

The Sepoy Rebellion Lesson Plan

Central Historical Question:
What caused the Sepoy Rebellion?

Materials:

- Copies of Documents A-E
- Copies of Guiding Questions

Note: This lesson is intended for multiple class periods. Prior to this lesson, students should be familiar with India's colonial history and the establishment of the British East India Company.

Plan of Instruction:

1. Introduction: Use the PowerPoint presentation to establish background information on the Sepoy Rebellion and introduce the day's Central Historical Question.
 - a. Slide 2: 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.* Note: The British territory is colored pink on the map.
 - b. Slide 3: 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.*
 - c. Slide 4-5: 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.*
 - d. Slide 6: Sepoys: Indian Soldiers. *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.* Note: The British territory is colored pink on the map.
 - e. Slide 7: 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.

- f. Slide 8: 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. Note: In this map, the green states remained neutral. The lighter blue states sided with the British. The rebels were active in various ways in the black, darker blue and tan states.*
 - g. Slides 9-10: 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.*
 - h. Slide 10: Central Historical Question. *In this lesson, students will be learning about both British and Indian views of the uprising and evaluating different interpretations of it. The students' main task will be to answer the lesson's Central Historical Question: What caused the Sepoy Rebellion?*
2. Introduce/Review skills of sourcing and corroboration.
 - a. If necessary, use Historical Thinking posters to review the skills of sourcing and corroboration.
 - b. Point out that historians make claims based upon evidence often found in historical documents. In order to gather credible evidence, historians evaluate the reliability, or trustworthiness, of different historical sources. They often do this by considering the point of view and purpose of different historical actors and by comparing how different sources portray historical events.
 - c. Explain to students that they will work on sourcing and corroborating five documents on the Sepoy Rebellion. Students will develop a claim addressing the lesson's central question. By carefully considering the varying points of view of these sources, they will seek to understand an historical event by evaluating contrasting and complementing accounts of it in the evidence.
 3. Hand out Documents A and B.
 - a. Explain that first the class will be reading two documents from the British perspective.
 - b. Have students review the Guiding Questions.

- c. In pairs, students read each document and answer the Guiding Questions.
 - d. As a whole class, share out and discuss responses.
4. Hand out Documents C and D.
 - a. Explain to students that they will now read two documents written by Indians.
 - b. Have students read Document C and answer the Guiding Questions.
 - c. As a whole class, share out and discuss responses.
 - d. Have students read Document D and answer the Guiding Questions.
 - e. As a whole class, share out and discuss responses.
 5. Hand out Document E.
 - a. Explain to students that they will now read a final document, an excerpt from an article written by a historian.
 - b. Ask students to consider how this final document compares to the others while they read the document.
 - c. Have students read Document E and answer the Guiding Questions.
 6. Final Discussion
 - a. What caused the Sepoy Rebellion?
 - b. What events do think were the most significant in causing the rebellion?
 - c. Which of these documents do you think provides the most reliable information regarding the rebellion? Why?
 - d. What perspective are we missing from this set of documents? Why might there be few accounts from this perspective? Why might an account from this perspective be valuable?

If students struggle to answer this, raise the question of whether this set of documents includes an account written by an Indian rebel. Explain that the British violently retaliated against entire villages believed to have supported the rebellion and that India was a colony of Britain for nearly 90 years after the end of the rebellion. It would have been difficult, even dangerous, for rebels to tell the history of uprising from their perspective.
 7. Final Claim. Using arguments and evidence from Documents A-E, write a final claim regarding the question: What caused the Sepoy Rebellion?
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Citations:

Document A

S.R Gardiner, *English History for Schools: B.C. 55—A.D. 1880*, New York: Holt, 1881, p. 435.

Document B

Sir Colin Campbell, *Narrative of the Indian Revolt from Its Outbreak to the Capture of Lucknow*, G. Vickers, 1858, p. 2.

Document C

Sita Ram, *From Sepoy to Subedar: Being the Life Adventures of Subedar Sita Ram, A Native Officer in the Bengal Army, Written and Related by Himself*, Vikas Publications, p.162, 164-166.

Document D

Sayyid Ahmed Khan, *The Causes of the Indian Revolt*. Medical Hall Press, 1873. Retrieved from <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00Urdu/asbab/translation1873.html?>

Document E

Joseph Coohill, "Indian Voices from the 1857 Rebellion," *History Today*, May, 2007, pp. 48-54.