

DODGING A BULLET

THE INDIAN REBELLION OF 1857 WAS DOOMED TO FAIL,
BUT THE RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL TENSIONS IT INFLAMED
WOULD ULTIMATELY TOPPLE THE BRITISH RAJ BY RON SOODALTER



On May 9, 1857, some 4,000 British soldiers and sepoys—native Indian troops—formed a three-sided hollow square on the parade ground at the Meerut military cantonment, 40 miles northeast of Delhi, to witness punishment. On the fourth side of the square 85 sepoys of the 3rd Bengal Light Cavalry—Muslims and Hindus, many of them veterans with long years of service—stood at attention as their uniform jackets were stripped from them. The disgraced soldiers, weeping and begging for mercy, were then marched away to imprisonment at hard labor. The offense for which they had been court-martialed was disobedience—they had refused to load their rifles.

For more than 150 years historians have maintained that India's first revolt against British rule broke out at least in part over a gun—to be precise, the muzzle-loading Pattern 1853 Enfield rifle-musket. Each of the weapon's paper cartridges contained a precise amount of powder and a .577-caliber Minié ball. The rifleman was required to bite off the cartridge's paper end, pour the powder down the barrel, seat and ram home the bullet, add a


percussion cap, bring the hammer to full cock and fire.

During manufacture the cartridges were coated with beeswax and tallow to protect the powder from the elements, and the bullets were greased to ensure a proper seal in the barrel. The adjutant-general's official 1856 *Instruction of Musketry* specified:

Whenever the grease round the bullet appears to be melted away or otherwise

removed from the cartridge, the sides of the bullet should be wetted in the mouth before putting it into the barrel; the saliva will serve the purpose of grease for the time being.

When rumors spread among the Indian troops at Meerut that the cartridges and bullets were greased with pork and beef fat, they were outraged. It is considered *haram* ("sinful") for Muslims to put anything derived from



Led by Maj. Gen. Sir Henry Havelock, British soldiers fight sepoy insurgents besieging the city of Lucknow. Sparking the revolt of native Indian troops were rumors that new British-issued cartridges, opposite, were greased with animal fat.

a pig in their mouths, just as it is unacceptable for Hindus to ingest cow fat. When ordered to load their weapons for firing drills, the sepoys refused.

The troops' British officers, either ignorant of the religious and cultural dilemma or simply not interested, responded by the book. When informed of the sepoys' concerns, Maj. Gen. George Anson, the commander in chief in India, reportedly responded, "I'll never give in to their beastly prejudices." By refusing a direct order, the sepoys opened themselves up to charges of mutiny, and a court-martial ensured they were convicted and punished accordingly.

The troops assembled to witness the punishment were openly troubled by the events of the day. That night a



Maj. Gen. George Anson, commander in chief in India: 'I'll never give in to [the Sepoys'] beastly prejudices'

native officer stealthily approached young Lieutenant Hugh Gough and warned him the sepoys were planning to mutiny the next day, and they intended to slaughter British officers and their families. Gough immediately brought word to his commander Colonel George Carmichael-Smyth—who laughed and informed the young lieutenant that longer exposure to India would quell his groundless fears. Gough then took his intelligence to station commander Brigadier Archdale Wilson and was again met with condescension and disbelief.

By 5 o'clock the next afternoon a horde of angry villagers and sepoys had come together in an uncontrollable mob. They set fire to the British bungalows and turned their weapons on the hated British officers. Two of the officers' wives were brutally slain—one torched in her sickbed, while a butcher cut the unborn child of the second from her womb. Gough peered cautiously from his veranda at what he later described as, "a thousand sepoys dancing and leaping frantically about, calling and

yelling to each other and blazing away with their muskets in all directions."

The sepoys freed their 85 jailed companions and set off for Delhi in no particular hurry, the British too stunned to attempt to stop them. The bloody Indian Rebellion of 1857 had begun.

In retrospect there was scant reason for the British at Meerut to have been caught off-guard. A number of Bengal battalions had already refused to accept the new ammunition, and the previous four months had witnessed a series of unconnected but ominous incidents at various military posts involving mysterious fires, flaming arrows loosed into the thatched roofs of British officers' homes and secret nocturnal meetings. Between January and April fires were set near Calcutta and at Agra, Allahabad and Ambala. The telegraph station at the Barrackpore post was burned to the ground, and on March 23 the 19th Native Infantry stationed there was disarmed and disbanded for disobeying orders regarding the paper cartridges.

Six days later a sepoy named Mangal Pandey attacked and wounded two British officers in protest. Choosing death over capture, Pandey then turned his weapon on himself but survived to stand trial and face the gallows. By hanging Pandey, the British created a martyr and coined a new word in the English colonial vocabulary. As the rebellion raged over the next two years, they would refer colloquially to all mutineers as "pandies." For the rebels, "Remember Mangal Pandey!" became a rallying cry.

Although each incident was duly reported, the impossibly ponderous and ineffectual chain of communication leading to the governor general's desk precluded immediate action, and the situation continued to fester—until the Meerut station went up in flames.

While the introduction of greased paper cartridges sparked the sepoy revolt, the underlying causes of the broader uprising were far more complex. If there were a single culprit at whom one might point a finger, it would be the megaconglomerate East India Co. (EIC).



In this period watercolor rebelling sepoys, some carrying

Founded in 1599 by a handful of London merchants seeking to enter the lucrative spice trade with the Indian subcontinent, it quickly amassed both wealth and power, and in 1661 its revised government charter gave it the power to "make war and peace with any prince or people that are not Christians."

The EIC soon grew into a massive monopoly that largely controlled and



ANNE S. K. BROWN MILITARY COLLECTION, BROWN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY (2)

their British-issued weapons and wearing elements of their uniforms, dispute the division of spoils they have looted from British barracks and homes.

expanded Britain's Eastern colonies and, with the support of the British government, fielded its own army. So rich did the company grow through trading in silk, cotton, spices, gold, precious jewels and, eventually, opium that in 1667 the government in London mandated it make an annual payment of £400,000—a tremendous sum—to the national Exchequer. Speaking in Parliament in

1788, noted British statesman Edmund Burke accurately described the EIC as, “a state in the disguise of a merchant.” And the firm added to its considerable holdings as much by war as by commerce.

An imperial power in its own right, with control over territories that far outstripped those of Britain itself, the EIC created a governing body that boldly

inserted itself into all aspects of Indian culture, politics and religion. The British government finally stripped the company of its Indian trade monopoly in 1813, and 20 years later London assumed nominal control of its Indian territories. Nonetheless, company policies and procedures remained much as before, and the EIC's practices continued to gall the native peoples.

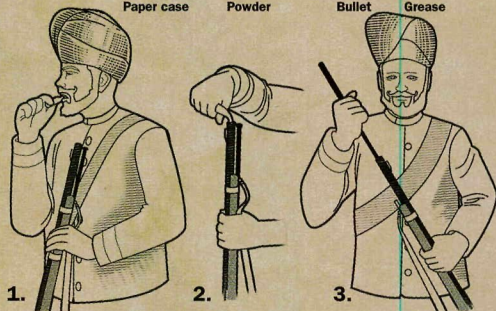
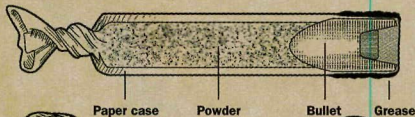
REBELLION OF 1857

In much the same way the Boston Tea Party vented Patriot frustration with British rule and sparked rebellion in the American colonies, the sepoy mutiny at Meerut vented Indian frustration with British rule and sparked the 1857 Rebellion. Neither was the causative agent but more the starting gun. But the Indian people were not unified in dissension, and the hostilities spread little beyond the north-central princely states. Other regions allied with the British or remained neutral.

From Meerut the rebels struck quickly at Delhi, killing British soldiers and civilians and seizing the primary powder magazine. The British response was slow but inexorably steady. The garrison at Lucknow endured a months-long siege before relief arrived. The massacre of Cawnpore's British population hardened popular opinion against the rebels, and by year's end the British had the upper hand. Crown troops crushed the last rebel holdouts at Gwalior in June 1858, and a treaty followed.



Greased cartridges



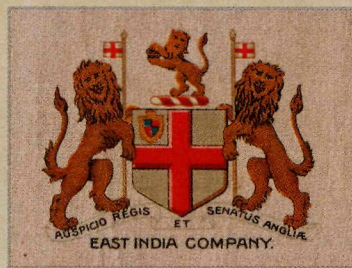
LOADING A CARTRIDGE

1. The soldier tears open the end of the cartridge with his teeth. **2.** He pours the powder down the muzzle of his rifle. Then he thrusts the bullet—still wrapped in the cartridge paper, which makes it a tight fit—into the muzzle. **3.** He takes the ramrod from its slot beneath the rifle barrel and rams paper, bullet and powder down the barrel to the breech.

THE SMOKING GUN

Providing more an excuse than a reason for rebellion, the Pattern 1853 Enfield was the standard rifle-musket of sepoys in the British East India Co. When rumors spread that newly issued cartridges had been greased with pork or beef fat, objectionable to both Muslim and Hindu troops, discontent coupled with indifference on the part of some British officers sparked mutiny.

THE BRITISH IN INDIA 1600s–1947



EAST INDIA CO. (EIC)

Granted a royal charter in 1599, the EIC quickly set about cornering the trade routes to India and then, with its own sanctioned army, subjugating the subcontinent itself. Mix in the free hand it allowed Christian missionaries, and the seeds for mutiny were sown.



BRITISH IMPERIALISM IN INDIA

As the EIC solidified its grip, so came reforms designed to civilize and modernize the British colony. Resentment grew. Lord Dalhousie fanned the flames with his Doctrine of Lapse, which allowed the EIC to annex any principality at its whim.



INDIAN REBELLION OF 1857

The rebellion had been brewing for decades before the issue of Enfield cartridges provided the flashpoint. Meerut station was the first to go up in flames, and the violence flared. Britain prevailed and wisely took control of India away from the EIC.



INDIGO REVOLT OF 1859

From the 1770s indigo planters in Bengal had profited from the cultivation of this dye-producing plant on the backs of peasant farmers. In 1859, on the heels of the wider rebellion, the farmers refused to plant, and the industry collapsed.



NATIONALISM AND REFORM

The British Raj continued reforms but interfered less with India's social and cultural traditions. As prosperity spread, so too did talk of independence by such strong figures as Mohandas Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. A split along religious lines was brewing.



1947 PARTITION OF INDIA

On Aug. 14, 1947, Pakistan came into being as a Muslim state, while predominantly Hindu India declared its independence the following day. The split was rife with violence, but the system the British Raj had put in place was now in native hands.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY/STEPHEN A. SCHWARZMAN BUILDING/GEORGE ARENTS COLLECTION; THE ART GALLERY COLLECTION/ALAMY; CHARLES BALL, THE HISTORY OF THE INDIAN MUTINY, LONDON, LONDON PRINT AND PUB. CO., 1858; WILLIAM SIMPSON/PRIVATE COLLECTION/STAPLETON COLLECTION/STAPLETON COLLECTION; THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY; PICTORIAL PRESS LTD/ALAMY; AGE IMAGES/ARCHIV



MUTINY AT MEERUT
 On May 10, 1857, sepoys at Meerut station escalated the decades-long discontent with EIC abuses into open revolt. Given the plodding British response, the rebels soon took Delhi and laid siege to other northern cities.



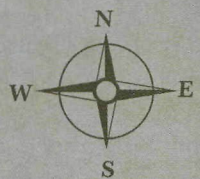
SIEGE OF CAWNPORE
 The sepoy slaughter of more than 600 men, women and children at this EIC garrison was an especially brutal act that solidified British resolve and brought retribution under the cry, "Remember Cawnpore!"



THE PRINCELY STATES AND COMPANY-CONTROLLED INDIA
 The EIC pursued control of the Indian subcontinent first through trade agreements with the princely states of India and then through outright war, defeating the last cohesive native armies by 1820. For the next several decades the company solidified its hold either by annexing principalities through Lord Dalhousie's Doctrine of Lapse or by entering military-economic alliances with them. During the Rebellion of 1857 these subordinate allies enabled the British to maintain control.

- States in Rebellion
- British Areas in Rebellion
- States Loyal to the British
- Neutral States

Miles | 100 | 200
 km | 200 | 400



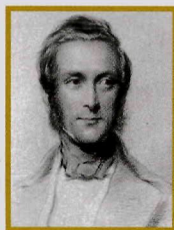
DISTANCES: Bombay to Delhi 716 miles/1152 km
 Maps by Steve Walkowiak/SWmaps.com



Indian Ocean

Although the company initially refrained from interfering with religious aspects of Indian life, by the 19th century it was sending out a growing number of Christian missionaries. To natives of other faiths and castes, this was an indication their most personal convictions were no longer sacrosanct, making the intrusion of Western culture complete. Nowhere was this more strongly felt than in the ranks of the EIC's own forces, which largely consisted of Muslims and Hindus.

At the same time the company was seeking religious converts, its British



Critics charged Lord Dalhousie with having 'stirred up the socioeconomic structure...beyond the breaking point'



Maj. Gen. Sir Hugh Wheeler surrendered the population of Cawnpore under a promise of safe conduct



Nana Sahib and his fellow rebel leaders ordered their sepoys to kill all the British prisoners

officers were growing increasingly distant from their native soldiers. Throughout the 1700s they were, as one historian described them, "real swashbucklers... [who] frequently underwent the same privations and dangers as their charges did." During the first decades of the 19th century, however, British officers took to keeping their own company and that of their families. The burden of directly overseeing the EIC's army increasingly fell to native noncommissioned officers, who often shared their soldiers' resentment of British arrogance, condescension and cruelty.

In 1848 James Broun-Ramsay, Earl Dalhousie, became governor-general of India. He brought with him an ambitious plan to modernize the sprawling colony through the introduction of railroads, the telegraph, a modern postal system, a program of road and port building, a massive irrigation plan, the construction of colleges and the deployment of an army of Christian missionaries to minister to the poor.

His program created as many problems as it resolved. In order to finance his vision, he needed to raise the already usurious tax rates. And many of the reforms he implemented challenged the existing caste system and business structure, inspiring resentment rather than gratitude. When Dalhousie retired to England eight years later, apparently oblivious to the unrest he had created, he found himself facing charges of having thoroughly "stirred up the socioeconomic structure of India to beyond the breaking point," as one historian put it.

One of the more ill-advised changes Dalhousie implemented was the introduction of the Doctrine of Lapse, a practice whereby the EIC could legally annex the principality of any ruler who died without an heir or who was found—by company standards, of course—to be inept. Under this policy the company acquired state after state, radically increasing its tax base while ignoring the rights of the ruling families, as well as those who served. By 1856, the year before the rebellion, Dalhousie had acquired the territories of more than a dozen independent rajas for the company, comprising nearly 250,000 square miles of territory—an area more than three times the size of England and Ireland combined.

The year 1856 also saw the end of the costly Crimean War. England's less-than-stellar performance had demonstrated this was not the same army that had defeated Napoléon at Waterloo four decades earlier. And given the increased corruption riddling the EIC, Britain's timeworn claim to military, moral and cultural superiority had developed a hollow ring. Suddenly, the idea of a



Promised safe passage by besieging sepoy rebels, the

peasant army facing off against the British lion didn't seem so farfetched.

By the time the British had issued the Enfield rifles and their tallow-coated paper cartridges to the Indian troops, at least some factions in the army were primed and ready to resist.

Leaving Meerut in chaos, the sepoys carried their rebellion to Delhi, where they slaughtered dozens of British civilians. When ordered to fire on the rebels, sepoys of the native infantry regiments defending the city instead fired over their heads and then joined the rioting throng. The reb-

TOP TO BOTTOM: GEORGE RICHMOND/PRIVATE COLLECTION/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY; NATIONAL ARMY MUSEUM/THE ART ARCHIVE AT ART RESOURCE, NEW YORK; CHARLEOTTE PARK; DERRICK G. WITTY/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY



THOMAS PACKER/NATIONAL ARMY MUSEUM, LONDON/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

British population of Cawnpore—more than 600 men, women and children—were treacherously slaughtered. The massacre spawned British atrocities.

els killed their British officers and seized the city. Delhi and its 3,000 barrels of powder would remain in rebel hands for months to come.

The initial British response to the occupation of Delhi was slow and ineffectual due to a dearth of ammunition and deteriorating troop strength. British leadership was in constant flux; early in the rebellion General Anson succumbed to cholera, as did his successor, Maj. Gen. Sir Henry Barnard. Meanwhile, throughout June and into July the rebel force within the city—joined by regiment after native regiment—grew to 30,000, while the British army at the

gates numbered some 5,000 poorly armed and suffering men. Not until late September did a reinforced British presence succeed in retaking Delhi.

By June the rebellion had spread as native soldiers throughout northern and central India turned out, joined by outraged citizens. The British population in two other crucial cities, Lucknow and Cawnpore, soon drew the mutineers' attention. The Lucknow garrison, comprising a few thousand British soldiers and civilians, came under attack by well over 20,000 mutineers and endured a grueling three-month siege. Casualties were high due to illness, exposure and

constant sniper and artillery fire. Finally, in September, a contingent of British forces relieved the city.

Cawnpore was not so fortunate. Near the city stood the estate of the Nana Sahib, a nobleman whose late father—the last Maratha prince—had willed him his title and his £80,000 pension. Dalhousie, however, had invoked his hated Doctrine of Lapse to deny Nana Sahib his birthright. Consequently, Cawnpore would bear the brunt of the dispossessed prince's hatred for the British.

On June 25, after besieging the city for nearly three weeks, Nana Sahib



In addition to hanging captured rebels, the British resorted to strapping captives to cannon muzzles and then blowing them apart—a method of execution

tricked Maj. Gen. Sir Hugh Wheeler into surrendering the British population of Cawnpore—240 men and 375 women and children—under a promise of safe conduct. Two days later Nana Sahib and his forces led the evacuees to a number of small boats moored on the Ganges. As they boarded, a shot rang out, followed by a barrage of grapeshot and musket fire directed into the boats. Cook fires aboard upended in the mayhem, setting a few boats ablaze. Only one vessel escaped, carrying four men to safety.

The 60 Englishmen who had lived through the initial fusillade were immediately executed, while the 210 surviving women and children were confined

in a small house. On July 15 Nana Sahib learned that a small British relief force was en route to Cawnpore. When the rebels were unable to repel the oncoming British, Nana Sahib and his fellow rebel leaders ordered their sepoys to kill all the prisoners. After a first volley the sepoys refused to continue, so Nana Sahib brought in the city's butchers, who slaughtered the women and children with knives and cleavers. Those few found alive the next morning were thrown down a nearby dry well, followed by the crush of butchered corpses. The rebels then withdrew from the city.

When the British relief force entered Cawnpore and discovered the bloody

aftermath of the slaughter, the outraged soldiers unleashed a reign of terror all their own, indiscriminately lynching the city's remaining residents. The British commander, Brig. Gen. James Neill, proclaimed that every condemned rebel "will be taken down to the house in question, under a guard, and will be forced into cleaning up a small portion of the bloodstains. The task will be made as revolting to his feelings as possible. . . . After properly cleaning up his portion, the culprit is to be immediately hanged." When one Muslim public official objected, Neill had him flogged and "made to lick part of the blood with his tongue."

Both sides engaged in further atrocities, sinking to new levels of brutality.



ANNE S.K. BROWN MILITARY COLLECTION, BROWN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY, RIGHT: COLLECTION ARCHIV FLEUR KUNST GESCHICHTE/ANG-IMAGES

tured or killed. Finally, on July 8 peace was declared.

The rebellion had been doomed to failure. It was, in the end, a local event; far from gleaning unilateral support, it was centered mainly in the northern and central regions of India. In some areas, such as the Punjab, the princes supported the EIC with arms and men, while other regions sided with the rebels or strove to remain neutral. As Cambridge historian Sir John Robert Seeley wrote shortly after the rebels surrendered:

We could subdue the mutiny of 1857, formidable as it was, because it spread through only a part of the army, because the people did not actively sympathize with it, and because it was possible to find native Indian races who would fight on our side.

While some Indian historians have defined the events of 1857–59 as India’s “first national uprising,” scholars of British colonial history generally dismiss what they call the Sepoy Mutiny as a disorganized and ineffectual rebellion conducted by a small, disaffected segment of the population. Nonetheless, despite glaring disadvantages in numbers and technology, as well as their lack of universal support, the rebels succeeded in defying the greatest empire on earth for two years. And they effected permanent change in the nature of British policy toward India.

For Britain the cost of victory was high—some 11,000 lives lost, mostly due to disease or exposure, and £36 million of debt, as well as a swath of the subcontinent to rebuild. The rebellion effectively ended the corrupt hold of the hated EIC. The British government assumed control of the company’s holdings and instituted the Raj, placing much of India’s cultural, political and military infrastructure under Crown control.

Not surprising, the army was completely restructured. The EIC’s regiments of white soldiers were disbanded and replaced with a permanent garrison of British army regulars. The proportion

of Indian to British troops was radically reduced to a 2-to-1 ratio, and all artillery, forts and arsenals were assigned strictly to the European troops. In addition, the number and troop strength of native infantry regiments in Bengal, Bombay and Madras was radically cut back.

Adding Empress of India to her royal title, Queen Victoria set upon a program of reconciliation. She lifted the threat of annexation from those princes who had either supported the Crown or remained neutral during the



Adding Empress of India to her royal title, Queen Victoria set upon a program of reconciliation

rebellion. And, aware of the part religious tensions had played in the recent conflict, she issued a proclamation phrased to mollify those Indians concerned with the encroachment of Christianity. After affirming “the truth of Christianity,” Victoria went on to state, “We disclaim alike the right and the desire to impose our convictions on any of our subjects.”

Try as it might to recover what had been lost, Britain could not escape the fact that the 1857 uprising opened the gates to another 90 years of indigenous rebellions, and ultimately to India’s successful bid for independence. Sir John Robert Seeley accurately predicted what the future held for the British empire in India and elsewhere when he wrote:

The moment a mutiny is but threatened, which shall be no mere mutiny but the expression of a universal feeling of nationality, at that moment all hope is at an end, as all desire ought to be at an end, of preserving our empire. (M)

For further reading Ron Soodalter recommends *The Great Mutiny: India 1857*, by Christopher Hibbert, and *The Indian Mutiny, 1857–58*, by Gregory Fremont-Barnes.

that had been practiced in India for two centuries.

Neither the rebels nor the British had any qualms about butchering women and children along with the men. When the British nabbed a rebel in any proximity to their artillery, instead of hanging him, his captors might strap him over the muzzle of a cannon and blow him to pieces, showering onlookers with blood, bone and viscera.

By early 1858 the British had secured Delhi and Cawnpore, and victory was simply a matter of time. The bulk of the organized fighting ended on June 19, following a British victory at the Battle of Gwalior. Guerrilla fighting would continue over the next several months, but by mid-1859 most of the rebel leaders had been either cap-

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