The War of Independence 1857–58

The long-term and immediate causes of the 1857–58 War, its course (including the part played by what is now Pakistan), the attitude of Bahadur Shah Zafar, why it failed, and its consequences for Muslims and for British rule.

The War of Independence 1857–58

The events of **1857–58** are called the **War of Independence** by many Pakistani and Indian historians. The British called them the "**Indian Mutiny**" or the "**Sepoy Rebellion**". It began as a revolt of Indian soldiers (**sepoys**) in the army of the **East India Company**, but it spread to many civilians and became the biggest challenge to British rule.

Long-term (underlying) causes

Type	Causes
Political	the **Doctrine of Lapse** (Lord Dalhousie) annexed states such as Satara, Jhansi and Nagpur when a ruler had no natural heir. In **1856** the British annexed **Awadh** (Oudh) on the grounds of misgovernment. The Mughal emperor **Bahadur Shah Zafar** was told that after him the title would end and the royal family would leave the **Red Fort**
Economic	**heavy land revenue** and the new system of tax collection ruined the peasants. Indian handicrafts (such as cotton weaving) were destroyed by **cheap British factory goods**. Many nobles and landowners lost their estates
Social and religious	many Indians feared that the British wanted to convert them to **Christianity**: missionaries were active, laws such as the ban on **sati** (1829) and the **Widow Remarriage Act** (1856) were seen as interference, and **Western education** was spreading
Military	Indian sepoys were **poorly paid** and could not rise above junior ranks. The **General Service Enlistment Act (1856)** required sepoys to serve overseas, which high-caste Hindus believed would cause loss of caste

More detail on the long-term causes.

- **Economic:** after the Industrial Revolution cheap British cloth flooded India, so the **handloom weavers** lost their markets. When princely states were annexed, their courts, armies and craftsmen lost their patrons, and **tens of thousands of soldiers** (for example in Awadh) lost their jobs.
- **Political insult: Nana Sahib**, the adopted son of the last Peshwa, was refused his father's pension; the heir of the **Rani of Jhansi** was not recognised; and in **1856** Lord Canning announced that after Zafar the Mughal title would end.

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- **Prestige:** the British disaster in the **First Afghan War (1839–42)** weakened the belief that they could not be beaten, and a rumour spread that British rule would end **100 years after Plassey**, in 1857.
- **Racial discrimination:** Indians were kept out of the higher ranks of the army and the civil service. The highest army rank open to an Indian sepoy was **subedar**.
- **Religion:** many sepoys and civilians believed that the railways, English schools and the missionaries were part of a plan to convert them.

Immediate cause: the greased cartridges

The army was being issued with the new **Enfield rifle**. Its **cartridges** had to be bitten open before loading, and a rumour spread that they were greased with **cow fat** (offensive to Hindus) and **pig fat** (offensive to Muslims). Many sepoys believed that this was a plot to destroy their religions.

The course of the War

Date	Event
29 March 1857	**Mangal Pandey** attacked British officers at Barrackpore
10 May 1857	the sepoys at **Meerut** rose in revolt, killed British officers and freed imprisoned comrades
11 May 1857	the rebels marched to **Delhi** and called on **Bahadur Shah Zafar** to lead them as Emperor
June 1857	the revolt spread to **Kanpur** (led by **Nana Sahib**), **Lucknow** (where the British were besieged in the Residency), **Jhansi** (**Rani Lakshmibai**) and other places
September 1857	the British, with Sikh and Punjabi soldiers, recaptured **Delhi** (20 September). Zafar was captured
1858	the British retook Lucknow and Jhansi, and by the end of 1858 the revolt was over. Zafar was **exiled to Rangoon**, where he died in 1862

The main centres.

- **Kanpur:** led by **Nana Sahib** (with **Tantia Tope** as his general). General **Havelock** retook it, and Nana Sahib fled towards Nepal.
- **Lucknow:** the rebels were led by **Begum Hazrat Mahal**, who acted for her young son. The British in the **Residency** were besieged for months (Sir **Henry Lawrence** was killed). **Colin Campbell** retook the city in **March 1858**.
- **Jhansi and Gwalior: Rani Lakshmibai** fought Sir **Hugh Rose** and died in battle in **June 1858**. **Tantia Tope** was betrayed and **hanged in April 1859**.

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The attitude of Bahadur Shah Zafar

Zafar was **old (over 80)**, a poet more than a ruler, and had **little power or money**. At first he was **unwilling** to take the lead and wrote to other rulers asking them to unite. He accepted the leadership because the rebels had already taken Delhi and there was no choice. He had **no real control** over the sepoys, his sons and the court quarrelled, and he was a **symbol** rather than a commander. After the fall of Delhi he took refuge at **Humayun's Tomb**, was captured by Captain Hodson, tried by the British and sent to Burma. His sons were shot.

The part played by what is now Pakistan

- The **Punjab and the North-West** were **largely loyal to the British**. The Sikhs, who had been defeated only in 1849, did not wish to see Mughal rule restored. Many **Muslim and Sikh chiefs** and landowners gave soldiers and supplies. Punjabi troops helped the British to retake Delhi.
- Sir **John Lawrence**, the Chief Commissioner of the Punjab, **disarmed** the Indian sepoys at Lahore (Mian Mir) and elsewhere quickly, preventing a rising, and raised new Punjabi regiments.
- **Some revolts did take place**: sepoy regiments rose at stations such as **Sialkot**, **Jhelum** and **Multan**, and in the **Gogera** region **Rai Ahmad Khan Kharal** led a revolt of the local tribes, in which he was killed (1857).
- **Sindh** and the **Frontier** were largely quiet.
- Muslim rulers such as the **Nizam of Hyderabad** and the **Nawab of Bahawalpur** stayed loyal to the British.

Reasons for failure

- **No unified leadership or clear plan**: Zafar was old and weak; the leaders (Nana Sahib, Rani of Jhansi, Tantia Tope) had different aims and fought separately.
- **No national spirit**: the revolt was mostly in the **north and centre**. **Madras, Bombay, Bengal (mostly) and the Punjab** were not involved.
- **Many Indians helped the British**: the **Sikhs**, **Gurkhas**, and several princes.
- The British had **better weapons**, **discipline**, **organisation**, and the **telegraph** and railways for moving troops and news. They were reinforced from Britain and from the Crimean War and China.
- The rebels lacked **supplies** and a **central command**.

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Consequences

For the British administration

- The **Government of India Act, 1858**: the **East India Company was abolished** and its powers passed to the **Crown**. A **Secretary of State** in London and a **Viceroy** in India (Lord **Canning** was the first) governed.
- **Queen Victoria's Proclamation** (1 November 1858) promised to respect Indian religions and customs and to treat Indians equally, and to respect the rights of the princes (the **Doctrine of Lapse** was ended).
- The **army was reorganised**: more British soldiers, artillery was kept in British hands, and recruitment shifted to the **"martial races"** of the **Punjab**, Gurkhas and others.
- In 1861 the **Indian Councils Act** let Indians be nominated to the Legislative Council. Universities had been set up at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras in **1857**.

For Muslims

- The British **blamed the Muslims** most, as the Mughal emperor had led the revolt. **Delhi was plundered**, thousands were killed, **estates and land were confiscated**, and Muslims lost jobs in the administration and army.
- Muslim **scholars (ulama)** were also persecuted. Many Muslims turned away from **English education**, which made them **poorer and less powerful** than the Hindus.
- It led to the **need for a Muslim leader** who would change this: Sir **Syed Ahmad Khan** (chapter 4).

> NOTE
>
> The **short-term impact** on Muslims was bad: loss of power, land and jobs, and harsh treatment. In the **long term**, the War led to the Muslim revival and the movements that led to Pakistan.

> TRY IT
>
> "The War of Independence of 1857 achieved nothing." Do you agree?

Outline. *Agree:* the revolt was crushed by 1858, Delhi, Lucknow, Kanpur and Jhansi were retaken, and Zafar was exiled. *Disagree:* it ended Company rule, brought direct Crown rule (the **Viceroy** and the army reorganised), and became a **symbol** of resistance that inspired later leaders. **Judgement:** it failed in its immediate aim, but its long-term effects were large.

> TRY IT

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> Why was independence not achieved in 1857–58?

Outline. No united leadership or plan; limited area; the loyalty of the Sikhs, Punjabis and Gurkhas and some princes; British superiority in weapons, organisation and communications (the telegraph); lack of supplies; and Zafar's weakness. **Judgement:** the lack of unity was the **main** reason.

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