

British Reactions to 1857

History

Lesson 3 of an enquiry of 4 lessons

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

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News of the conflict

The news of what was happening in India in 1857 reached Britain slowly. In the mid nineteenth century there was no internet or telephones that connected Britain to India. So, it took about six weeks for people in Britain to find out that a conflict had started when sepoys in Meerut refused to follow orders.



Causes of the conflict

The British government was led by a man called Lord Palmerston. Palmerston was an experienced politician who had a reputation for increasing Britain's power overseas. Palmerston and other members of the government did not want to make it look like there was a **crisis**. So, they referred to the conflict as the 'sepoy mutiny'. By calling it a 'mutiny', they made it look like the conflict was small-scale and did not include ordinary Indians. Palmerston was also confident that British troops would quickly be able to defeat the sepoys and regain control.



Parliamentary opposition

However, other British politicians did not see the conflict in the same way. The British government could only pass laws if it had support in **parliament**. However, there were some members of parliament who criticised Palmerston and his reaction to the conflict in India. One of these politicians was a man called Benjamin Disraeli. Disraeli was from a different **political party** to Palmerston. As a result, Disraeli probably wanted to make Palmerston's government look bad so that someone from Disraeli's political party would replace Palmerston as the leader of the government. To make Palmerston's government look bad, Disraeli made speeches in parliament which criticised Palmerston.



The names of the conflict

So, Palmerston and members of his government called the conflict a ‘mutiny’ and suggested it was not a major challenge to the East India Company’s control of India. Whereas Disraeli made the conflict seem like a bigger uprising, Disraeli suggested the conflict could lead to the end of British control of India. In parliament, Disraeli made a speech saying: “The decline and fall of empires are not affairs of greased cartridges.” What he meant by this was the conflict was not just caused by the sepoys refusing to use the new Enfield rifles. Instead Disraeli believed the East India Company had misruled India by upsetting the local nobility and questioning religious practices.



Evidence of a wider uprising

Members of Palmerston's government did not want to accept Disraeli's criticism. They continued to suggest the conflict was only a mutiny and one minister said “no native Prince has been” involved. As we now know, this was not true. Lakshmibai, the Queen of Jhansi, was one local noble who joined the uprising and fought against the British.



End of East India Company rule

In some ways, Disraeli's critical speeches were successful. In 1858, Palmerston's government removed the East India Company's right to rule India. The British government started ruling India instead. Several years later, Disraeli himself became the leader of the British government. When he did so, he gave the British Queen, Victoria, a new title: the Empress of India.



The British Empire

However, during the nineteenth century many British people continued to call the conflict the “sepoy mutiny”. This is because lots of British people liked to imagine their empire was good for Britain and good for the people ruled in **colonies** like India. So, by calling the conflict a ‘mutiny’ it seemed like 1857 was not about Indians not wanting the British to rule India. Instead the word ‘mutiny’ allowed Britons to think it was a small conflict about some soldiers disliking the rule of the East India Company.



Glossary

Colonies: the parts of an empire which are ruled by another country. For example, India was a British colony between 1858 and 1947.

Crisis: a difficult and dangerous time.

Parliament: an organisation which debates new laws and passes taxes. In many countries, governments cannot rule without support from a parliament.

Political party: a group of politicians who share similar views and work together to try to form governments.



Comprehension Questions

1. How long did it take for news of the conflict in India to reach Britain?

Sentence starter: It took.....for news of the conflict in India to reach Britain.

2. What did Palmerston call the 1857 conflict in India?
3. Who received the title ‘Empress of India’?
4. Why did many British people in the nineteenth century continue to call the 1857 conflict a ‘mutiny’?
5. Challenge question: What do you think was Disraeli’s ulterior motive for saying the East India Company has misruled India?



Extension Question

6. Why did Palmerston's government refer to the 1857 conflict as 'a mutiny'?

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

| Sentence starters: | Key words |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| <i>One reason why Palmerston's government referred to the 1857 conflict as a mutiny was....</i> | -Sepoy -Crisis -East India Company |
| <i>To explain this further....</i> | -Local rulers -Army |
| <i>Another reason why Palmerston's government referred to the 1857 conflict as a mutiny was....</i> | -Officers -Empire -Colony |
| <i>To explain this further...</i> | |

