



## GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE 1857 INDIAN REVOLT

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### ABSTRACT:

In this study an attempt has been made to explore the global responses to the 1857 Revolt, examining perspectives from British, Indian, European, American, Canadian, Russian, Chinese, and various other nationalities. The British reaction, shaped by political and imperial motives, aimed to prevent negative repercussions in their colonies, asserting racial superiority and justifying retribution against the Indians. Literary works and media sensationalism further fuelled British narratives, leaving a lasting impact on the national psyche. The Indian response, initially suppressed by fear and British reprisals, gradually found expression in the works of V.D. Savarkar and others, highlighting the unity of Hindus and Muslims against British rule. European nations displayed diverse reactions, with imperialists viewing the revolt as a warning and others, like Hungary and Czech, sympathizing due to their own struggles for nationhood. German, Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Hungarian responses reflected their unique historical contexts. The Canadian and American reactions, rooted in racial biases, depicted contrasting views on the Indian Revolt. Russian sentiments, influenced by their recent defeat by the British, showed support for the Indian rebels. The research analyses the lasting impact of the 1857 events on global perceptions, shaping narratives and attitudes that persisted for decades. The study contributes to a nuanced understanding of this crucial historical episode from diverse international perspectives.

**KEYWORDS:** Revolt, Global Responses, British Imperialism, 1857 Uprising, Colonial History, Historical Narratives.

### INTRODUCTION

The uprising of 1857 elicited varied responses globally, with perspectives either favouring the British or the Indians. The British reaction to the revolt was influenced by their political and imperial motives, driven by a desire to prevent negative repercussions in other colonies. Additionally, they aimed to assert the racial superiority of the British and portray their efforts to enlighten and uplift Indian society from what they perceived as primitive and orthodox values. British narratives accentuating their

superiority were disseminated worldwide, often exaggerating the heroism of their citizens against the Indian rebels. Literary works such as "The Defence of Lucknow" by Lord Alfred Tennyson and "In the Round Tower at Jhansi 1857" by Christina Rossetti amplified the valour of the British fighters. Notably, stories emerged in October 1857 highlighting the courageous act of Ms. Ulrica Wheeler, daughter of Maj Gen Hugh Wheeler, the Commander-in-Chief at Kanpur. The narrative portrayed her bravely fighting rebels until the end, ultimately choosing death by jumping into a well. This account, however, proved false after eight years, with historian Sir George Trevelyan revealing that Ms. Wheeler had been rescued by Ali Khan, living under a Muslim identity.

British literature also aimed to sensationalize Indian violence, fostering hatred among the British populace and justifying retribution against the Indians. An example of misrepresentation was the reporting of the Kanpur massacre, where around 200 women and children, previously held hostage by the rebels, were brutally massacred, and their bodies dismembered and thrown into a well. Some British authors even accused Russia of inciting the mutiny, claiming that Russian agents bribed Indian contractors to supply beef fat instead of mutton fat for paper cartridge manufacture.

Notably, the impact of the 1857 events lingered in the British psyche, fueling increased fear and racism.<sup>1</sup> A British officer, Capt Costello, who participated in executing rebel Alum Bheg in Sialkot, brought back the skull of the deceased as a trophy. This skull became a significant historical artefact studied by Prof Kim A Wagner, leading to the book "The Skull of Alum Bheg." Lord Cromer underscored the significance of the Indian Revolt of 1857 in British academia, expressing that it abounded in lessons and warnings in his memoirs.

## INDIAN RESPONSE

In the initial years following the upheaval of 1857, a pervasive atmosphere of fear and terror gripped the Indian populace, deterring any attempts to document the rebels' cause. Witnessing the ruthless and mass killings of their compatriots, Indians refrained from writing about their response to the revolt. The suppression was intensified by the British, who punished or killed Urdu poets and reporters sympathetic to the rebels' cause, further discouraging Indians from expressing their perspectives. The rebels' viewpoint, therefore, could not be documented as comprehensively as the British version due to the limited literacy among Indians in the second half of the nineteenth century. Additionally, the scarcity of printing resources in Hindi and other native languages during that era posed a significant constraint.<sup>2</sup> The situation was exacerbated by Hindi authors and scholars who, out of fear for their survival, praised the British and provided distorted versions of the events of 1857. Despite these challenges, memories of the resistance against the British persisted among certain communities and regions, finding expression in folk songs, ballads, and poems. These oral traditions inspired subsequent generations of Indians to formally record their perspectives. One of the earliest such accounts offering an Indian perspective was authored by V.D. Savarkar, who wrote "The First War of Independence" in 1908 in Marathi. Savarkar portrayed the Indian Revolt of 1857-58 as a national struggle, emphasizing the unity of Hindus and Muslims against their common adversary.

Other Indian historians, including R.C. Majumdar, S.N. Sen, and K.K. Datta, also contributed to the narrative from a nationalist perspective. Post-Independence, a plethora of Indian historians and scholars authored books in Hindi and various vernacular languages, characterizing the revolt as a pivotal event marking the onset of India's struggle for independence.<sup>3</sup>

## EUROPEAN RESPONSES

French, Italian, Czech, Hungarian, Spanish, Portuguese, and German media all gave the 1857 events considerable coverage, but their portrayals of the Indian Revolt differed.<sup>4</sup> What made this

coverage stand out was how each European country's news outlets framed the Indian news according to their own history and worldview. Some imperialist countries saw the 1857 uprising as a warning signal, whereas nations like Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Bulgaria, who were still fighting for their independence, saw it differently.<sup>5</sup>

### **GERMAN RESPONSE**

Since the German people in the 1800s were very interested in what was happening in India, the news of the 1857 events was covered extensively in German newspapers. The responses of German academics were also published in a plethora of books, journals, and other written formats.<sup>6</sup> In 1857 and 1858, the uprising was covered extensively in the Berlin-based German newspapers *Volks-Zeitung* and *Kreuz-Zeitung*. German historian Claudia Reichel compares and contrasts the perspectives of three prominent German writers on the Indian Rebellion: Theodor Fontane, Wilhelm Liebknecht, and Edgar Bauer.<sup>7</sup>

Karl Marx pondered India's potential independence from British control in his writings. In his article for *Kreuz-Zeitung*, poet Theodor Fontane argued against the idea that Indians required British authority in order to achieve civilization and administration, as well as against the British view of Asian superiority.<sup>8</sup> Fontane also denied the British media's assertion that Russia had any role in sparking the Indian Revolt. In his eulogy for Nana Saheb, another German author Hermann Goedsche (Sir John Retcliffe) portrayed the British as criminals in his book "Nana Sahib oder Die Empörung in Indien" (Nana Sahib or: The Uprising in India). Many Europeans viewed the Indian Revolt similarly to the national uprisings in Ireland, Italy, and Hungary, according to German journalist Edgar Bauer, who was a political refugee residing in London and reported on the events in India beginning in July 1857.

### **ITALIAN RESPONSE**

On the road to becoming a sovereign nation, Italy was through a tumultuous period in 1857. As a whole, Italian magazines learned about the Indian Revolt from French, Indo-British, and British press sources. There were three major schools of thought in Italian politics: the conservatives (the Austro-Hungarian Empire and various Italian monarchy), the Democrats, and the Moderates.<sup>9</sup> According to conservative media outlets, the British government sought to minimise the true gravity of the revolt in order to delegitimize and condemn British power during the Revolt. The Democrats backed the Indian insurgents because they wanted a modern Italy to be born out of a national revolution. *Italia del Popolo*, an Italian daily, said that the British were repressing the Indian population in the same way that they had criticised the King of Naples in June 1857.<sup>10</sup> Pro-British during the Indian Revolt, moderates were intimidated by the democratic socialists' revolutionary aims and regarded Britain as the perfect ally to unite the country under the constitutional monarchy of Piedmont-Sardinia.

### **FRENCH RESPONSE**

The French, as an opposing colonial power, sided with India on most issues. French journalists used the Indian Revolt as a springboard to fantasise about a future India free of British rule. *Le Siecle* (The Age) and other French publications strongly denounced the British government's retaliatory policies. France and other states could have to step in if the British government's tyranny persisted, according to *L'Estafette* (The Courier). French publications, evoking comparisons to the French Revolution of 1789, characterised the Indian Revolt of 1857 as a revolution, in contrast to the terminology employed by the British press.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to the selfish, savage, and greedy British rule, some French writers pictured a future in which France governed India. They portrayed France as a constructive and liberating power.

### **SPANISH RESPONSE**

As its colonial influence declined in the 1800s, Spain saw England as a potential colonial adversary. While expressing disapproval of the Indians, the Spanish press defended British domination. The fundamental subject of Spanish journals was that the British should have aggressively spread Christian moral principles among the Indians and governed peacefully. The journals urged the British to offer "positive and friendly advice" to the empire in this matter.<sup>12</sup> Spanish writers were worried that the United States may become more influential in global affairs if Britain's influence waned, which led them to back the British Empire.

### **HUNGARIAN RESPONSE**

The Hungarian revolutionaries' fierce resistance to the Austrian Empire culminated in their two-year breakaway from the empire nearly eight years before 1857.<sup>13</sup> Attitudes formed after the 1848–1849 Hungarian War of Independence, which failed to win against the Austrian Empire, heavily influenced the Hungarian reaction to the 1857 Revolt. Thus, they saw the uprising as a catastrophe for the Indians and the Hungarians alike. *Budapesti Szemle*, the most famous Hungarian newspaper, *Budapesti Hirlap* (Budapest News), *Vasarnapi Ujsag* (Sunday Magazine), and *Pesti Naplo* were among four Hungarian periodicals that covered the 1857 Revolt.<sup>14</sup>

### **PORTUGUESE RESPONSE**

The examination of the Portuguese response is intriguing due to its colonial presence in South India during that historical period.<sup>15</sup> Portuguese colonial India had experienced similar uprisings before, and by 1857, the Portuguese presence, which began with the control of Goa in 1510, was in decline. As a minor colonial power dependent on the larger colonial power of Great Britain, the Portuguese did not sympathize with the Indian revolters.<sup>16</sup>

### **CZECH RESPONSE**

The Czech people had limited contact with Indians, yet, as a small nation under the Habsburg Empire, they shared a predicament with Indians under British rule. The Indian Revolt of 1857 received regular coverage in the Czech press during 1857 and subsequent decades. In 1857, Czech was under an authoritarian regime, with most print media shut down.<sup>17</sup> The main Czech newspaper, *Prazsky Noviny*, aligned with the government, relied on British sources, propagating the British viewpoint without independent analysis. However, in the ensuing years, the representation of the event became more favorable to the Indians due to prevailing conditions in both nations.<sup>18</sup>

### **IRISH RESPONSE**

After the unsuccessful uprising for Irish nationhood in 1848, the country continued to fight for independence from British authority throughout the second part of the nineteenth century. The Indian Revolt made it to Ireland in 1857 via personal letters, telegraphs, and newspapers. Hearing of the Indian Revolt filled the Irish with optimism and eagerness, as they thought the rebels would be able to topple the British control in India.<sup>19</sup> Numerous Irish nationalists found renewed determination to pursue independence in the wake of the Indian Revolt. On July 4, 1857, an article in the Irish newspaper *Nation* asserted that the revolt in India exposed the weakness of British rule.<sup>20</sup> The *Nation* compared the Indian Revolt of 1857 with the Irish Movement, highlighting that the actions of the armed and disciplined men of Bengal Native Infantry held lessons for freedom fighters in any other country, including Ireland. The

Kilkenny Journal praised the rebels' valiant struggle, noting that this event served as inspiration to other colonies.<sup>21</sup>

### **BULGARIAN RESPONSE**

The Indian Revolt of 1857 aligned with the period of the Bulgarian struggle for national independence. Consequently, the Bulgarian journal—The Bulgarska Dnevitsa (The Bulgarian Diary), edited by national leader Georgi Stoykov Rakovski, extensively covered the Indian Revolt.<sup>22</sup> While relying on British sources for information, Rakovski provided his interpretation of the events, perceiving the revolt as a struggle for Indian independence.<sup>23</sup> He was inclined towards this viewpoint, seeing in the Indian struggle a potential hope for the independence of Bulgaria. The lead article in Bulgarska Dnevitsa on 17 July 1857 asserted that the Indian Revolt had shaken the confidence of the British Empire as an imperial power. It further stated that, despite moving forces from various regions to quell the rebels in India, the British heavily relied on the Indian natives of the British East India Company forces.

### **AMERICAN RESPONSE**

In 1857, America lacked direct connectivity to Europe through an undersea telegraph cable. Consequently, news about the Meerut and Delhi rebellion reached the port of New York from London on 23 June 1857 through the Royal Mail steamship 'Persia.' The New York Daily Times published the first report, "Mutiny in the Native East Indian Army," on 6 July 1857.<sup>24</sup> The Indian Revolt and the American Civil War unfolded on opposite sides of the globe with a three-year time gap. Leading up to the American Civil War (1861-1865), the North experienced growth in industrial power and population, while the agrarian-based South stagnated economically. American press extensively covered the Indian Revolt, analyzing its potential impact on the North-South divide in the U.S. While the New York Times justified British brutal retaliation, other reports focused on the economic repercussions for America if the revolt persisted.<sup>25</sup>

### **CANADIAN RESPONSE**

Before 1857, Canadians firmly believed in the 'superiority of Whites over the Asiatic.' The Indian Revolt of 1857 became the dominant news event in Canada during 1857-58. Despite their other differences, all Canadians continued to hold a negative image of Indians as Asians, perceiving them to lack character.<sup>26</sup>

### **RUSSIAN RESPONSE**

Russia was keenly interested in hearing about the Indian Revolt after its humiliating defeat at the hands of the British in the Crimean War in 1854. The Russian people were elated to hear news of the first victories of Indian revolutionaries over the British Empire. The Russian press accurately reported the events and consequences of the uprising, even if they relied on French and British sources. "An Opinion of the History and Contemporary State of the East India Company" (published in September 1857) by NA Dobrolyubov portrayed the Indian Revolt of 1857 as more of a "historically necessary affair" than a mere rebellion.<sup>27</sup> Russkiy Vestnik, the official journal of Russia, portrayed the uprising as a conflict between "barbarism" and "civilization," and its writers hoped that the British would win.

### **CHINESE RESPONSE**

In 1857, China and India were simultaneously engaged in fighting the Second Opium War (1856-1860) and the Indian Rebellion, respectively, against a common aggressor—the British. Although there was no direct connection between the people of these two regions, the actions of the rebels in India

forced the British to redirect their forces midway to India, diverting them from their intended destination in China.<sup>28</sup> This unintended consequence aided the cause of China, prompting sympathy and admiration for the Indian people against the British Empire. Despite the Chinese people's deep concern and desire for the revolt to succeed, these sentiments could not be widely propagated in academic spaces due to the absence of vernacular newspapers in China at that time.

## REASSESSMENT

Now that we've covered the facts of the uprising, it's time to look at how those in authority and historians have understood what happened in 1857. From the very beginning, the 1857 rebellion's character generated heated debate. Civil unrest was a result of the law and order apparatus breaking down, according to the official British position, which held that the mutiny had occurred solely within the Bengal army. At first, many government officials thought it was just a revolt.<sup>29</sup> Benjamin Disraeli, the conservative leader, however, questioned this view in July 1857. His main point was that empires don't rise and fall over greased cartridges. Such outcomes are brought about by sufficient causes, and by the buildup of sufficient causes. "Is it a military mutiny, or is it a national revolt?" Disraeli asked, posing a pivotal question.

Not only did Disraeli disagree with the official stance, but so did certain members of the British society in India. The official account of the Sepoy War was challenged by Colonel G.B. Malleon, who went on to finish J.W. Kaye's History of the Sepoy War, who said, "The crisis came: At first, apparently a mere military mutiny, it speedily changed its character and became a national insurrection."<sup>30</sup> In 1909, the nationalist analyst V.D. Savarkar proclaimed the rebellion to be the "Indian War of Independence." This view was bolstered by the works of S.B. Chaudhary, who proved that 1857 was a "rising of the people." This line of reasoning was quickly adopted by the Indian historical tradition.

But R.C. Majumdar voiced a different opinion; he denied that 1857 was a war of independence. He maintains that "to regard the outbreak of 1857 as either national in character or a war of independence of India betrays a lack of true knowledge of the history of the Indian people in the nineteenth century." An elite Muslim group may have been complicit in sparking the unrest, according to certain historians. To give only one example, Outram said the uprising was a "Muslim conspiracy exploiting Hindu grievances." According to another account, the rebels were really fighting against the feudal system in addition to the British.<sup>31</sup> As Talmiz Khaldun put it, "It was crushed so easily because of betrayal by the propertied classes." This betrayal, he claims, was the reason the revolution failed.

Despite recognising the Revolt's popular character, subsequent historiography emphasised how retrograde it was. According to Bipin Chandra, "The entire movement lacked a unified and forward-looking programme to be implemented after the capture of power." The "Revolt of 1857" was characterised by Tara Chand as the "last attempt of an effete order to recover its departed glory." Her description was more direct. It has been said that the Indian troops' discontent and lack of discipline, along with the British military's stupidity, were the sole causes of the outbreak, Percival Spear said. Calling the rebellion the first essay in contemporary independence is, in reality, a bit of a stretch. From a political standpoint, it was more akin to the final attempt of the old conservative India. On the other hand, these are just a few of the many points of view that have been spoken, and the continuing discussion about the 1857 uprising bodes well for the development of new understandings and insights.

## CONCLUSION

The prevailing understanding and knowledge of this crucial historical event, according to a scholar warrior in the Indian Military, is currently limited to the domestic view of the Revolt, and this is without dispute. George Orwell famously said, "the most effective way to destroy people is to deny and

obliterate their own understanding of their history." This reminds me of that thought. The absolute necessity of fully understanding this historical event in India, including its global context in 1857, is encapsulated in this claim. A scholar-warrior's current viewpoint on this event can be strengthened by such an approach. The idea of British invincibility was shattered and the prestige of the British was drastically 'dented' by the 1857 Revolt. Many novels and fictional narratives were published decades after the event, reflecting the public's fascination with the rebellion and its impact on public and political debates in nations including the UK, USA, Russia, France, Germany, Italy, and Hungary. This topic takes on more weight because it motivated people in other parts of the world to fight back against their colonial oppressors when they were in a similar position. Indian Army historians should put their reservations aside and investigate this battle more thoroughly as part of their military history curriculum. Incorporating questions on the 1857 Revolt into promotion and competitive exams would be a fitting way to give it the respect it deserves. In addition to preparing the groundwork for future nationalist initiatives, this strategy will help the Indian public comprehend the sacrifices and struggles of 1857.

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