

Name: _____ Seat _____ Period _____ Due Date: _____

Whitney High School
9th Grade World History

Lesson 84 • Handout 171
S. Rosenberg

Imperialism and the Sepoy Mutiny: India 1857

The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 (May-December, 1857)

Instructions: Study the following passage and be prepared for class discussion on this material. The right margin has been pulled back to facilitate note-taking (not mandatory on this assignment, but highly recommended).

By 1857, the English had established a series of well-developed colonies on the Indian subcontinent. These colonies were run by the British East India Company under a charter issued by the British government. This charter allowed the company to run India as a “private” country and gave it exclusive trading rights. The company was only interested in annual profits and largely ignored the culture and needs of the Indian people.

In 1857, new cartridges were issued to Indian troops of the British East Indian Army. These native Indian troops were called Sepoys. The cartridges were rumored to have been greased with cow or pig fat; as such, they were forbidden to the Indian troops because of their religious beliefs. Muslims believe that pigs are unclean; thus, they cannot touch them. Hindus believe that cattle are sacred and should not be killed. The cartridges of this time required a soldier to tear open the cartridge with his teeth and pour the powder and bullet down the barrel of the gun. This process would have caused the Sepoys to “pollute their souls” due to the animal grease. After refusing to use the new cartridges, a whole regiment of Sepoy troops was imprisoned by the British. Other Sepoys attempted to free these prisoners, and it snowballed into a revolt all across northern India. The heavily outnumbered white Europeans and some Indians who remain loyal to them were attacked by the Indian Sepoys. Some Indian units remained loyal but refused to use the cartridges issued to them; instead, they fought only with swords and bayonets until they were issued new cartridges greased

with sheet or goat fat. There were many massacres during which hundreds of European were killed by Sepoys who were bent on revenge and intent on kicking the British out of India.

Eventually, pockets of Europeans, both civilians and army troops, held out against the Sepoys. They were finally rescued by British Army units in the fall of 1857, after having been besieged for as much as six months with little food or water. The rebellion was crushed and order resorted to India.

The British government, however, realized that two changes were needed in the handling of British colonies. First of all, the inefficient company-type government of the East India Company had to end. Second, some attention had to be paid to the needs of the Indian people.

The British installed a government-run colonial rule to replace the company government. They also passed the Act for Better Government of India, which provided schools, hospitals, and other services. Indians were allowed to serve as civil servants in the colonial government. This new type of colonial government was later used in other British colonies, as well as the colonies of other countries. This form of government is referred to as the “New Imperialism.” New Imperialism still involved holding the colonies under the control of the Imperial power, but it improved the quality of colonial government and moved away from the “profit first” idea of “Old Imperialism.”

