# The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 Shook British Rule in India

By Robert McNamara

The Indian Revolt of 1857



The Sepoy Mutiny was a violent and very bloody uprising against British rule in India in 1857. It is also known by other names: the Indian Mutiny, the Indian Rebellion of 1857, or the Indian Revolt of 1857.

In Britain and in the West, it was almost always portrayed as a series of unreasonable and bloodthirsty uprisings spurred by falsehoods about religious insensitivity.

In India, it has been viewed quite differently, and events of 1857 have been considered the first outbreak of an independence movement against British rule.

### Background of the Sepoy Mutiny

By the 1850s the East India Company controlled much of India. A private company which first entered India to trade in the 1600s, the East India Company had eventually transformed into a diplomatic and military operation.

Large numbers of native soldiers, known as sepoys, were employed by the company to maintain order and defend trading centers. The sepoys were generally under the command of British officers.

In the late 1700s and early 1800s, sepoys tended to take great pride in their military prowess, and they exhibited enormous loyalty to their British officers. But in the 1830s and 1840s tensions began to emerge.

A number of Indians began to suspect that the British intended to convert the Indian population to Christianity. Increasing numbers of Christian missionaries began arriving in India, and this led to resentment.

There was also a general feeling that English officers were losing touch with the Indian troops under them.

Under a British policy called the "doctrine of lapse," the East India Company would take control of Indian states where a local ruler had died without a male son. The system was subject to abuse, and the company used it to take land in a questionable manner.

And as the East India Company annexed Indian states in the 1840s and [1850s](http://history1800s.about.com/od/timelines/a/1850-60timeline.htm), the Indian soldiers in the company's employ began to feel offended.

### A New Type of Rifle Cartridge Caused Problems

The traditional story of the Sepoy Mutiny is that the introduction of a new cartridge for the Enfield rifle provoked much of the trouble.

The cartridges were wrapped in paper, which had been coated in a grease which made the cartridges easier to load in rifle barrels. Rumors began to spread that the grease used to make the cartridges was derived from pigs and cows, which would be highly offensive to Muslims and Hindus.

There is no doubt that conflict over the new rifle cartridges sparked the uprising in 1857, but the reality is that social, political, and even technological reforms had set the stage for what happened.

On March 29, 1857, on the parade ground at Barrackpore, a sepoy named Mangal Pandey fired the first shot of the uprising. His unit in the Bengal Army, which had refused to use the new rifle cartridges, was about to be disarmed and punished. And Pandey shot a British sergeant-major and a lieutenant.

In the altercation, Pandey was surrounded by British troops and shot himself in the chest. He survived, and was put on trial and hanged on April 8, 1857.

As the mutiny spread, the British began called mutineers "pandies." And Pandey, it should be noted, is considered a hero in India, and has been portrayed as a freedom fighter in films and even on an Indian postage stamp.

**Major Incidents of the Sepoy Mutiny**

Throughout May and June 1857 more units of Indian troops mutinied against the British. Sepoy units in the south of India remained loyal, but in the north, many units of the Bengal Army turned on the British. And the uprising became extremely violent.

Particular incidents became notorious:

* **Meerut and Delhi:** In a large military camp (called a cantonment) at Meerut, near Delhi, a number of sepoys refused to use the new rifle cartridges in early May 1857. The British stripped them of their uniforms and put them in chains.

Other sepoys revolted on May 10, 1857, and things quickly became chaotic as mobs attacked British civilians, including women and children.

Mutineers traveled the 40 miles to Delhi and soon the large city erupted in a violent revolt against the British. A number of British civilians in the city were able to flee, but many were slaughtered. And Delhi remained in rebel hands for months.

* **Cawnpore:** A particularly horrific incident known as the Cawnpore Massacre occurred when British officers and civilians, leaving the city of Cawnpore (present day Kanpur) under a flag of surrender were attacked.

The British men were killed, and about 210 British women and children were taken prisoner. A local leader, Nana Sahib, ordered their death. When sepoys, abiding by their military training, refused to kill the prisoners, butchers were recruited from local bazaars to do the killing.

The women, children, and infants were murdered, and their bodies thrown into a well. When the British eventually took back Cawnpore and discovered the site of the massacre, it inflamed the troops and led to vicious acts of retribution.

* **Lucknow:** At the town of Lucknow about 1,200 British officers and civilians fortified themselves against 20,000 mutineers in the summer of 1857. By late September British forces commanded by Sir Henry Havelock succeeded in breaking through.

However, Havelock's forces did not have the strength to evacuate the British at Lucknow, and were forced to join the besieged garrison. Another British column, led by Sir Colin Campbell, eventually fought through to Lucknow and were able to evacuate the women and children, and ultimately the entire garrison.

# What Was the Indian Revolt of 1857?

By [Kallie Szczepanski](http://asianhistory.about.com/bio/Kallie-Szczepanski-40912.htm)



British officers hang so-called mutineers after the Indian Revolt of 1857

**Question:** What Was the Indian Revolt of 1857?

*In May of 1857,* [*sepoys*](http://asianhistory.about.com/od/glossaryps/g/What-Is-A-Sepoy.htm) *in the British East India Company's army rose up against the British. The unrest soon spread to other army divisions and civilian towns across north and central* [*India*](http://asianhistory.about.com/od/india/p/indiaprof.htm)*. By the time it was over, hundreds of thousands or even millions of people had been killed. The British home government had disbanded the British East India Company, taking direct colonial control of the* [*British Raj*](http://asianhistory.about.com/od/colonialisminasia/p/profbritraj.htm) *in India. Also, the* [*Mughal Empire*](http://asianhistory.about.com/od/india/p/mughalempireprof.htm) *ended, and Britain sent the last Mughal emperor into exile in* [*Burma*](http://asianhistory.about.com/od/burmamyanmar/p/ProfileBurma.htm)*.*

*So what was the Indian Revolt of 1857 all about?*

**Answer:**

The immediate cause of the Indian Revolt of 1857 was a seemingly minor change in the weapons used by the British East India Company's troops. The East India Company upgraded to the new Pattern 1853 Enfield rifle, which used greased paper cartridges. In order to open the cartridges and load the rifles, sepoys had to bite into the paper and tear it with their teeth.

Rumors began in 1856 that the grease on the cartridges was made of a mixture of beef tallow and pork lard; eating cows, of course, is [forbidden in Hinduism](http://hinduism.about.com/od/vegetarianism/a/holycows.htm), while consumption of pork is [*haram* in Islam](http://mideastfood.about.com/od/middleeasternfood101/a/halalfoods.htm). Thus, in this one small change, the British had managed to seriously offended both Hindu and Muslim troops.

The revolt started in Meerut, which was the first area to receive the new weapons. The British manufacturers soon changed the cartridges in an attempt to calm the spreading anger among the sepoys, but this move backfired as well - the fact that they stopped greasing the cartridges only confirmed the rumors about cow and pig fat, in the sepoys' minds.

### Causes of Spreading Unrest

Of course, as the Indian Revolt spread, it took on additional causes of discontent among both sepoy troops and civilians of all castes. Princely families joined the uprising due to British changes to the inheritance law, making adopted children ineligible for their thrones. This was an attempt to control succession in many of the princely states that were nominally independent from the British.

Large land-holders in northern India also rose up, since the British East India had confiscated land and redistributed it to the peasantry. Peasants were none too happy, either, though - they joined the revolt to protest heavy land taxes imposed by the British.

Religion also prompted some Indians to join the mutiny. The East India Company forbade certain religious practices and traditions, including [sati](http://asianhistory.about.com/od/glossaryps/g/GlosSati.htm) or widow-burning, to the outrage of many Hindus. The company also tried to undermine the [caste system](http://asianhistory.about.com/od/india/p/indiancastesystem.htm), which seemed inherently unfair to post-Enlightenment British sensibilities. In addition, British officers and missionaries began to preach Christianity to the Hindu and Muslim sepoys. The Indians believed, quite reasonably, that their religions were under attack by the East India Company.

Finally, Indians regardless of class, caste or religion felt oppressed and disrespected by the agents of the British East India Company. Company officials who abused or even murdered Indians were seldom punished properly; even if they were tried, they were rarely convicted, and those who were could appeal almost indefinitely. A general sense of racial superiority among the British fueled Indian anger across the country.

### End of the Rebellion and Aftermath:

The Indian Revolt of 1857 lasted until June of 1858. In August, the Government of India Act of 1858 dissolved the British East India Company. The British government took direct control of the half of India formerly under the company, with various princes still in nominal control of the other half. [Queen Victoria](http://womenshistory.about.com/od/victoriaqueen/p/queen_victoria.htm) became the Empress of India.

The last Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, was blamed for the revolt (although he played little role in it). The British government sent him into exile in Rangoon, Burma.

The Indian army also saw huge changes after the revolt. Instead of relying heavily on Bengali troops from the [Punjab](http://asianhistory.about.com/od/glossaryps/g/GlosPunjab.htm), the British began to recruit soldiers from the "martial races" - those peoples considered particularly warlike, such as the [Gurkhas](http://asianhistory.about.com/od/glossaryfj/g/GlosGurkha.htm) and the Sikhs.

Unfortunately, the Indian Revolt of 1857 did not result in freedom for India. In many ways, Britain reacted by taking firmer control of the "crown jewel" of its empire. It would be another ninety years before India (and [Pakistan](http://asianhistory.about.com/od/pakistan/p/PakistanProf.htm)) gained their independence.

**Overview**



Mutineers attack British troops at Lucknow
(Getty Images)
[View more images](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/history/empire/gallery/)

The Sepoy Rebellion began in the spring of 1857 in Bengal among the sepoys - a Sepoy is an Indian soldier. Some 45,000 white British soldiers, half of them in Punjab, waited in May anticipating the uprising. There was no chance of immediate reinforcements from England.

The rebellion began at Meerut on 10 May. Within three days a figurehead Mogul emperor, Bahadur Shah the Second, was proclaimed. Inside three weeks the rebellion covered the Ganges valley.

The reasons for the rebellion were long standing and included: attempts by British missionaries to convert all India to Christianity; ineffectual command of the army in Bengal; insensitive recruiting policy and "Europeanization" of the sepoy regiments and sepoy objections to serving outside their homeland and traditional areas. The spark that started the rebellion was the relatively new objection by sepoys to cartridges coated with animal grease. This offended both Hindus and Muslims.

Sir John Lawrence, the Chief Commissioner, observed that "these combinations, arsons and émeutes are all caused by the disaffection which has arisen from the introduction of the new cartridge; nothing will put a stop to this state of affairs short of giving up the use of new cartridges of any kind. The disaffection pervades the whole of the Native Regular Army and will extend to the irregulars. Even punishment will not prove effective; for the sufferers will become objects of sympathy and be looked upon as martyrs for their religion".

At Meerut on 23 April 1857 troops refused to use the new cartridges. On 9 May they were publicly degraded, stripped of their uniforms and jailed. This prompted other sepoys to break open the jail and kill any European officer they could find before heading for Dehli. For some reason the British hadn't a full regiment on standby. On 30 May came the uprising at the Lucknow garrison followed by the notorious massacre of Europeans in Cawnpore.