meerut, 1857 by Elisa Greathed

A) We were on the point of going to the evening service, when the disturbance commenced on the Native Parade ground. Shots and volumes of smoke told of what was going on: our servants begged us not to show ourselves, and urged the necessity of closing our doors, as the mob were approaching.

B) The increasing tumult, thickening smoke, and fires all around, convinced us of the necessity of making our position as safe as we could; our guard were drawn up below. After dark, a party of insurgents rushed into the grounds, drove off the guard, and broke into the house, and set it on fire. On all sides we could hear them smashing and plundering, and calling loudly for us; it seemed once or twice as though footsteps were on the staircase, but no one came up. We owed much to the fidelity of our servants: had but one proved treacherous, our lives must have been sacrificed.

C) After some time, the flames got the ascendant, and the smoke became intolerable. Just as the fire threatened our destruction, we heard the voice of one of our servants calling to us to come down. At all risks, we descended. Our faithful servant, Golab Khan, seeing our perilous situation amidst the increasing flames, and that every moment was precious, with his characteristic presence of mind and quickness, had suddenly thought of a plan by which to draw away the mob, who, after having satisfied themselves with all the plunder they could get, were every moment becoming more eager in their search for us. He boldly went up to them, won their confidence by declaring himself of their faith, and willing to give us up into their hands. He assured them it was useless to continue their search in the house; but if they would all follow him, he would lead them to a haystack, where we had been concealed. The plan succeeded; and so convinced were they that what he had told them was the truth, that not a man remained behind. In this interval we got safely down.

D) The artillery depot, with its large enclosure, was converted into a fort, and became a home for every one; many families occupied the rooms in the long range of barracks, and the space between was filled with tents. Here we found shelter, and with the aid of "tatties" [straw screens] and thermantidotes [a type of fan], felt little inconvenience from the scorching sun and hot blasts. strength and spirits seemed to rise with the exigencies of our position; no complaints were heard; heat and comparative discomfort were alike disregarded; all were cheerful and ready to help others, and those who had lost all, had their wants generously supplied by those who had been less unfortunate.

Massacre at Delhi by British Forces

“The orders were to shoot every soul. I think I must have seen about 30 or 40 defenseless people shot down before me. It was literally murder and I was perfectly horrified. . . and a few yards further on still some of our own drunken soldiers would reel past, exciting your pity not unmixed with disgust. Wherever you go, you see some unfortunate man or other being dragged out of his hiding place, and barbarously put to death.”

Massacre at Cawnpore by Sepoy Rebels

“The place was one of mass blood. I am not exaggerating when I tell you that the soles of my boots were more than covered with the blood of these poor wretched creatures. [I found] quantities of dresses, clogged thickly with blood, children’s frocks, frills, and ladies’ under clothing of all kinds, also boys’ trousers, leaves of Bibles . . . all bloody, and one or two shoes . . . All the way to the well was marked by a regular track along which the bodies had been dragged, and the thorny bushes had entangle in them scraps of clothing and long hairs. I have looked upon death in every form, but I could not look down that well again.”