# Indian Mutiny

**Indian Mutiny**, also called **Sepoy Mutiny** or **First War of Independence**, widespread but unsuccessful rebellion against British rule in India in 1857–59. Begun in Meerut by Indian troops (sepoys) in the service of the British East India Company, it spread to Delhi, Agra, Kanpur, and Lucknow. In India it is often called the First War of Independence and other similar names.



Indian troops during the Indian Mutiny.
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## Background

To regard the rebellion merely as a sepoy mutiny is to underestimate the root causes leading to it. British paramountcy—i.e., the belief in British dominance in Indian political, economic, and cultural life—had been introduced in India about 1820. The British increasingly used a variety of tactics to usurp control of the Hindu princely states that were under what were called subsidiary alliances with the British. Everywhere the old Indian aristocracy was being replaced by British officials. One notable British technique was called the doctrine of lapse, first perpetrated by Lord Dalhousie in the late 1840s. It involved the British prohibiting a Hindu ruler without a natural heir from adopting a successor and, after the ruler died or abdicated, annexing his land. To those problems may be added the growing discontent of the Brahmans, many of whom had been dispossessed of their revenues or had lost lucrative positions.

Another serious concern was the increasing pace of Westernization, by which Hindu society was being affected by the introduction of Western ideas. Missionaries were challenging the religious beliefs of the Hindus. The humanitarian movement led to reforms that went deeper than the political superstructure. During his tenure as governor-general of India (1848–56), Lord Dalhousie made efforts toward emancipating women and had introduced a bill to remove all legal obstacles to the remarriage of Hindu widows. Converts to Christianity were to share with their Hindu relatives in the property of the family estate. There was a widespread belief that the British aimed at breaking down the caste system. The introduction of Western methods of education was a direct challenge to orthodoxy, both Hindu and Muslim.

The mutiny broke out in the Bengal army because it was only in the military sphere that Indians were organized. The pretext for revolt was the introduction of the new Enfield rifle. To load it, the sepoys had to bite off the ends of lubricated cartridges. A rumour spread among the sepoys that the grease used to lubricate the cartridges was a mixture of pigs' and cows' lard; thus, to have oral contact with it was an insult to both Muslims and Hindus. There is no conclusive evidence that either of these materials was actually used on any of the cartridges in question. However, the perception that the cartridges were tainted added to the larger suspicion that the British were trying to undermine Indian traditional society. For their part, the British did not pay enough attention to the growing level of sepoy discontent.

## The rebellion

In late March 1857 a sepoy named Mangal Pandey attacked British officers at the military garrison in Barrackpore. He was arrested and then executed by the British in early April. Later in April sepoy troopers at Meerut refused the Enfield cartridges, and, as punishment, they were given long prison terms, fettered, and put in jail. This punishment incensed their comrades, who rose on May 10, shot their British officers, and marched to Delhi, where there were no European troops. There the local sepoy garrison joined the Meerut men, and by nightfall the aged pensionary Mughal emperor Bahādur Shah II had been nominally restored to power by a tumultuous soldiery. The seizure of Delhi provided a focus and set the pattern for the whole mutiny, which then spread throughout northern India. With the exception of the Mughal emperor and his sons and Nana Sahib, the adopted son of the deposed Maratha *peshwa*, none of the important Indian princes joined the mutineers.

From the time of the mutineers' seizure of Delhi, the British operations to suppress the mutiny were divided into three parts. First came the desperate struggles at Delhi, Kanpur, and Lucknow during the summer; then the operations around Lucknow in the winter of 1857–58, directed by Sir Colin Campbell; and finally the "mopping up" campaigns of Sir Hugh Rose in early 1858. Peace was officially declared on July 8, 1859.

A grim feature of the mutiny was the ferocity that accompanied it. The mutineers commonly shot their British officers on rising and were responsible for massacres at Delhi, Kanpur, and elsewhere. The murder of women and children enraged the British, but in fact some British officers began to take severe measures before they knew that any such murders had occurred. In the end the reprisals far outweighed the original excesses. Hundreds of sepoys were bayoneted or fired from cannons in a frenzy of British vengeance (though some British officers did protest the bloodshed).

## Aftermath

The immediate result of the mutiny was a general housecleaning of the Indian administration. The East India Company was abolished in favour of the direct rule of India by the British government. In concrete terms, this did not mean much, but it introduced a more personal note into the government and removed the unimaginative commercialism that had lingered in the Court of Directors. The financial crisis caused by the mutiny led to a reorganization of the Indian administration's finances on a modern basis. The Indian army was also extensively reorganized.

Another significant result of the mutiny was the beginning of the policy of consultation with Indians. The Legislative Council of 1853 had contained only Europeans and had arrogantly behaved as if it were a full-fledged parliament. It was widely felt that a lack of communication with Indian opinion had helped to precipitate the crisis. Accordingly, the new council of 1861 was given an Indian-nominated element. The educational and public works programs (roads, railways, telegraphs, and irrigation) continued with little interruption; in fact, some were stimulated by the thought of their value for the transport of troops in a crisis. But insensitive British-imposed social measures that affected Hindu society came to an abrupt end.

Finally, there was the effect of the mutiny on the people of India themselves. Traditional society had made its protest against the incoming alien influences, and it had failed. The princes and other natural leaders had either held aloof from the mutiny or had proved, for the most part, incompetent. From this time all serious hope of a revival of the past or an exclusion of the West diminished. The traditional structure of Indian society began to break down and was eventually superseded by a Westernized class system, from which emerged a strong middle class with a heightened sense of Indian nationalism.

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