

Sammelrez: Indian Rebellion of 1857

Mazumdar, Shaswati (Hrsg.): *Insurgent Sepoys. Europe Views the Revolt of 1857*. London: Routledge 2011. ISBN: 978-0-415-59799-9; 305 S.

Wagner, Kim A.: *Great Fear of 1857. Rumours, Conspiracies and the Making of the Indian Uprising*. Oxford: Peter Lang Ltd/Oxford 2010. ISBN: 978-1-906165-27-7; 312 S.

Herbert, Christopher: *War of No Pity. The Indian Mutiny and Victorian Trauma*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 2007. ISBN: 978-0-691-13332-4; 334 S.

Llewellyn-Jones, Rosie: *The Great Uprising in India, 1857–58. Untold Stories, Indian and British*. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer 2007. ISBN: 978-1-84383-304-8; 258 S.

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In the year 2007 India and Britain commemorated the 150th anniversary of what Indians now call the Great Revolt of 1857–59, and what among the majority of British people is still and simply known as „Mutiny“. British contemporaries of the revolt as well as historians of later generations characterised the war as a mutiny of superstitious (Hindu) and fanatic (Muslim) sepoys (English corruption for „sipahi“: Hindustani: soldier, mercenary) who attacked their British officers in the barracks of Meerut on May 10, 1857. Historical research of the last two decades has, however, shown that the uprising was not merely a mutiny but the revolt of large parts of the rural as well as urban society comprising peasants, artisans, traders, shopkeepers, the courtesans of Lakhnau and, of course, soldiers.

Meanwhile academic terminology has agreed upon „revolt“ or „rebellion“ as the numerous publications demonstrate which came out shortly before, in, or after 2007.¹ Many articles and books contributed to a more sophisticated picture of the war of 1857–59 pointing out the social and economic as well as the political implications of the uprising. The latter aspect is of particular

interest since British contemporaries in India had identified some kind of patriotism among the insurgents, which is why one may be tempted to call the rebellion a „War of Liberation“. New aspects of this war are covered by the four books under review here. In contrast to the majority of books dealing with the Great Rebellion they are about the ‘prelude’ and the aftermath of the revolt elaborating on imaginations, perceptions and constructions. Taken together the authors of the books represent a new generation of historians who try to set the Indian Revolt in a wider context.

However, it must be stated at the beginning that all four books deal with the perceptions of Europeans and thus making them, again, the actors and objectives of the revolt. This is not to criticise the authors but to demand a still missing social history of the revolt written from an Indian-South Asian perspective if not a perspective ‘from below’. A first approach in that direction was made by Vinayak Savarkar’s book in 1905 titled „The Indian War of Independence“.² The book was also the first attempt to write the story of the rebellion from a national(ist) point of view. Yet British censorship confiscated the manuscript regarding it seditious literature. A second approach was developed by Eric Stokes who pushed the idea of a social rebellion further.³ Yet, a decisive analysis is still missing. An important part of such a social approach, however, is the contribution of Kim A. Wagner since he tries to write an ‘événementiel micro-history’ (p. 22) of the events preceding the outbreak of the revolt.

Kim A. Wagner’s „Great Fear of 1857“ convincingly demonstrates that the revolt of 1857 was to a very large extent caused by rumours and information panic among the *sipahis* and, ultimately among the British themselves. This information panic or rather, chaos was soon forged into the historiographical construction

¹ For example Daniel J. Rycroft, *Representing Rebellion. Visual Aspects of Counter-Insurgency in Colonial India*, New Delhi 2006; Biswamoy Paty (ed.), *The 1857 Rebellion*, Delhi 2007; Shireen Moosvi (ed.), *Facets of the Great Revolt 1857*, New Delhi 2008.

² Vinayak D. Savarkar, *The Indian War of Independence (National Rising of 1857)*, London 1909.

³ Eric Stokes, *The Peasant Armed. The Indian Revolt of 1857* (ed. by Christopher A. Bayly), Oxford 1986.

of a vast conspiracy of treacherous and fanatic Orientals attacking innocent British people. Early historiography like the magisterial work of J.W. Kaye *History of the Sepoy War in India* (completed and published by G.B. Malleson 1864–76) largely determined the conspiracy setting of „Mutiny“ which was to become the blueprint for many historical studies on the rebellion. Like the early novels which appeared on the events in British India in 1857–58 (see Mazumdar’s book below) it was this kind of academic, literary as well as journalistic representation which fixed the essentialist Orientalist discourse of the „Mutiny“ and thus making it an instrument to rule country and colony for the next odd 100 years as Wagner shows in his Prologue.

Reading the wellknown sources again and adding some new material, Wagner deconstructs the Orientalist picture of a conspiracy and argues in favour of a rather spontaneous outbreak of the revolt that, at the same time, was the outcome of a long-lasting dissatisfaction with British rule in India. In re-telling the story of well-established incidents like the greased cartridge issue, the arson at Ambala, missionary activities, the distribution of chapattis and the pollution of flour with bone-dust, Wagner paints a very different and differentiated history of the events in the first half of 1857. For example, according to the conspiracy theory, the distribution of the *chapattis* was part of a secret communication network preparing the rebellion. Yet, as Wagner demonstrates, the distribution coincided with the spreading of the cholera in central and northern India during the latter half of 1856. *Chapattis* were indeed used as medium of information but in this case to turn attention towards the virulent disease. That there was much fear among the Indian population is demonstrated by the fact that evangelical missionaries were regarded as agents or officials of the British government in India trying to forcefully convert Hindus and Muslims alike. Another incident was the pollution of flour with bone-dust from pigs and cows, again seen as an attack on north Indian religion, culture and society. And the revised history about the greased cartridges is also very telling. According to the conspiracy

theory the cartridges greased with pig and/or cow fat had been distributed among the 3rd BLC regiment to set an example. In fact, only 5 cartridges had been distributed among the 90 *sipahis*, the rest refusing to take the ammunition. Yet they did not refuse to use the cartridges on religious grounds, rather the remaining 85 members of the regiment simply argued that they would accept the cartridges if all regiments were to use them. It was their selection for (unjustified) public demonstration and not religious reasons that made the *sipahis* refuse to touch the cartridges.

The outbreak of the „Mutiny“ must also be seen from a different point of view. A series of rumours spreading in the cantonment and the bazaar of Meerut caused a panic, which ultimately resulted in the shooting and killing of British officers setting the revolt in motion. Among these rumours was the one that 2,000 fetters forged for the native soldiers were to be ready within two days. Additionally some sayings maintained that the 85 „mutineers“ were to be blown from guns. Another rumour stated that European troops were approaching Meerut. Taking this new evidence into consideration Wagner states that the outbreak of the rebellion/mutiny was not the result of a carefully planned mutiny let alone conspiracy but, rather, of a spreading panic caused by a series of rumours. Finally, in a rush of hysteria, fear and anger were ventilated in the Meerut Sudder Bazaar.

Wagner quotes at length from the sources, which generates a vivid account of the historic events. More than any other history and analysis of the pre-history of the Great Revolt this narrative uncovers the fears among the Indians as well as the British. Wagner deconstructs the conspiracy-narrative and, therefore, a centrepiece of British historiography on India. It is this new narrative which deserves utmost attention by British and South Asian historians.

Critique can be levied only on some minor points. For example the author states that the British created a new type of army on the Indian Subcontinent based on regular payment and loyalty to officers and ultimately the colonial state (p. 44). However, at the same time Wagner writes that the ‘Indian sepoys were not simply hired hands lust-

ing for plunder, but they do seem to have maintained enough of the traditional mercenary instinct to be dissatisfied with the conditions under which they served the British' (p. 41). One wonders what a mercenary instinct is. Dissatisfaction due to harsh military exercises, bad and/or irregular payment and „social ignorance“ may cause a mutiny in every army. It seems doubtful that the „mutineers“ were seeking some better employment. Another point of critique refers to the rather descriptive form of narration, which in some instances has its lengths. And sometimes quotations seem to be too long even if one takes into consideration that half page (or even longer) quotes demonstrate style and tenor of the source.

Rosie Llewellyn-Jones book promises untold stories about the Great Uprising and she keeps her promise. The Introduction provides many familiar facts of the events, familiar to the reader acquainted with the general narrative of the Great Rebellion's history. To all others it may provide a useful entry to a rather difficult subject. However, the role of the telegraph is being overestimated by the author (pp. 17f.; 52) since almost all lines were cut within a few hours and days after the outbreak of the Great Rebellion and the British were unable to fix the telegraph until the beginning of 1858 when the most important military operations had already been completed.⁴

Each chapter indeed tells an untold one of the Great Rebellion, of actors and actions hitherto unknown. Chapter one on the „Rebels and Renegades“ (pp. 27–65) provides new insights into the general unrest in northern India in the first half of 1857. Of particular interest are the so called „Descriptive Rolls“ which were set up at the request of the Calcutta government for listing the leading persons concerned in the rebellion which ultimately comprised some 400 names. The said list proves that the uprising was by far not a mutiny but a rebellion, which started as a mutiny soon turning into a civil unrest that had then quickly spread to rural revolt (pp. 37–43). The list also proves that contemporaries could have known better, i.e. that the rebellion was not only a mutiny of soldiers.

One of the most fascinating rebellion stories is the chapter on „The Kotah Residency

Murders“ (pp. 66–95). Rebellion at Kotah started in 1858 – after the British had recaptured Delhi, Lakhnau and Kanpur. Llewellyn-Jones traces the origins of the murder of the British Political Agent and his two sons at the residency in Kotah back to the 1830s. Reference to N. Peabody's seminal study on Kotah would have been quite useful.⁵ The story of the Kotah murders reveals that fighting between two factions, the raja and his vakil (some kind of ambassador) at the British residency, was part of the rebellion against the British. Their Political Agent became the victim of a rather confusing situation at the court of Kotah where the raja had already become a prisoner in his own palace-fort unable or unwilling to protect the British.

Much has been written about the cruelties that happened during the rebellion in particular those perpetrated by Indian „mutineers“. Well known is the fact of the brutality with which the British revenged the atrocities. We know of summarily executed „mutineers“, peasants, villagers etc. Yet Llewellyn-Jones provides some new insight explaining, on the one hand, individual hunting and mowing down of suspected persons trespassing the line of civility and, on the other hand, of the growing amount of violence spiralling into unprecedented heights when, for example, hundreds of revolting and captured Indian soldiers were executed in a row of days or when towns were recaptured and prisoners of war not made due to the lack of personnel to guard them which in the case of Sikan-derabagh caused 2,000 casualties among the town's population.

The „Great Rebellion“-„Mutiny“ had a deep impact on the late Mughal societies in India as well as on the mid-Victorian society of Britain. As the subtitle of Christopher Herbert's book „War of No Pity“ suggests, the Indian Mutiny caused an immense trauma in Victorian Britain. Herbert also deconstructs the myth-narrative of the „Mutiny“ which consists of Indian atrocities justifying the brutal suppression of the revolt by British

⁴Deep Kanta Lahari Chaudhury, *Telegraphic Imperialism. Crisis and Panic in the Indian Empire, c. 1830*, Basingstoke 2010, pp. 31–49.

⁵Norbert Peabody, *Hindu Kingship and Polity in Pre-colonial India*, Cambridge 2003.

troops. Rather than being a just retribution of treacherous and heinous Indian soldiers betraying their loving masters Herbert demonstrates that it was the sheer brutality of a revenge, which caused doubts about Victorian values in the contemporary British public opinion. Herbert selects a set of books representing different genres to verify his assumption. This set comprises early novels on the „Mutiny“ written in its immediate aftermath, novels written towards the end of the nineteenth century as well as historical narrations of the „Mutiny“.

The selected literary and historical works show that the brutality of the massacres and carnages that took place on both sides during the „Mutiny“ was perceived as an ambivalent „event“. More than the brutality on the Indian side the brutality of British soldiers was perceived as revolting. Ambivalence about the extent of revenge rather than just retribution made its way into the mid-Victorian value-system. The idea of the seventeenth century's English Puritan retaliation was not compatible with the sensitive charity of mid-nineteenth century Victorian Britain.⁶ Most amazingly contemporary writing shows that during the war Christian ideals like forgiveness were turned into diabolic passions of severe retaliation inherent in Christian ideology as well. To justify the British carnages among innocent Indian villagers, Indian deeds were grossly exaggerated. Taken together atrocities and brutality caused the overall perception of the „Mutiny“ as a war trespassing the threshold of the imaginable.

The „Mutiny“ became a parable for the state of mid-Victorian morals and morality. In fact it seems to have shaken the value-system of Britain at its roots, suddenly raising deep questions about the basis of the British nation. Sometimes novelists and historians attributed values, which were seen as particularly European and Christian like chivalry, mercy and good character to Indians, and thus the former glorious (romanticised Middle-Age) warfare of Europe was contrasted with the inglorious warfare of the „Mutiny“. This ambivalence was also manifested in the divided public opinion in Britain torn between retributive justice and what was regarded as modern (British-European) civic values of the time.

Likewise for a brief period the „Mutiny“ questioned Muslim fanaticism contrasting it with Evangelical fanaticism which let Satan loose during the „Mutiny“.⁷

Cruelties on the one side and mercilessness on the other pushed the perception of the War beyond civilization and humanity. During a time in which the press and public opinion began to have a deep influence at least on Britain's society, the War in India did not only present the battles of a war but, for the first time ever, the brutalities going along with every war. This, in fact, was most shocking for the British society but also, as can be seen from the book by Shaswati Mazumdar, for the larger emerging European public. The extent of carnage and massacres make Herbert speak of a 'war of extermination' (pp. 178f.). Furthermore, he maintains that the 'idea of genocide was definitely in the air' (p. 173). One may seriously doubt the idea of genocide in mid-nineteenth century. This argument (or rather terminology) seems to be part of a sensationalist interpretation, which cannot be verified by contemporary sources.

Looking at Herbert's own writings a more substantial interpretation seems likely. Herbert rightly points out that one of the reasons why the British reacted so extremely to the rebellion was the fact that they regarded the „mutineers“ as ungrateful children. These children had to be punished accordingly by their British „parents“, and punishment, in any case, was justified. As „Indian servants“ the „mutineers“ also rebelled against their „British masters“. This reminds one of the brutal suppression of slave revolts in the Caribbean right into the early decades

⁶ Vera Nünning, *Where the Discourses of Nationalism and Religion Meet. The Forging of an Empire of the Mind in Nineteenth-Century Debates About the British Empire*, in: Hans-Dieter Metzger (ed.), *Religious Thinking and National Identity. Religiöses Denken und nationale Identität*, Berlin 2000, pp. 149–76.

⁷ Rudrangshu Mukherjee, 'Let Satan Loose upon Earth'. The Kanpur Massacres in India and the Revolt of 1857, in: *Past and Present* 128 (1990), pp. 92–116, Vera Nünning, *Vom historischen Ereignis zum imperialen Mythos. The Siege of Lucknow als Paradigma für den imperialistischen Diskurs*, in: *Anglistik & Englischunterricht* 58 (1996), pp. 51–71, idem, 'Daß jeder seine Pflicht tue': Die Bedeutung der Indian mutiny für das nationale britische Selbstverständnis, in: *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 78 (1996), pp. 363–91.

of the nineteenth century. Rebellious slaves were always hunted down and summarily executed, sometimes thousands of them. The brutal suppression of the „Mutiny“ should be placed in the aftermath of the slavery abolition in the British Empire (1834) since this may help to explain the extraordinary amount of force against a population which, in any case, the British saw as subdued people meant to serve them. This is supported by the fact that in the two decades before the „Mutiny“ the British started to call Indians not only blacks but „niggers“ who dared to share the blood of their masters and mistresses (p. 71).

Whilst Herbert's book sheds some new light on the perception of the „Mutiny“ in Britain, Mazumdar's „Insurgent Sepoys“ deals with the perception of the Indian Rebellion of 1857 in newspapers, novels and plays in Europe during the hundred years following the events in British-India. The book is organised in two parts, the first on „News and Views“, the second on „Fact and Fiction“. So far only three articles dealt with the 1857 events in European newspapers apart from Great Britain.⁸ Taking a look at the European press in particular that of Germany, France, Italy and Spain one is struck by the fact that already contemporary journalists questioned the interpretation of events as a mutiny. Instead they wrote of insurgency, rebellion, revolt and, in some French cases, even of revolution. In many instances it becomes clear that the European press reacted to the emerging British colonial power and the Indian disaster with derision.

But interpretations of the Indian Rebellion were not homogenous, on the contrary. For example, conservative German journalists like Theodor Fontane had a clear anti-colonial stance whilst Wilhelm Liebknecht, one of the founding fathers of the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD) was convinced of the necessity of British colonial rule in India as it would bring social and material progress to the backward country. In this respect, the radical socialist Wilhelm Liebknecht obviously agreed on Karl Marx' interpretation of „The future results of British rule in India“ and viewed the revolt as the feudal system's last rising.

Similarly the Italian press differed in the in-

terpretation of the Indian events. The moderate patriots, for example, admired the British liberal tradition and cultivated their affiliation with British policy on Europe and abroad. Consequently they did not sympathise with the Indian rebels. The conservative (Catholic) press interpreted the rebellion as a stunning blow to the protestant mercantilist regime of the East India Company. And the democrats, on the one hand, did not approve of Britain's oppressive colonial regime but, on the other hand, regarded the British as potential allies for subduing absolutist regimes in Europe.

European literature also reflected upon the Indian events of 1857. Generally writers sympathised with the rebellion and rebellion leaders. In particular Nana Sahib became the rebellion's hero. In Germany Hermann Goedsche writing under the pseudonym Sir John Retcliffe contributed with his novel „Nana Sahib“ to that chivalrous-romanticised image of the rebellion.⁹ At the same time he reproduced the German Orientalist understanding of India as the former home of humankind. Also he used the nineteenth century imagination of conspirators who have gathered from different parts of the globe to overthrow unjust British colonial rule in India. Revelling in brutality and sadism, Goedsche produced a novel of adventure and sensation fascinating a broad readership.

In Italy Aristide Calani's „Scene dell' insurrezione indiana“ published in 1858 also supported the case of the rebels. Striking is the fact that he gave much room to the Indian view of events. He describes the revolt as a real war of independence, carefully planned and supported by various Indian princes and rajas collectively acting against suppression and pursuing the freedom of the people. Politically seen this interpretation opted for an Italian rebellion, which would ultimately unify the country. The same is true with two other novels written in the aftermath of the Indian rebellion. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the protagonists in these novels are never British but exclusively Indians.

⁸ C. P. Joshi (ed.), *Rebellion 1857. A Symposium*, Calcutta, Part Three, pp. 291–336.

⁹ Kim A. Wagner was introduced to the „Mutiny“ as a youngster reading Goedsche's „Nana Sahib“!

Jules Verne also reflected on the Indian rebellion. Like in Goedsche's novel, Nana Sahib became the hero in his writings on the Indian rebellion. When these writings were published in England, the anti-British stance was lost in translation. In the second half of the nineteenth century the British nation as an imperial people was also forged by a reading community supplied with literature which emphasized the superiority of the British race meant to rule foreign people. As several articles show, French, Portuguese and Italian novels opposed this notion and in particular French writings maintained France's civilizing superiority.

Articles in the book vary greatly in quality and substance. Some are on an international academic level offering a thesis to be further debated, some are rather descriptive randomly putting together bits and pieces, and some are rather bad, with terminology being mixed up (nation and people) and in which a non-historian claims some obscure and odd „universal law of history“. However, over all, the contributions mark an important point of departure, rightly pointed out by the editor in his introduction.

Taken together all four books offer a fresh view on hitherto neglected aspects of the Great Rebellion. There has been much historical ado about the Great Rebellion which definitely contributed to its establishment as a national myth, and also to its role as a national drama if not tragedy. Yet, rumours and information panic were part of this ado in some way being the prelude to the Rebellion. Both, the prelude and the main acts as well as the aftermath have to be seen in much tighter connection since this may help to explain the extraordinary status of the Great Rebellion in the second half of the nineteenth century and, not very surprisingly, even nowadays.

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