INTRODUCTORY ESSAYS

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The Rebellion of 1857:

Origins, Consequences, and Themes

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The Rebellion of 1857 (also known as the Indian Mutiny) was a watershed event in the history of British India. It was by far the largest, most widespread, and dangerous threat to British rule in India in the nineteenth century.[1] One of its most obvious repercussions was the elimination of the ruling East India Company and the transfer of control of India to the British Crown. As a military crisis of truly massive proportions, the Rebellion also inspired the structural transformation of both the British and Indian armies. In Britain, the crisis resulted in the amalgamation of the East India Company's European forces into the line, and the commitment of a permanent, 80,000-man garrison on the subcontinent.[2] In India, the mutiny or disbandment of sixty-nine out of the seventy-four regiments of the Bengal army necessitated its entire reconstruction with men as different in origin as possible from those who had so recently rebelled.[3]

The Rebellion, however, was much more than a military crisis. In north-central India—especially around Awadh (Oudh)—mass peasant uprisings accompanied the military rebellions, thus demonstrating the existence of broad-based antipathy to British administrative and economic policies there. In addition, the Rebellion generated unprecedented interest in Britain, where ordinary citizens followed its events with fascinated horror—a phenomenon that has prompted some historians to call it Britain's first 'national-popular' war.[4]

Ideologically, the Rebellion dramatically increased racial antagonisms between Britons and Indians. On the British side, this was in large part due to the fact that English-language accounts of the Rebellion framed it in terms of a savage attack on British women and children, who were allegedly being raped and murdered by fanatic soldiers in alarming numbers.[5] Thus, public outrage over the violation of 'innocent' Britons fueled an emotive and vengeful response to the Rebellion. On the Indian side, widespread British atrocities against both mutinous soldiers and Indian civilians left

little doubt that British notions of justice and due process did not always apply to colonial subjects. Indeed, the violence of colonial rule in India was at its most exposed during the Rebellion.

Especially since Indian Independence in 1947, the Rebellion has been a highly contested area of historical inquiry, and controversies over interpretation, significance, and even about what to call the conflict remain unresolved today. Conventionally, British historians depicted the conflict as a purely military mutiny and, often, as a heroic fight against depraved sepoys intent on rape and murder. In the last fifty years, scholars in the postcolonial era have challenged such interpretations, and have emphasized previously silenced themes in the conflict, including the scale of British atrocities and the peasant aspect of the uprisings.[6] This essay engages some of these historical controversies at the same time as it seeks to provide an introductory overview to the origins, chronology, consequences, and themes of the Rebellion.

Origins

In 1857, the British East India Company controlled more than 1.6 million square miles of territory on the subcontinent, including the newly annexed states of Sind (1843) and Punjab (1849). This vast area was controlled and protected by an equally vast military force, composed of three distinct armies centered around the presidencies of Madras, Bombay, and Bengal. In 1856 its combined native troops alone numbered 280,000 men, making it the largest all-volunteer mercenary army in the world and a powerful strategic tool for British world dominance.[7] Yet just one year later its strongest military arm—the Bengal Army—looked as though it might also prove to be the downfall of British rule in India.

Although the East India Company had begun as a trading company in the seventeenth century, its transition to a territorial empire in the eighteenth century required that it place military concerns at the heart of its policy. Foremost among these concerns was to ensure the stability of Company rule through the suppression of internal unrest and the security of its borders and alliances. The very structure of Company rule reflected these concerns. Due initially to difficulties in transport and communication and later to a strategic desire to 'forestall dangerous pan-Indian combinations,' each of the three centers of Company control at Madras, Bombay, and Calcutta maintained separate military establishments, commanders-in-chief, and military staffs as well as civil governments.[8] Loosely coordinating policy between the presidencies were the Governor-General in Council and the Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army (also CIC of the Bengal Army), both based in Bengal. Between them they controlled policy on war, diplomacy, and revenue collection for the whole of India.

The combined forces of the Indian Army were composed of a multitude of peoples and traditions.[9] Europeans served in each of the Company's three

presidency armies, and British regulars served on a rotating basis as imperial garrison troops. In 1857, the total number of European forces in India was about 40,000, though Company and Crown troops were kept quite separate and regarded one another with mutual distaste.[10]

Small and divided as the European forces in India were, they were nevertheless regarded as a vital security against domination and revolt by the far larger numbers of indigenous mercenary volunteers that made up the bulk of the troops in the Indian army. Some of these forces stood outside the command structure of the presidencies as irregular troops. Units like the Frontier Scouts were commanded independently by British officers. Others, such as the Punjab Irregular Force, were commanded directly by Lieutenant Governors and were answerable to the Government of India in the Foreign Department rather than the Commander-in-Chief in Bengal.[11] Still others came from the standing armies of the Princely States, nominally independent areas that received British agents at court and offered friendly military alliances in return for financial and political rewards.

Most native troops, however, served in the three presidency armies of Madras, Bombay, and Bengal, of which by 1857 the Bengal army was by far the largest.[12] Native volunteers were recruited in large numbers partly because of the vast span of British territory that needed protecting, partly because of the large resources of manpower various Indian populations offered, and partly because native soldiers were less expensive, better disciplined, and healthier than their European counterparts.[13] Also, native troops of diverse areas were relatively easy to recruit into the Indian army. This was true for several reasons. First, the British tended to recruit from populations, like the Rajputs of northern India, who came from long traditions of pre-colonial military service, and who perceived military service as both a respectable and honorable means of employment.[14] This focus on areas of traditional military service meant that only seldom did the British have to resort to direct recruitment, relying instead on family and village connections to supply fresh recruits. Second, unlike the British regular army the salaries offered by the Company were respectable and steady, although by 1857 pay had not kept pace with the cost of living and was increasingly less attractive.[15] Third, military service in the Company offered added benefits—in the form of special pay or land grants—for those willing to serve in foreign stations, and for those with long service, good conduct, or conspicuous acts of bravery in battle.[16]

Although each presidency army had its advocates, by 1857 the Bengal army was considered by many to be the showpiece of the Indian army. Its officers made much of the character and physique of Bengal army recruits, who were drawn increasingly from the higher Brahmin and Rajput castes of north-central India, in particular Awadh (Oudh) and Bihar. In contrast to the Madras and Bombay armies, whose officers relied on the service of a wide variety of castes and religions, Bengal officers excluded all of the lower castes, Christians, and many Muslims from their recruiting efforts.[17] British officers also established a culture of tolerance for the religious requirements of such high-caste sepoys, allowing them wide berth for observing rituals and proscriptions, and militating

against the undue use of corporal punishment.[18] By mid-century, concessions to rituals of caste had become excessive, and helped reinforce Bengal sepoys' sense of superiority relative to other Indian troops.[19] Nevertheless, British officers hailed Bengal army sepoys as models of high native character and discipline, and generally believed their colonial troops held them in mutual esteem.[20]

Even while most British officers saw few signs of trouble themselves, by mid-century the Bengal army was riven with discontent. One problem was that real sepoy wages had decreased relative to the cost of living. More serious was the increasing lack of communication and understanding between British officers and native sepoys, which resulted from a number of mutually reinforcing causes. Native officers, who might have provided an essential connection between the two, commanded little authority with their men and were not given positions of trust with British officers. This situation arose because promotion was based on seniority rather than merit, which meant that advancement to the highest class of native officer took many years and was normally conferred only on soldiers already advanced in age.[21] Talent and leadership abilities were thus weakly rewarded, with the result that high rank bore little relationship to the respect individual officers carried among their men.[22] Additionally, native officers were positioned within the regimental structure in such a way that their rank carried almost no authority with their British officers. The highest-ranking native officer could never outrank even the lowest-ranking British officer and the opinions of native officers were rarely sought by their British superiors, which left little incentive for native officers to communicate effectively about the rank and file, and frequently resulted in low morale.

To make matters worse, British officers regularly took long absences outside their regiments to pursue other, more gainful, employment in civil staff appointments or with irregular regiments.[23] Thus many officers who were on the pay lists of Company regiments were seldom in residence long enough to come to know and identify with the men nominally under their command.[24] The combination of these long absences with impaired communication between native and British officers resulted in a loss of morale among the troops and a much stronger feeling of identification among the rank and file, who already came from similar social and religious backgrounds.[25]

Several other factors specific to the decades just prior to the Rebellion added fuel to the fire of the Bengal sepoys' discontent. First, there was the rapid expansion of British power in the subcontinent, signaled by the annexation of the Punjab in 1848 and the annexation of Awadh in 1856. The final conquest of the Punjab had discontented many soldiers in the Bengal army, who had been receiving extra pay (*batta*) for serving in an area outside of Company control. Once the Punjab officially became part of the Company's territories in 1849 the *batta* ceased— causing grumbling irritation in the ranks.

The annexation of Awadh, whence as we have seen many recruits hailed, further provoked the sepoys as well as their home communities. In 1856 the King of Awadh was summarily deposed, an action many in the province perceived as a

deep humiliation. In his place the Company placed a British chief commissioner who introduced new laws concerning the ownership of land, which dispossessed many of the influential *zamindars* and *taluqdars*[26] who traditionally were at the head of society. Moreover, the transfer of Awadh to Company rule also caused extreme hardship on the bulk of the population through serious over-assessments of property for tax purposes in many districts, through unemployment and dislocations caused by the removal of the King of Awadh's court, and through a rise in prices of essential commodities.[27]

Second, sepoys in the Bengal army increasingly feared that the British meant to convert the population of India to Christianity. Christian missionary activity had in fact increased dramatically in the 1840s and 1850s following an 1834 Act that rescinded the East India Company's right to keep British subjects (and missionaries in particular) out of India. Although many missionaries believed they held only the best intentions for Indian peoples, they were often overzealous and almost always publicly critical of Islam and Hinduism—including not a few Bengal Army officers.[28] Indeed, Christianizing India was a vital element in the Liberal project to reform and uplift Indian society, begun in earnest with the governor-generalship of Lord William Bentinck in 1828.[29]

Yet both Hindus and Muslims often felt deep horror at British Christian evangelism. Rumors of British intent to resort to forced conversions circulated widely, and seemed all the more believable in light of changes in landholding, law, and customary rights so recently imposed. Mistrust of British intentions with regard to religion were particularly acute in the Bengal army, where high-caste sepoys believed the religious tolerance traditionally allowed them by British officers was rapidly being reversed.[30] Especially despised was the 1856 General Service Enlistment Act. This Act, in contrast to previous legislation which allowed most recruits to enlist on terms of service within the Subcontinent only, dictated that no recruit would henceforth be accepted to any of the Presidency armies unless he was prepared to undertake overseas service when required.[31] For Hindus, and especially high-caste Hindus, overseas service was abhorrent because crossing the ocean would leave individuals in a ritually impure state, requiring expensive purification ceremonies or else becoming outcasts in their home communities. At the same time, refusal to enlist entailed a loss of a highly esteemed profession, a dilemma which many potential recruits angrily faced in 1856.[32] For all these reasons, it appeared to many Bengal army sepoys—and especially those from the newly conquered area of Awadh—that the British were in fact bent on seizing power, destroying their traditions, and subverting their religion in order to convert them to Christianity.

The final straw came in late 1856 when it was rumored that the cartridges for the new Enfield muzzle-loading rifles being issued to the East India Company Army were greased with the fat of pork and beef. For Hindus, eating or touching beef to the lips meant a loss of caste, and for Muslims, the ingestion of pork was repugnant to the faith. Thus, it seemed to many that the British were deliberately and openly trying to make both Hindu and Muslim soldiers lose their religion, because army drill required that the soldier bite off one end of the cartridge before loading the rifles. Upon investigation, Company administrators

discovered that tallow or lard had in fact been used to lubricate the cartridges, and it was suspected that animal fat from pigs or cows had been included in the mixture.[33] The mistake was inadvertent, but was an illustration of just how out of touch were the rulers from the ruled. The British military administration moved quickly to correct the blunder by allowing the cartridge to be torn with the hands, and by allowing the men to grease their own cartridges with ghee, but in Bengal it was of little use.[34] Many regiments refused the cartridges, and when eighty-five men from the 3rd Native Cavalry in Mirath (Meerut) were publicly degraded and imprisoned for refusing orders to use them, the next day—May 10, 1857—the whole regiment mutinied in protest and killed their British commanders.[35]

Brief Chronology

After the first local mutiny in Mirath, other disaffected regiments in the Bengal Army quickly followed suit. Meanwhile the 3rd Cavalry, gathering strength the whole way by the addition of other regiments who had mutinied against their British officers, marched to Delhi. There were few British soldiers in Delhi, and when the marchers arrived they were welcomed by Indian soldiers, who had left the gates of the city open.[36] The rebel force quickly proclaimed the eighty-three year old titular Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah the leader of their cause, thereby giving the revolt a symbol around which to rally. Delhi became the center for the rebel operations, and as more and more regiments in the Bengal Army mutinied, rebel soldiers came in large numbers to reinforce those who had reached the capital of the old Mughal empire first.[37]

Over the next few months, though contemporary British sources attempted to deny it, much of north-central India became lost to British control. In Awadh, as well as in other areas nearby in Uttar Pradesh, civil rebellions accompanied the military rebellion and changed its tenor to an all-out popular revolt that enveloped all classes of the population.[38] Moreover, the paucity of British troops throughout the region meant that the British could do little to control or stop the progress of the revolt.

The events of the spring and summer of 1857 established Delhi, Lucknao (Lucknow), and Kanpur as the three most important centers of revolt.[39] After taking Delhi, on May 30 rebel forces laid siege to the British garrison at Lucknao, residence of the new Commissioner of Awadh and home to nearly five hundred British women and children. In late June, they forced the surrender of the small British garrison in nearby Kanpur (Cawnpore). Although the terms of surrender had promised the British population free passage to Allahabad, instead the three hundred fifty men of the garrison were murdered near the Ganges river, and the one hundred twenty-five women and children were imprisoned in the city. A little more than a week later, the women and children were also killed, their bodies thrown into a well.[40]

The alleged rebel architect of the 'Cawnpore Massacre,' as it came to be known,

was the Nana Sahib, Maharaja of Bithoor. More than any other rebel leader, the Nana became the object and symbol of British wrath and hatred.[41] The murders he apparently sanctioned at Kanpur were used to legitimate stunning reprisals against Indian soldiers and civilians. Thus, after Kanpur, acts of brutality on the part of British soldiers were given the full sanction of the law and the willing acceptance of the public. In turn, rebels treated their British captives with little mercy, thus fanning the flames of bitter hatreds that would last on both sides for decades.

Only in the autumn of 1857 did British counter-rebellion measures begin to have serious impact on the progress of the revolt. In Delhi, the small British and Indian force that had been besieging the rebel stronghold for months was finally reinforced by a moveable column from the Punjab. This force, which was hastily organized by John Lawrence, then Lieutenant-General of the Punjab, has generally been credited with the successful recapture of the city on September 21, 1857.[42]

At Lucknao, too, British-led forces began to meet with success after a summer of disappointments. A flying column under the command of General Henry Havelock had arrived in Kanpur on July 17, only two days after the massacre of British women and children. From there, Havelock intended to march directly to Lucknao to relieve the still-besieged garrison and to save the British captives there from a similar fate. His progress was made incomparably slower, however, by an outbreak of cholera among his troops and a lack of reinforcements. As a result, Havelock's band was not able to attempt the relief of Lucknao until September. Finally, on September 25, the column succeeded in forcing its way into the besieged residency, only to find it was not strong enough to actually break the siege and relieve the captives. This state of affairs required a second relief force to be assembled. On November 17 a force under the command of General Sir Colin Campbell, Commander-in-Chief in India and former hero of the Crimean War, successfully broke the siege and evacuated the Residency after much hard fighting.

The end of the siege did not signify the end of the fighting, as combat continued around Lucknao, Jhansi, Gwalior, and Bareilly until the middle of 1858. The *rani* of Jhansi (a woman who led her own rebel troops) and Tantia Topi (Nana Sahib's artillery expert) proved especially dangerous and difficult to defeat until both leaders were killed.[43] However, by that time most Britons were fully confident of eventual victory.[44]

Military Consequences

The violent disruption of the Rebellion, and the bitterness with which it was fought on both sides, had effects in both Britain and India that went far beyond the cessation of hostilities. Politically and administratively, the Rebellion brought an end to the East India Company, as its powers and territories were officially transferred to the British Crown in 1859. Militarily, the Rebellion led to wide-

ranging changes in the structure, composition, and outlook of both the Indian and British armies.

Though the British had emerged victorious in Bengal, the native army there—once the pride of the Company's forces—lay in ruins. All ten regiments of the Bengal Light Cavalry had mutinied, and nearly all of the Infantry had either mutinied or had been disbanded in anticipation of mutiny.[45] The sepoys of that army, who had so recently been praised for their physique, manner, and gentlemanly behavior, were now in disgrace.

The men who stood in their place at the end of 1859 were very different. During the crisis, large numbers of new recruits had hastily been raised to fight the rebellious sepoys. Of these, many were low-caste men from various areas in Hindustan. The majority, however, were from the newly annexed Punjab province, which was under the efficient and ruthless leadership of John Lawrence.[46] At the outbreak of the Rebellion, Lawrence had moved quickly to quell mutiny in the regiments of the Bengal army stationed in the Punjab, and then, on his own initiative, began raising local Punjabi troops to fight the rebels. As a result of this initiative, by the end of 1858 Lawrence had increased the number of Punjabis serving in the Indian army from a mere 30,000 to a grand total of 75,000 men.[47] It was these troops who made up the bulk of the moveable column believed to be critical in breaking the siege at Delhi in September, 1857.

Historical accident and the need to construct a loyal army in the midst of an emergency had thus left the British administration with a very different army at the end of 1858 than the one that had existed at the start of 1857. Moreover, it was clear to most contemporaries that there was no going back to the old structure of the 1857 army. Less clear was the problem of how the army should be structured in the future now that the immediate crisis had passed. How could a new army be recruited and organized to prevent future discontent from igniting into mass rebellion like, as one contemporary put it, "the seared and yellow leaves before the blast"?[48]

In the end, a mixture of pragmatism, experience, and influence prevailed. Though the crisis had indeed passed, the internal defense demands of India required a combat-ready force, and the Government could hardly afford to demobilize the loyal forces of the existing army in 1858, and then remobilize with hand-picked troops. As a result, the army that had been "raised in haste" to fight the rebels, composed of the few loyal regiments of the Bengal army and the new low-caste and Punjabi regiments, became the logical and practical base upon which the new force was built.[49]

The recommendations of the Peel Commission, a special Parliamentary Committee charged with reviewing the state of the Indian army in 1858, helped determine the size of the new Indian army. After hearing testimony from a number of British officers who decried the small size of the European forces in India, the commissioners recommended a 1:2 ratio of British to Indian soldiers in Bengal.[50] To accomplish this act, the British garrison in India had to be

doubled to 80,000 troops, and the Bengal army had to be reduced by 65,000 men to reach an acceptable size of 110,000 troops. Once the necessary reductions had taken place, the Bengal army emerged as a new force. Only eighteen regiments of the old Bengal army remained, while fourteen new regiments consisted of recruits raised in the Punjab during the rebellion. Seven regiments of low-caste recruits were retained, as were four local regiments. A total of fifteen Gurkha, Sikh and Punjab regiments, numbered each in their own sequences, were also retained.[51]

The Peel Commission did not make many specific recommendations about how the future Indian army should be recruited, but its report did recommend recruiting from as many different nationalities as possible.[52] Officers' testimony had produced an overwhelming consensus that the old Bengal army had relied far too heavily on high-caste Brahmins from Awadh and Bihar to fill its ranks. Many interviewees argued that British officers had pandered to every 'superstition' and ritual claimed by high-born sepoys, and that such favoritism had encouraged insolence and intransigence within the Bengal army.[53] As one officer put it, the Indian army must be restructured so that "none of the old leaven should be left to impregnate the new mass."[54]

As a remedy to the favoritism and exclusionary recruiting practices of the old Bengal army, the Peel Commission opined that "the Native Army should be composed of different nationalities mixed up in the regiments," and that all sepoys should be henceforth enlisted for general service.[55] Yet while this "general mixture" system was implemented in about half of the Bengal army regiments during the 1860's, it came up against a conflicting policy advocated by another report—that of the enormously influential Punjab Committee, headed by Sir John Lawrence.[56] The Punjab Committee agreed with the Peel Commission that the recruiting base of the Indian army should be widened. But rather than mix all the sepoys of the army together as the Peel Commission had advocated, the Punjab Committee recommended they be recruited and stationed locally, each 'race' or religion kept in separate companies within regiments. That way, differences between groups could be played up to encourage "the Muhomedan of one county [to] despise, fear, or dislike the Muhomedan of another."[57]

Yet even as the Punjab Committee published its report, the inclusiveness of its recruiting strategy clashed with the language and values of many military commanders who had just experienced mass rebellion in the army. The events of the Rebellion had seemed to prove that some native groups were 'naturally' more loyal to the Raj than others. As a result of emergency recruiting, the post 1858 Bengal army was already radically different from the army that existed in 1857, and its geographical base was already weighted towards the Punjab. Those Indian men who had remained loyal during the Rebellion—many of whom hailed from that region—became, in spite of official warnings, favored populations whose loyalty was increasingly perceived as having proven both their military worth and their superiority over other native groups. Eventually, recruiting from the Punjab became institutionalized as a matter of army policy, and by the end of the nineteenth century such policy had transformed the geographical base of the

Indian army.

Ideological Consequences

Important as its military consequences were, the effects of the Rebellion extended well beyond matters of army organization and defense. Indeed, the Rebellion was crucial in an ideological sense as well, for British narrative accounts that emerged out of the conflict helped to shape beliefs and perceptions about colonialism, gender, and race in both Britain and India, the legacies of which still haunt historical interpretation in the present.

Two factors ensured the ideological significance of the Rebellion. First was the explosion of the British media, which coincided neatly with the timing of the Rebellion.[58] This unprecedented expansion allowed, for the first time, the events of an imperial conflict to reach a truly 'mass' audience in Britain. Second was the spectacle of the massacre of British women and children at Kanpur on July 15, 1857, and the threat of a second massacre at the still-besieged garrison at Lucknao. These events, involving as they did the fate of 'innocent' British women and children, seemed to provide proof of the racial depravity of mutinous sepoys while simultaneously justifying vengeance on a scale that might otherwise have provoked moral outrage in Britain.

After the murders, competing narratives about the causes or conduct of the campaign were silenced; in their place was a narrative that depicted British responses to the Rebellion as a righteous crusade of moral vengeance. The desire to vindicate British womanhood thus transformed the Rebellion—in both the press and in military accounts—into a popular and heroic struggle. Indeed, gendered ideals of honor and dishonor, manliness and cowardliness, came to define the core of the conflict.

Without Kanpur, it is not clear whether the Rebellion would have received popular support in Britain. Initial reports of the Rebellion provoked a wave of criticisms directed at the East India Company and its army.[59] The Conservative opposition party took an early lead in placing the blame for the Rebellion with the Indian government and military. In July 1857 the opposition leader Benjamin Disraeli openly attacked the East India Company in a speech to Parliament, arguing that, "The decline and fall of empires are not affairs of greased cartridges. Such results are occasioned by adequate causes, and by an accumulation of adequate causes."[60]

British public opinion seemed to concur. Many people agreed that the East India Company had made its bed and was now lying in it. Company officers were blamed for excessive conversion efforts among their Hindu and Muslim sepoys as "one cause of the outbreak."[61] *Blackwood's Magazine*, a respected journal with clear connections to an imperially-minded audience, suggested in addition that "our leaders were unequal to their duty" in the crisis.[62] So great was the general contempt for the perceived blunders of the East India Company that the

Anglo-Indian *Delhi Gazette Extra* was forced to concede, "[t]he British public remain utterly impassive and indifferent, and become impatient when the subject is broached in conversation. They have made up their mind that it was entirely owing to the insolence and incompetency of the Regimental Officers, and seem rather glad that they have suffered for their supposed dereliction of duty."[63]

But when news of the Kanpur massacre began to filter into Britain by the late summer of 1857, the mood of the British public shifted abruptly away from its previous critical mode. In the wake of the murders, the Rebellion metamorphosed from a military conflict on the imperial periphery to a popular national struggle in which even ordinary Britons felt invested. The specter of British women and children being murdered by colonial men proved to be a catalyst by which ideologies of gender and race became both inseparable and central to the British 'cause' in India.[64]

Coverage of the event was widespread and sensational in national, provincial, and local papers all over Britain. *The London Times* alone carried one hundred eight stories on the massacre between August 15, 1857 and February 3, 1860. All of the largest national newspapers, regardless of political affiliation, featured intensive coverage of the murders—including *Reynolds's*, *Lloyd's*, and *News of the World*. In addition to selling newspapers, these 'horrors' also inspired unprecedented local action, by prompting packed meetings to pledge money for the victims of the Rebellion.[65]

The depth of public reaction to the murders was due in large part to the lurid nature of the published accounts. Though papers frequently argued that the 'vile tortures' practised upon British women and children should "be remembered, not told," all of them did in fact 'tell' of rape and torture in graphic detail.[66] Letters and telegraphs flooded the papers with accounts of women being raped in front of their children before being killed, of matted blood, gory remains of children's limbs, and of the suffocation of living children among their dead mothers when the victims were thrown into a well.[67]

Such graphic tales of rape and murder inflamed public sentiments calling for vengeance on a massive scale.[68] The *Illustrated London News* voiced its indignation in tandem with most other national, provincial, and local papers when it claimed that "every British heart, from the highest to the humblest of the land, glows with honest wrath, and demands justice, prompt and unsparing, on the bloodyminded instruments of the Rebellion."[69] Leading national and provincial papers went so far as to advocate the 'extermination' of Muslim and Hindu rebels.[70] In India, the *Delhi Gazette* also proclaimed that "the paramount duty of the British Government is now retribution—a duty to the dead and living."[71]

This vengeance was imagined against perpetrators who had come to represent a potent mixture of masculine, racial, and religious depravity. Sepoys were represented in the press not as men, but as "demons" and "fiends," led by their "passions" to "faithlessness, rebellion, and crimes at which the heart sickens."[72] Their apparent thirst for innocent blood—and their reported lust

for forbidden women—had unmanned them, and placed them outside the boundaries of masculine honor. Moreover, their decision to operate outside these rules of conduct absolved the British from addressing their grievances or from showing them mercy. A poem in the Anglo-Indian *Delhi Gazette* put it plainly when it cried, "No mercy's shown to men whose hands/ With women's blood yet reek!"[73]

That rebel sepoys would commit such unspeakable crimes against women was attributed both to racial characteristics and to religion. In India, the conflict had hardened racial hatreds among British officers long before Kanpur. Correspondence reveals widespread use of the word 'nigger' and other racially antagonistic language when referring to natives, and officers writing home frequently echoed the contention that "[t]he race of men in India are certainly the most abominable, degraded lot of brutes that you can imagine, they don't seem to have a single good quality."[74] In the British and Anglo-Indian media, such language received almost unqualified sanction in the wake of Kanpur. Despite the fact that a majority of high-caste Bengal army sepoys were traditionally recruited for their tall physiques and light skin, British sources depicted "gangs of black satyrs" raping and dismembering British women, and called rebel Indians "that venom race," "in heart as black as face."[75]

These 'black' villains were also believed to be depraved because of their religion, whether Hindu or Muslim, for in both cases religion was presumed to have encouraged the rape and murder of British women. Rumors circulated that some of the women at Kanpur were raped, kidnapped, and forced to convert to Islam.[76] High-caste Brahmins were said to be slaves to the requirements of caste, which supposedly included debased notions of masculine honor. Shortly after Kanpur, the *Delhi Gazette* bellowed:

We shall never again occupy a high ground in India until we have put a yoke upon the Brahmins. We have conceded too much to the insolence of caste. Not one high caste man should henceforward be entrusted with a sword.... He has been trusted with power, and how has he betrayed it? The graves of 100 English women and children—worse, the unburied bones of those poor victims—are the monuments of high bred sepoy chivalry.[77]

By their crimes at Kanpur, then, both Hindu and Muslim sepoys had given up all claims to manliness, to honor, to bravery, and to chivalry. Moreover, both their 'race' and their religion were increasingly called upon to explain the loss of those claims.

The effects of such narrative constructions were not merely textual—instead, they had real effects in the material world. Perhaps most importantly, they legitimated acts of appalling vengeance by British forces. At the same time, however, British control over these narratives either glossed or completely ignored the extent of British acts of brutality against Indian soldiers and civilians. As one of the conflict's most influential historians put it in 1864, the Rebellion had been fought by "English heroes" who, in the end, "marched triumphantly to

victory."[78]

More recently, a growing number of historians have acknowledged that these "English heroes" were responsible for savage acts of retribution in India. Once it was clear that the Rebellion might induce any number of Bengal army regiments to mutiny, for example, many British officers lost no time making examples of the mutineers through execution.[79] Punishment was sometimes general, involving the slaughter of whole, or nearly whole, regiments. This was the fate of the 51st and 26th regiments, who both fell victim to the "unceasing vigilance" of John Lawrence in his proactive efforts to stem the Rebellion in the Punjab.[80] Of the 26th, Lawrence noted in August 1857 that, "we have killed and drowned 500 out of the 600 men of the… regiment."[81]

In addition to military executions, the British also exacted severe reprisals on civilian populations in north-central India. The notorious actions of Colonel James Neill, called to Bengal from the Madras army to help suppress the Rebellion, bear directly on the events surrounding the Kanpur massacre. After arriving in Allahabad on June 11, 1857, Neill was responsible for thousands of murders both of sepoys and suspected rebels as well as innocent men, women, and children. Describing the actions of Neill's troops around Allahabad, one officer wrote:

Every native that appeared in sight was shot down without question, and in the morning Colonel Neill sent out parties of regiment [?]...and burned all the villages near where the ruins of our bungalows stood, and hung every native that they could catch, on the trees that lined the road. Another party of soldiers penetrated into the native city and set fire to it, whilst volley after volley of grape and canister was poured into the fugitives as they fled from their burning houses.[82]

On June 29 1857, Neill ordered "the village of Mullagu and neighborhood to be attacked and destroyed—slaughter all the men—take no prisoners." He added, "all insurgents that fall into good hands hang at once—and shoot all you can."[83]

Significantly, Neill's 'bloody assizes' around Allahabad (as they came to be known) occurred before, not after, the massacre of British women and children at Kanpur on July 15. Some scholars have speculated that the murders were ordered in retaliation for the Indian civilians whose murders Neill personally supervised.[84] Whether or not such a contention can be proven, it is nevertheless clear that Neill's brutality could not have been justified by the Kanpur massacre as was so often contended, for his own excesses preceded the event.[85]

Yet while British atrocities preceded the massacre at Kanpur, once news of the killings spread they were used to justify retaliatory murders and punishments on an astonishing scale. Neill himself, who was with the first British force to enter the city two days after the massacre, invented macabre executions for both Hindu and Muslim sepoys that were designed to ensure both intense suffering before

death and eternal damnation afterwards.[86]

British soldiers sent to India offered ample testimony to the scale of British retaliation against both military and civilian targets. Sergeant David McAusland of the 42nd Highland Regiment recalled that during his service in Bareilly during the Rebellion, "three scaffolds and six whipping posts stood outside of the town along side of the jail and there [took place] executions to the number of six every day." The judge in charge of trials had lost his wife during the conflict, and had told McAusland, "if ever I get the chance of [judging] these Black rebels I will hang a man for every hair that was in my wife's head." McAusland responded by asking him how many men he had executed already, "he told me close on 700 well I said if you just continue you will have made good your work and turning to Sergt…Aden I said you mind what Sir Colin [Campbell] said to us at Cawnpore that every man that had a black face was our enemy and we could not do wrong in shooting him so you know how to act here."[87]

Private Alexander Robb, also of the 42nd, described the first summary hanging of an Indian civilian he witnessed during the Rebellion, adding, "that was the first man I saw dancing on nothing in India, but it was not the last, for I saw some awful sights in that line."[88] Lieutenant Robert Bruce McEwen of the 92nd Gordon Highlanders recorded, on numerous days, routinely shooting large numbers of prisoners and in taking part in actions where between 500 and 700 rebels were killed.[89] And when British forces finally attacked and re-took the city of Delhi in September, 1857, they were merciless in their treatment of soldiers and civilians alike.[90]

As these stories indicate, the history of the Rebellion—like all historical subjects—is continually in the process of being revised and re-interpreted. Scholars in the post-colonial period in particular have challenged British-centered accounts of the Rebellion, emphasizing instead the widespread nature of the conflict among Indian civilians as well as soldiers, and the scale of British retribution and violence. In recent years, historians of gender and racial theory have also contributed to the re-interpretation of the Rebellion by emphasizing the important consequences of the conflict for imperial ideologies. All of these approaches have helped to deepen our understanding of this bloody, brutal, but significant conflict. For the Rebellion was both a military mutiny and a peasant rebellion; it included murders and atrocities on both the British and the Indian sides; and it was significant not just in military terms but in ideological and historiographical terms as well.

Notes

1. T. A. Heathcote, *The Military in British India: The Development of British Land Forces in South Asia, 1600-1947* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 103; Bernard Porter, *The Lion's Share: A Short History of British Imperialism* (London: Longman, 1975), 28.

2. House of Commons, "Reports from Commissioners: Organization of Army (Indian)," (1859

Session 1, Volume V), x.

3. David Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj: the Indian Army, 1860-1940* (London: Macmillan, 1994), 9; T. A. Heathcote, *The Military in British India*, 114-124.

4. Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire, and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 81.

5. Jenny Sharpe, "The Unspeakable Limits of Rape: Colonial Violence and Counter-Insurgency," *Genders* 10 (Spring 1991); Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), chapter 7. Widespread claims about rape, in contrast to those of murder, were unfounded.

6. Many historians of the Rebellion have commented extensively on its historiography. For some examples, see Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *Spectre of Violence: the 1857 Kanpur Massacres* (Delhi: Viking, 1998); S.B. Chaudhuri, *Theories of the Indian Mutiny, 1857-59* (Calcutta: World Press Private, 1965), esp. chapter one; Snigdha Sen, *The Historiography of the Indian Revolt* (Calcutta: Punthi-Pustak, 1992); Ainslie T. Embree, *1857 in India: Mutiny or War of Independence?* (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1963).

7. Strength quoted from Peter Stanley, *White Mutiny: British Military Culture in India* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 9.

8. Douglas Peers, *Between Mars and Mammon*: *Colonial Armies and the Garrison State in India, 1819-1835* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995), 74.

9. For a good overview of the composition of the Indian army, see Douglas Peers, *Between Mars and Mammon*, especially chapter 3, "The Military Resources of the Garrison State."

10. For the strength of European forces, see T.A. Heathcote, "The Army of British India," in David Chandler, ed. *The Oxford Illustrated History of the British Army* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 381; for antagonisms between Crown and Company troops, see Stanley, *White Mutiny*, chapter 1, "Hope of Fortune and Preferment."

11. T.A. Heathcote, *The Indian Army: The Garrison of British Imperial India, 1822-1922* (London: Hippocrene, 1974), 26-27.

12. Out of more than 250,000 native troops, the Bengal army comprised more than 160,000 in 1856. Stanley, *White Mutiny*, 9.

13. Peers, *Between Mars and Mammon*, 84-85.

14. Douglas Peers, "Sepoys, Soldiers, and the Lash: Race, Caste and Army Discipline in India, 1820-50," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 23:2, p. 218. See also Dirk Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput, and Sepoy: The Ethnohistory of the Military Labor Market in Hindustan, 1450-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

15. For example, the monthly rate of pay for an ordinary private soldier in the Indian army was Rs 7 a month, whereas unskilled artisans made between Rs 5 and 6 a month, and ordinary laborers around Rs 4 a month (figures derived from 1831 statistics). Taken from Heathcote, *The Indian Army*, 111.

16. For the issue of land grants, see Seema Alavi, "The Company Army and Rural Society: The Invalid Thanah 1788-1830," *Modern Asian Studies* 27:1 (1993). Soldiers who committed acts of bravery received both recognition in the form of the Indian Order of Merit (est. 1837) and increased pay according to rank and the number of acts committed. Even one recognized act of

bravery brought with it a one-third increase in pay and pension.

17. Peers, *Between Mars and Mammon*, 89.

18. Peers, "Sepoys, Soldiers and the Lash," 212.

19. For example, high-caste soldiers refused to take orders from lower-caste men, and refused to do menial labor such as dig trenches that would cause ritual pollution. Heathcote, *The Indian Army*, 83.

20. A few officers did not share this optimism. In 1849, Charles Napier had warned against complacency, arguing it was important to remember that "All India is a conquered land." Charles Napier, Report following the Conquest of the Punjab (1849), MSS Eur C 0123, OIOL, 24.

21. The ranking for Indian infantry soldiers began at Sepoy, with a promotion to Naik (similar to Corporal in the British army). Non-commissioned ranking began at the rank of Havaldar (Sergeant), and advanced to Havaldar-Major. Commissioned ranking began with Jemadar (Ensign) and advanced to Subedar (Lieutenant) and Subedar-Major. K.M.L. Saxena, *The Military System of India*: *1850-1900* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1974), 205.

22. Saxena, *The Military System of India*, 204-205.

23. Peers, *Between Mars and Mammon*, 78. In contrast to regular regiments of the Indian army which maintained between twenty and twenty-four British officers, irregular regiments (which comprised a minority in the presidency armies but a majority in the various local forces) maintained only between three and five British officers. This situation offered a much wider scope of command for individual British officers, as well as higher pay.

24. Saxena, *Military System of India*, 201-203.

25. Peers, *Between Mars and Mammon*, 95.

26. Landholders, members of the landed gentry.

27. For an in-depth view of popular feeling after the annexation of Awadh, see Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *Awadh in Revolt, 1857-58: A Study of Popular Resistance* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), especially chapter two, "Annexation and the Summary Settlement of 1856-7."

28. Heathcote, *The Indian Army*, 85.

29. Thomas Metcalfe, *Ideologies of the Raj: The New Cambridge History of India, Volume III:4* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 33.

30. Madan Paul Singh, *Indian Army Under the East India Company* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1976), 156-157; Saxena, *Military System of India*, 88.

31. Edward Spiers, *The Army and Society*, 123.

32. Heathcote, *The Indian Army*, 85.

33. Surendra Nath Sen, *Eighteen Fifty-Seven* (Delhi: Publications Division, 1957), 42.

34. Heathcote, *The Indian Army*, 86.

35. The general Rebellion discussed here refers only to the Bengal army. The Bombay and

Madras armies, with very little exception, remained quiet during the rebellion—a fact that was widely used after the Uprising to support the continuance of the three-army system. The reasons they did not rise with the Bengal army have been hotly debated, but it is generally agreed that distance between the armies discouraged communication, and that the particular conditions in the Bengal army of mass disaffection and religious grievances did not exist in either the Madras or Bombay armies.

36. Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India, Sixth Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 235.

37. Sen, *Eighteen Fifty-Seven*, 70-72.

38. An early attempt to locate the Rebellion as a large-scale peasant revolt in addition to a military mutiny was S.B. Chaudhuri's *Civil Rebellion in the Indian Mutinies, 1857-1859* (Calcutta: World Press Private, 1957). Eric Stokes later took up the subject in *The Peasant Armed: The Indian Revolt of 1857* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), as did Rudrangshu Mukherjee in *Awadh in Revolt, 1857-58: A Study of Popular Resistance* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984) and Ranajit Guha in *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).

39. Wolpert, *A New History of India*, p. 236.

40. For further details on the events leading up to the Kanpur massacre, see Sen, *Eighteen Fifty-Seven*, chapter 4; M.P. Srivastava, *The Indian Mutiny, 1857* (Allahabad: Chugh, 1979), chapter 4; Rudrangshu Mukherjee *Spectre of Violence: the 1857 Kanpur Massacres* (Delhi: Viking, 1998), 63-79; Pratul Chandra Gupta, *Nana Sahib and the Rising at Cawnpore* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963).

41. Although hunted with intensity, the Nana was never captured, and is believed to have died in Nepal in 1859.

42. See R.H. Haigh and P.W. Turner, *The Punjab Moveable Column its Effect on the Course of Events in the Punjab during the Indian Mutiny of 1857* (Sheffield: Sheffield Polytechnic Department of Political Studies, 1983).

43. The Rani of Jhansi was killed on her horse in battle, and Tantia Topi was captured and hung by British forces.

44. Surendra Sen provides an in-depth narrative of the events of the Rebellion in his *Eighteen Fifty-Seven*; as does Christopher Hibbert, albeit more apologetically, in *The Great Mutiny: India 1857* (New York: Viking, 1978). P.J.O. Taylor has produced the useful *What Really Happened During the Mutiny: A Day-by-Day Account of the Major Events of 1857-59 in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

45. Heathcote, "The Army of British India," 382.

46. David Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj: The Indian Army, 1860-1940* (London: MacMillan, 1994), 9.

47. Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj*, 5, 6.

48. India and her Future Military Organization, in a Series of Letters addressed to Sir Joshua Walmsley. Confidential (1858), Public Record Office, WO 33/6A, #101, 1.

49. Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj*, 9. The quotation is by Lord Ripon in 1881. Ripon was then

Viceroy of India.

50. House of Commons, "Reports from Commissioners: Organization of Army (Indian)," (1859 Session 1, Volume V), x. In Madras and Bombay, the ratio was to be fixed at 1 British soldier for every 3 sepoys.

51. Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj*, 8, 9.

52. House of Commons, "Reports from Commissioners: Organization of Army (Indian)," xiv.

53. Aside from this, the interviewed officers produced extremely contradictory recommendations about how the future army should be recruited. Some would have recruited all comers, while others hoped to limit the recruiting field to the Punjab.

54. House of Commons, "Reports from Commissioners: Organization of Army (Indian)," 182.

55. House of Commons, "Reports from Commissioners: Organization of Army (Indian)," xiv.

56. For the numbers of 'general mixture' regiments, see David Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj*, 87. The Punjab Committee Report was incorporated into the Peel Commission's Report in an appendix.

57. House of Commons, "Reports From Commissioners," 184.

58. For the expansion of the press in this period, see Alan Lee, *The Origins of the Popular Press, 1855-1914* (London: Croom Helm, 1976); Stephen Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain: The Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981); and Lucy Brown, *Victorian News and Newspapers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

59. Laura Peters has also noted the early criticisms of the East India Company administrators in " 'Double-dyed Traitors and Infernal Villains': Illustrated London News, Household Words, Charles Dickens and the Indian Rebellion," in David Finklestein and Douglas Peers, eds. *Negotiating India in the Nineteenth-Century Media* (London: MacMillan, 2000), 113.

60. Quoted in Bernard Porter, *The Lion's Share: A Short History of British Imperialism* (London: Longman, 1975), 30.

61. *Aberdeen Herald and General Advertiser*, Saturday, August 22, 1857, p. 3.

62. "The Bengal Mutiny," *Blackwood's Magazine* 82 (September 1857), 382.

63. "London Correspondent," *The Delhi Gazzette Extra*, 10 July 1857.

64. Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness*, 202.

65. *Aberdeen Free Press and Buchan News*, Friday, Sept. 11, 1857, 5.

66. Quoted from "Retribution," *The Delhi Gazette* 1857.

67. Alison Blunt, "Embodying War: British Women and Domestic Defilement in the Indian 'Mutiny,' 1857-8," *Journal of Historical Geography* 26:3 (2000), 412-414.

68. Both Jenny Sharpe and Nancy Paxton call attention to the focus on rape of contemporary accounts and fictions of the Uprising. See Jenny Sharpe, "The Unspeakable Limits of Rape: Colonial Violence and Counter-Insurgency," *Genders* 10 (Spring 1991); Nancy L. Paxton,

"Mobilizing Chivalry: Rape in British Novels About the Indian Uprising of 1857," *Victorian Studies* (Fall 1992).

69. "Progress of the Indian Rebellion," *Illustrated London News*, 5 September 1857.

70. These included the *Times*, the *Morning Post*, and the *Newcastle Chronicle*. Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*, 94.

71. "Retribution," *The Delhi Gazette*, December 1857.

72. General Orders India, October 7, 1857, in General Orders for the Military for 1857, OIOC, L/MIL/17/2/306.

73. R. Jacket, "The Indian Mutiny," *The Delhi Gazette* 1858.

74. Brevet-Major R. Poore, MS letters by Brevet-Major R. Poore in Indian Mutiny. (1854-1858) 9504-22, National Army Museum, March 9, 1857.

75. Jacket, "The Indian Mutiny," *The Delhi Gazette*, January 1858; "Retribution," *The Delhi Gazette*, December 1857.

76. William Forbes-Mitchell, *The Relief of Lucknow* (London: The Folio Society, 1962). Mitchell was a soldier in the 92nd Gordon Highlanders, and was in Kanpur days after the murders. His diary was unpublished until 1962.

77. "Retribution," *The Delhi Gazette* 1857.

78. Sir John Kaye, *Kaye's and Malleson's History of the Indian Mutiny of 1857-8, Volume I* ed. Colonel Malleson (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1971), p. xii. (originally published 1897-98, Longmans, Green & Co.)

79. Edward Spiers, *The Army and Society*, 129.

80. The words "unceasing vigilance" were those ascribed to Lawrence by the Governor-General in General Orders for the Military for 1857, October 7, 1857. OIOC, L/MIL/17/2/306.

81. John Lawrence, August 1, 1857, Correspondence of Lord Lawrence, OIOC, MSS EUR C 203/1.

82. Quoted from Mukherjee, "The Kanpur Massacres in India," 182.

83. Instructions issued by Colonel Neill on 29 June, 1857 to Major Renaud, James George Smith Neill Papers, Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections, Duke University.

84. Sen, *Eighteen Fifty-Seven*, 150; Spiers, The Army and Society, 131; Patrick Brantlinger, "The Well at Cawnpore: Literary Representations of the Indian Mutiny of 1857," in *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 201.

85. Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *Spectre of Violence*, 32.

86. These included the notorious punishments of requiring sepoys to lick the blood of the slain women before being hanged. See Neill's orders for 25 July, 1857 at Kanpur, James George Smith Neill Papers, Duke University.

87. David McAusland, Diary While in the 42ⁿᵈ, Accession #0214, Black Watch Museum, p. 84.

88. Alexander Robb, Reminiscences of a Veteran: Being the Experiences of a Private Soldier in the Crimea, and During the Indian Mutiny. (1888), p. 98. Catalog #: O/NO795, accession #6161, Black Watch Museum.

89. Robert Bruce McEwen diary, PB 157, Gordon Highlanders Museum. Entries include October 9, 11, 19, 25, 26, and 27, 1858.

90. Spiers, *The Army and Society*, 131-132.

Editor's Note: Illustrations for this article came from the following sources: E. W. Green, *An Atlas of Indian History* (Bombay and London, 1937), map 19; Henry Beveridge, *A Comprehensive History of India*, Vol. III (London, 1865), 574 and 639; McLeod Innes, *The Sepoy Revolt: A Critical Narrative* (London, 1897), [map of Awadh]; R. Montgomery Martin, *The Indian Empire*, Vol. II (London, n.d.), [engraving of Bahadur Shah]; Francis Cornwallis Maude, *Memories of the Mutiny* (London, 1894) [photo of sepoys]; and *Punch*, 15 August 1857, 65, and 12 September 1857, 109.

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