

# What caused the Sepoy Rebellion?

## Document A: Gardiner's *English History*

*Samuel Rawson Gardiner (1829-1902) was an English historian and a professor of history at King's College in London. He wrote several books on English history. The excerpt below comes from a book he wrote for young students.*

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### The Indian Mutiny of 1857

The religion of the Hindus, who form a great part of the natives in India, teaches many things which seem very strange to Englishmen. Among other things they are taught that they will be **defiled** if they eat any part of a cow. By this defilement they will meet with much **contempt** from their fellows, and will suffer much after death in another world. The bulk of the army in India was composed of Hindus.

It happened that an improved rifle had lately been invented for the use of the soldiers, and that the **cartridges** used in this rifle needed to be greased so they could be rammed down easily into the barrel. The men believed that the grease was made of the fat of cows, though this was not really the case. There was, therefore, much suspicion and angry feeling among the native soldiers, and when ignorant men are suspicious and angry they are likely to break out into deeds of unreasoning **fury**.

**Source:** Gardiner's *English History for Schools*, an *English textbook edited for American students*, 1881.

### Vocabulary

defiled: made dirty, spoiled, ruined

contempt: disrespect

cartridge: ammunition for a gun or rifle

fury: extreme anger

## Document B: Sir Colin Campbell (Modified)

*Sir Colin Campbell took charge of British forces during the uprising. In this passage from his book on the uprising, he first discusses the Hindu sepoy. These soldiers included members of various castes, and a sizable number of them were Brahmins, the highest caste.*

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Any considerable offence offered to [the Brahmins] . . . might seriously endanger the **fidelity** of the native troops; and there seems to be little doubt that offence has been given. **Injudicious** attempts to convert sepoy to Christianity have been made, and [the sepoy believed] that they were to be converted by **compulsion**. . . .

At the same time it is impossible to dissociate the revolt and the [removal] of the Muslim king of **Oudh**.

The province of Oudh had always maintained its independence. . . . But at length the system of government became too bad to be tolerated; the court was a mere hot bed of oppression, intrigue, and sensuality; and the British took control of Oudh.

It has never been disputed that this was a merciful change for the people of Oudh; but the people are not always governed by reason. Prejudices – religious, national and social – have paramount influence even in a civilized country; this is even more true in a region sunk into barbarism.

**Source:** *Sir Colin Campbell*, Narrative of the Indian Revolt from Its Outbreak to the Capture of Lucknow, 1858.

### Vocabulary

**fidelity:** loyalty, faithfulness

**injudicious:** unwise, lacking in judgment

**compulsion:** act of compelling or forcing

**Oudh:** Region in northern India

**fanaticism:** wild or extreme devotion or enthusiasm, as with regard to religion or politics

## Document C: Sita Ram

*Sita Ram was a sepoy who remained loyal to the British. Yet even he had his "doubts" about them. The following is an excerpt from memoirs he wrote sometime in the 1860s about the rebellion.*

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It chanced that about this time the English Government sent parties of men from each regiment to different garrisons for instruction in the use of the new rifle. These men performed the new drill for some time until a report got about, by some means or other, that the cartridges used for these new rifles were greased with the fat of cows and pigs. The men from our regiment wrote to others in the regiment telling them of this, and there was soon excitement in every regiment.

Some men pointed out that in forty years of service nothing had ever been done by the English Government to insult their religion, but as I have already mentioned the sepoys' minds had been inflamed by the seizure of Oudh. Interested parties were quick to point out that the great aim of the English was to turn us all into Christians and they had therefore introduced the cartridge in order to bring this about, since both Muslims and Hindus would be defiled by using it. . . .

[The Proclamation of the King of Delhi] stated that the English Government intended to make all Brahmins into Christians, which had in fact been proved correct, and in proof of it one hundred ministers were about to be stationed in Oudh. Caste was going to be broken by forcing everyone to eat beef or pork. . . .

I had never known the English to interfere with our religion or our caste in all the years since I had been a soldier, but I was nevertheless filled with doubt. . . . I had also remarked the increase in Missionaries during recent years, who stood up in the streets of our cities and told the people that their cherished religion was all false, and who exhorted them to become Christians.

**Source:** *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.

## Document D: Sayyid Ahmed Khan

*Sayyid Ahmed Khan was a Muslim noble and scholar who worked as a jurist for the British East India Company. At the time of the uprising, he was loyal to the British. Later, he came to blame several British policies and mistakes for the uprising. He thought that the British decision not to include Indians in the Legislative Council, a British government organization in charge of India, was particularly harmful. He explained his views in a book he first published in 1858 in Urdu. The book was translated into English in an edition published in 1873. This passage is from the English translation.*

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The evils which resulted to India from the non-admission of natives into the Legislative Council of India were various. . . . The people had no means of protesting against what they might feel to be a foolish measure. . . . Whatever law was passed was **misconstrued** by men who had no share in the framing of it. At length the **Hindustanis** fell into the habit of thinking that all the laws were passed with a view to degrade and ruin them. . . . Although the intentions of Government were excellent, there was no man who could convince the people of it; no one was at hand to correct the errors which [the government] had adopted. And why? Because there was not one of their own number among the members of the Legislative Council. Had there been, these evils that had happened to us, would have been averted.

There is not the smallest doubt that all men whether ignorant or well-informed, whether high or low, felt a firm conviction that the English Government was bent on interfering with their religion and with their old established customs. They believed that Government intended to force the Christian Religion and foreign customs upon Hindu and Muslim alike.

**Source:** Sayyid Ahmed Khan, *The Causes of the Indian Revolt*. Medical Hall Press, 1873.

### Vocabulary

misconstrued: misunderstood.

Hindustanis: people of Hind area of Northern India, along the plain of the Ganges River.

## Document E: Joseph Coohill

*Joseph Coohill is a historian and university professor at Duquesne University. The passage below is from an article he wrote in 2007 for the magazine History Today.*

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Sepoys in the East India Company army had seen their pay (and therefore their status) decline in recent years, and many felt that the new officers serving in the Company army . . . did not have the same respect and sympathy for sepoys as the previous generation of Company officers. Lord Dalhousie, Governor General of India, introduced the so-called Doctrine of Lapse, a policy which allowed the East India Company to extend its control into Indian territory when a native ruler died. . . . The Company applied the Doctrine to take over the town of Oudh. Indians considered this to be a final outrage of British conquest. Oudh was such a rich and historic part of India that this seizure was seen as a cultural insult. The outbreak of hostilities in the army would not have spread so quickly or gained much-needed local support if the sepoys' **grievances** had not been echoed by **discontent** in many parts of India, both rural and urban.

**Source:** Joseph Coohill, "Indian Voices from the 1857 Rebellion," History Today, 2007.

### Vocabulary

**grievances:** complaints

**discontent:** unhappiness

## Sepoy Rebellion Guiding Questions

### Document A: Gardiner's History

- 1) What kind of document is this? When was it written?
- 2) Who was the intended audience of this document?
- 3) What are the author's main claims about what caused the Sepoy Rebellion?
- 4) Do you think this is a trustworthy document? Why or why not?

### Document B: Colin Campbell

- 1) Who is Campbell? When was the document written?
- 2) What are Campbell's two main claims about what caused the Sepoy Rebellion?
- 3) According to Campbell, why did the British take control of Oudh?
- 4) How does Campbell describe the residents of Oudh?
- 5) Do you think this is a trustworthy document? Why or why not?

**Document C: Sita Ram**

- 1) Who is Sita Ram? When was the document written?
  
  
  
- 2) What are Sita Ram's main claims about what caused the Sepoy Rebellion?
  
  
  
- 3) Do you think this is a trustworthy document? Why or why not?
  
  
  
- 4) How do Sita Ram's arguments compare to those in Document A and Document B?

**Document D: Sayyid Ahmed Khan**

- 1) Who is Khan? When was the document written?
  
  
  
- 2) What are Kahn's main claims about what caused the Sepoy Rebellion?
  
  
  
- 3) Do you think this is a trustworthy document? Why or why not?





## Sepoy Rebellion Final Claim

Using arguments and evidence from Documents A-E, make a final claim to answer the question: *What caused the Sepoy Rebellion?*