

Sepoy Rebellion

Focus Question: What caused the Sepoy Rebellion?

British Colonial India 1765-1805: During the first half of the 19th century, Britain ruled large parts of India through its British East India Company. This was a huge private trading company with governmental powers, such as the power to tax, raise armies, reach agreements with local Indian princes, and take over some regions directly.

Mughal Empire: India was a huge rural society with millions of poor peasants. A large minority of them were Muslims. The Muslim Mughal emperors once ruled much of India, but they had lost most of their power by the early 1800s. Most Indians were Hindus. They were divided into castes – hierarchical social classes based on beliefs of purity and pollution that each person was born into. The Brahmin caste was the highest one.

The British East India Company & British Colonial India 1837- 1857: The number of British officials in India was small. However, during the first half of the 19th century, Britain extended its control of the country. In many regions, the East India Company relied on traditional princes and other rulers. In some regions, the Company took direct control, in part to tax land more effectively. Its taxing powers often angered both poor peasants and wealthy aristocratic landowners.

Sepoys: The sepoys were Indian soldiers serving in the British East India Company's armies. By the 1850s, there were nearly 300,000 sepoys serving in the Company's army.

Rebellion of 1857: In 1857, rumors spread that new rifle cartridges were greased with cow and pig fat. Using them would violate both Muslim and Hindu rules. On May 10th 1857, some sepoys violently rebelled, killing English residents in Meerut in north India. They then marched to Delhi to appeal to the last Mughal emperor to lead them. This was the start of the Sepoy Rebellion.

Spread of the Rebellion: The Sepoy Rebellion spread to many separate areas in northern India. The sepoys and the British both committed terrible atrocities. Certain incidents in which British women and children were slaughtered aroused enormous outrage in England. British soldiers also fought with fury and ruthless violence. In addition to soldiers, members of the rebellion included some Indian nobility, rural landowners, and peasants. Yet many Indians sided with the British, and not all regions of India took part in the uprising. The uprising was fully suppressed by the middle of 1858. As a result of the rebellion, Britain took over the East India Company's colonies.

British Perspective: Explain to students that for a long time, people learned of the Sepoy Rebellion mainly from British accounts of it. Historians have offered differing interpretations of the uprising, focusing on different causes and perspectives.