

Unit 1J The British Empire 1857 – 1967 bridging work

A key skill to master for the Unit 1 part of the history A Level is to read, understand and summarise the main point/opinion/view/argument in **interpretations**.

An **interpretation** is somebody's view of the past, usually a historian compiling a history about a specific time period, event or person.

British Empire in India



India before the British Empire

Shashi Tharoor: *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India*

“The fact is that before 200 years, the British came to one of the richest countries in the world – a country which had 23% GDP...a country where poverty was unknown. A country that was the world leader in at least three industries – textiles, steel and ship building. A country that had everything.”

The British takeover of India

Andrea Major: *The East India Company – how a trading corporation became an imperial ruler*. History Extra Magazine, 2017.

“When the East India Company first visited the Mughal court [the rulers of India] in the early 17th century, it was as supplicants attempting to negotiate favourable trading relations. With Emperor Jehangir's permission, they began to build small bases, or factories, on India's eastern and western coasts. From these...they orchestrated the profitable trade in spices, textiles and luxury goods.

In the 18th century, the EIC became increasingly involved in Indian politics. They grappled to maintain their trading privileges in the face of declining central Mughal authority. As well as maintaining a large army consisting primarily of *sepoys* (Indian mercenary soldiers trained in European military techniques), the EIC was able to call on British naval power and crown troops garrisoned in India.

Such military advantages made the EIC a powerful player in local conflicts and disputes, as did the financial support offered by some local Indian merchants and bankers, who saw in the EIC's increasing influence an unmissable commercial opportunity. After military victories the EIC took control of Bengal. At the same time, the company expanded its influence over local rulers in the south, until by the 1770s the balance of power had changed. Expansion continued and rivals such as the Maratha people in western India were defeated. By 1818, the EIC was the main political power in India, with direct control over two thirds of the subcontinent's landmass and indirect control over the rest.”

Read 'India before the British Empire' and answer the following:

What is the main point Tharoor is making about the British in India?

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Read 'The British takeover of India' and answer the following:

How did the East India Company gradually secure more power over India?

Watch the following: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tbiOfQUWo1E>

The Sepoy Rebellion

Amit Singh: *Think India should be grateful for colonialism? Here are five reasons why you're unbelievably ignorant* – The Independent Newspaper, 2015.

"Britain's bloody rule of India was best encapsulated by the September 1857 seizure of Delhi during the now infamous Sepoy Mutiny. The British troops murdered Sepoy troops, as well as indiscriminately massacring civilians. One young officer was apparently recorded as saying "the orders were to shoot every soul... it was literally murder."

Joseph Coohill: *Indian Voices from the 1857 rebellion in History Today (May 2007)*

"The Indian Rebellion—or Mutiny—of 1857 was one of the most significant events in the history of the British Empire. Indian soldiers in the army of the East India Company in Bengal rose up against their officers, captured and killed many civilians, and nearly overthrew British rule in northern India. Although there is an abundance of first-hand narratives of the year-long Rebellion from Britons and other Europeans, Indian historical voices are largely silent...this is an obvious example of history being written by the victors. The handful of surviving Indian narratives tell us a great deal about the rebellion, however. They shed light on the condition of the rebels' armies and encampments and the great personal difficulties of remaining loyal to the British....and the extent to which the British government (and even Parliament itself) was directly involved in creating the conditions which led to the mutiny and then to the wider rebellion."

Encyclopaedia Britannica: *India* – this article focuses on a range of different causes of the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857.

"The immediate cause of military disaffection was the deployment of the new Enfield Rifle, the cartridge of which was purportedly greased with pork and beef fat. When Muslim and Hindu troops learned that the tip of the Enfield cartridge had to be bitten off to prepare it for firing, a number of troops refused, for religious reasons, to accept the ammunition. These troops were placed in irons, but their comrades soon came to their rescue.

Politically, the British wars against the Afghans and the Sikhs...alarmed and outraged them (the Indian people). The Muslims had lost the large state of Avadh; the Marathas had lost Nagpur, Satara, and Jhansi (important places). Further, the British were becoming increasingly hostile towards surviving traditions...and all things Indian. There was both therefore resentment and unease (towards the British).

Then came the Western innovations of the now overconfident British. Their educational policy was a Westernising one, with English instead of Persian as the official language. Western inventions such as the telegraph and railways aroused prejudice...More disturbing to traditions were the interventions in the name of humanity, in the realm of Hindu custom e.g. the prohibition (stopping of) Suttee, the campaign against infanticide.

Finally, there was the activity of Christian missionaries, by that time widespread...Hindu society was inclined to regard the missionaries as eroding Hindu society without openly interfering. In sum, this combination of factors produced, besides the normal tensions in India, an uneasy, fearful, suspicious, and resentful frame of mind and a wind of unrest ready to fan the flame of any actual physical outbreak. "

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Read the three interpretations about the Sepoy Rebellion/Indian Mutiny of 1857 and answer the following:

1. What sorts of things took place during the mutiny/uprising?
2. What reasons did the Indians have for staging this rebellion?
3. How does Amit Singh view the actions of the British?

The British Empire in Africa



The Scramble for Africa

Niall Ferguson: *Empire* "In the mid-nineteenth century, apart from a few coastal outposts, Africa was the last blank sheet in the imperial atlas of the world. North of the Cape, British possessions were confined to West-Africa: Sierra Leone, Gambia, the Gold Coast, and Lagos, most of them left-overs from the battles for and then against slavery. Within twenty short years after 1880, however, ten thousand African tribal kingdoms were transformed into just forty states, of which thirty-six were under direct European control. Never in human history had there been such a drastic redrawing of the map of a continent. By 1914, apart from Abyssinia and Liberia (an American colony), the entire continent was under some form of European rule. Roughly a third of it was British. This was what came to be known as the 'Scramble for Africa' – though the Scramble of Africa might be nearer the mark."

Cecil Rhodes and the Maxim Gun

Cecil Rhodes wanted to take over a large amount of land in South Africa in order to mine for diamonds. Rhodes needed money from the bank to pay for his activities in Africa. He wrote a letter to the bank that said "The Matabele King [the king of the biggest South African tribe] is the only block to central Africa, as, once we have his territory, the rest is easy, as the rest is simply a village system with a separate headman, its gold, the reports are not simply based on hearsay..."

Niall Ferguson: *Empire*

"Rhodes' men brought with them a devastating secret weapon. Operated by a crew of four, the 0.45 inch Maxim gun could fire 500 rounds a minute, fifty times faster than the fastest rifle available. A force equipped with just five of these lethal weapons could literally sweep a battlefield clear. The Battle of Shangani River in 1893 was among the earliest uses of the Maxim in battle. Around 1,500 Matabele warriors were wiped out. Just four of the 700 invaders died."

Eye witness account of the Battle of Shangani

"The Matabele never got nearer than 100 yards led by the Nubuzu regiment, the King's body guard who came on yelling like fiends and rushing on to certain death, for the Maxims far exceeded all expectations and mowed them down literally like grass. I never saw anything like these Maxim guns, nor dreamed that such things could be: for the belts of cartridges were run through them as fast as a man could load and fire. The natives told the King that they did not fear us or our rifles, but they could not kill the beast...by which they mean the Maxim."

1. What happens to the African continent within 20 years of 1880?

2. What does Rhodes want to do in central Africa?

3. According to Ferguson, what made Rhodes' plans easy to accomplish?

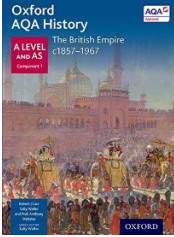
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Essential reading:

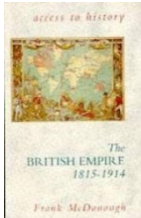
All historians are expected to obtain a copy of the following textbook:

Oxford AQA History The British Empire c1857-1967



Suggested reading:

Frank McDonough *The British Empire 1815 – 1914*



This provides an easy to understand introduction to the British Empire, including key concepts that are essential to know and understand for Unit 1. It is a book designed for level 3 study and written for students.

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4. What happened to the Matabele at the Battle of Shangani?