

# The events of 1857

History

Lesson 2 of an enquiry of 4 lessons

Enquiry: Why does it matter what we call the 1857 conflict in India?

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# Causes of the conflict

Before 1857, many Indians had been growing uncomfortable with changes the East India Company was trying to make to the lands they controlled. It was felt that British attempts to 'civilise' India were attempts to change the ancient religions of India. Some Indians feared the British would force Hindus and Muslims to **convert** to Christianity. Furthermore, there were also long-term concerns that the Company was ruling India badly. In 1770 there had been a major **famine** in an area called Bengal. As a result a third of the population of Bengal had died.

Shortly before 1857, a new type of gun had been issued to the sepoy. The gun was called the Enfield rifle and in order for it to be loaded a cartridge had to be bitten into by soldiers. A rumour spread around some sepoy that the cartridges contained cow and pig fat. As there are Hindu and Muslim rules around consuming beef and pork some sepoy refused to bite into the cartridges.



# Meerut

In April 1857, in a town called Meerut, a group of 85 sepoy soldiers refused to follow orders over concerns about the cartridges. These soldiers were then arrested. The next day civilians in the town of Meerut started to protest about the harsh punishment for the sepoy soldiers. In the evening, sepoy soldiers then **rebelled** against their British officers and fired on them. The rebel sepoy soldiers then broke into the prison and released the 85 sepoy soldiers who were arrested the day before. The British fort was then destroyed and any British officers who had not been killed fled.



# The conflict spreads

Having successfully rebelled against the British in Meerut, the sepoy now started to march towards the ancient capital of Delhi. Here the Sepoys declared a descendent of the Mughals the new Emperor of India. News of the rebellion quickly spread to other parts of India. There were three army regiments near Delhi. The sepoy in these regiments either fled to join the rebellion or refused to follow orders from British officers to attack the rebels. It looked like the East India Company was losing control as sepoy and civilian rioters started killing Europeans and Christian Indians in Delhi.



# Lakshmibai of Jhansi

It is difficult to know exactly what happened next. Across northern and central India, the East India Company effectively lost control. However, the extent to which this happened differed from region to region. What happened in the state of Jhansi reveals how complicated the conflict was. Jhansi was ruled by a queen called Lakshmibai. At first she supported the British against rebel sepoys who tried to attack Jhansi. Rebel sepoys carried out a massacre of British soldiers and their families in June 1857. Then between August 1857 and January 1858, Lakshmibai managed to keep Jhansi out of the conflict. During 1858, the British attempted to crush the entire rebellion and regain control. When they returned to Jhansi in March 1858, Lakshmibai declared Jhansi was independent. She then fought against British troops first in Jhansi and then with other rebel leaders until she was killed in June 1858.



# End of the conflict

Within a year, the rebellion was over and the British had regained control. Soldiers from Britain and sepoy soldiers from loyal states fought together against the rebels. When the British Indian Army retook an area they executed anyone suspected of supporting the rebellion without a trial. Executions were designed to scare anyone from rebelling in the future. From 1858, the British government ended the East India Company's rule of India and took over itself.



# Glossary

**Convert:** to change from one religion to another

**Famine:** a period with extreme food shortages

**Rebel (verb):** to rise up against authorities and refuse to follow orders

For example: *The sepoys rebelled against the British in Meerut*

**Rebel (noun):** someone who rises up against authorities

For example: *The rebels killed British women and children in Delhi*

**Regiments:** a large group of soldiers who train to fight together



# Comprehension Questions

1. What religion did many Indians fear the East India Company was trying to spread?

Sentence starter: Many Indians feared the East India Company was trying to convert people to....

2. Why did some sepoys feel uncomfortable about using the new Enfield rifles?
3. Where did the rebel sepoys go after destroying the British fort in Meerut?
4. How did the British attempt to regain control of northern India?
5. Challenge question: Why is it difficult to describe Lakshmibai of Jhansi as a 'rebel'?





# Extension Question

6. In what ways could the 1857 conflict be described as a ‘mutiny’?

Use the sentence starters and key words below to answer this question

Sentence starters:	Key words
<i>On the one hand, the 1857 conflict could be described as a ‘mutiny’ because...</i>	-Sepoy
	-Civilian
	-Rebellion
<i>However, calling the conflict a ‘mutiny; could be misleading because....</i>	-Regiment
	-British
	-States/regions
	-Mughal Emperor
	-Delhi

