

Mazumdar, Shaswati. *Insurgent Sepoys. Europe views the Revolt of 1857*, New Delhi, Routledge, 2011. ISBN: 978-0-415-59799-9.

Filipa Lowndes Vicente¹

As happens with so many other conflicts in history, the event that is the central subject of this book—an Indian armed resistance against British dominion—has been named in many different ways depending on the perspective of who is naming it. In terms of the most traditional British historiography, which began to reflect on the event as soon as it happened, this was the Indian “mutiny” of 1857. However, within the most critical and recent bibliography it has multiplied its terminology: the word “Mutiny” is still used, but so is “Uprising”, “Rebellion” or “Revolt”. This last word—“revolt”—was the one chosen for the title of this book, one that concentrates on the ways in which this event was perceived and written about in different European countries. By choosing this word and not others, the editor is undoubtedly engaging with recent debates on this central event of Indian history and the history of Indo-British relationships while assuming the subversive and widespread impact of this episode.

The word “mutiny” was until recently the most commonly used term within the context of British historiography. For a long time, since the event itself, it was used in a sense that restricted the Indian agency to the actions of a few armed men, underlined its military character and tended to be associated with a history where the British were the victims of the violence of those who previously served them. Within this approach, ideas of “conspiracy,” a conspiracy that had been carefully orchestrated, came to be especially relevant as a tool of historical explanation, as another recent book on the subject has demonstrated (Kim A. Wagner, *The Great Fear of 1857. Rumours, conspiracies and the making of the Indian Uprising*, 2010). However, two other recent books on the subject use the word “mutiny” in their titles, probably because this is still the word that best identifies the subject in the context of where they concentrate, its impact in Britain: Gantam Chakravarty, *The Indian Mutiny and the British Imagination* (2005) and Christopher Herbert, *War of No Pity: The Indian Mutiny and Victorian Trauma* (2008). Therefore, to use other words in the title, as the book we are reviewing does, implies a consciousness that is in itself a historiographical statement.

But a reader might ask, what is the Indian “mutiny” or “revolt” or “uprising”? Even if throughout the second half of the nineteenth century this event had a global impact, with

¹ Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon. E-mail: filipa.vicente@ics.ul.pt

particular resonance in Europe, nowadays it is more probable that only those familiar with Indian or British history know something about it. Even if, at the time, it was related to other historical events such as the French Revolution, the American War of Independence, or the 1848 revolutions in Europe, right now other events in India history—such as its independence from Britain in 1947—have a much stronger place in world history. The uprising took place amongst the Indian *sepoys*, the Indian soldiers who formed part of the military of the East India Company. A cartridge used in the new rifle introduced amongst the native regiments, needed to be opened with the teeth. The problem was that in order to be better loaded, the cartridge was greased and it was rumoured that the grease was made of pig lard and cow tallow, two components that would contradict the religious precepts of both Hindus and Muslims. This fact, based in a rumour, was the trigger for the first events of 10 May 1857, when some *sepoys* murdered their officers and also all the British civilians they encountered along the way. They then went to the city of Delhi while other revolts spread throughout the north of India, ones in which civilians often joined the military. Some Indian rulers who had been taken from their seats of power also demanded to return. This long process of Indian dissatisfaction manifested in different ways, which took the British by surprise, was only completely suppressed two years later in 1859.

This event has been seen as a major turning point in British-Indian relationships although this book does not ponder on this perspective. There is a before 1857 and an after 1857: before 1857, the commercial oriented East India Company and after 1857 the transformation of India into the biggest part of the Empire, with Queen Victoria calling herself the Empress of India from 1859 on. Behind this change in names and terminology there were major political transformations: the event, as is so often repeated, had a deep and enduring impact on Indo-British relationships. For some, those who call it “the first Indian war of Independence,” it was a proto-nationalistic event that culminated in India independence less than a century later in 1947. And even if this view is contested and considered as an artificial projection from the present to the past, it is generally accepted that the impact of this uprising had an enduring effect on subsequent colonial relationships: from a deeper British consciousness of the need to respect local traditions and religious precepts, to the growing separation of colonizer and colonized.

A characteristic of this event is the quantity of fiction that it provoked. Beyond the newspapers articles, the historical writings or the autobiographical narratives of those involved, there was an immense output in popular adventure novels and literary texts. Early on, men, and also women, started writing about the event in a kind of worldly catharsis, one which the editor of this book identifies as a response to trauma. Even if the opposite argument could be stated—sometimes a traumatic historical event provokes a silence amongst those who are not yet ready

to deal with it—it is true that the 1857 events were “commodified” as sensational, consciously playing with the fear of British readers. Along with writings, there were many visual images of the event contributing to augment its tantalizing effect, something that this book does not explore. Another characteristic that *Insurgent Sepoys* does not address is the fact that there was a substantial number of women writing about the 1857 uprisings. In fact, books on the “Indian mutiny” appear as one of the main subjects of women travelers in colonial India according to the typology with has been drawn by recent historiography devoted to women writing in British colonial contexts.

However, what many of the authors of this book also show is that when analyzing the response of this event beyond the specific British context, the reactions, positions and approaches were much more diverse. And so was the terminology used to designate an historical episode that, as this book also demonstrates, had a huge impact on European public opinion of the time. One of the originalities of the book is precisely to concentrate on the reactions to a contemporary Indian event, at a time when India’s past dominated European interest. Amongst the prolific writing on European orientalism that has been published in the last decades, the India that comes across was that of Sanskrit literature, religiosity, and ancestral traditions. Not the “India” of agency and action that prompted revolts and that came to disturb the widely repeated idea of Indians as passive, spiritual and submissive to foreign domination.

By concentrating on the European—which here means non-British—reactions to a major episode of the history of British-Indian relationships in the middle of the nineteenth century, and therefore a central subject of British imperial history, this book also has the great merit of subverting the tendency of British historiographical preeminence in anything that relates to this period of Indian history. If, on the one side, this preeminence is historically understandable—India was at this time the central place for Britain to rehearse its different ways of colonial domination—this book demonstrates how other European countries, colonizers or non-colonizers, were very attentive to what was happening “there”. But what the book also shows is that they were attentive for different reasons. While for those European countries that were engaged with their own colonial enterprise, this event was seen as a “cautionary tale,” even if one with different meanings, for those countries that had no colonies and that were still dealing with their own nationalistic expectations, the Indian revolt had a direct resonance. Like themselves, the Indians were also reacting to an invasive and uncomfortable power or even fighting for their national independence. This is manifest, for example, in the Italian case addressed by Chiara Cherubini, “Freedom and Democracy: the Revolt in the Italian Press.” In 1857, Italy was not yet a united nation but was on the verge of becoming so. The Italian example

is especially rich because of its transformations along the second half of the nineteenth century: from concentrating on the internal process of becoming a united nation, to the late-nineteenth-century effort of also becoming a colonizer nation, as other major European countries.

These changes also had repercussions in the ways in which the Indian revolt of 1857 was perceived. While Cherubini argues that in 1857 the “Italian public opinion understood the Indian rebellion in light of the contemporary internal debates on the legitimate forms of government and nascent ideas of national identity,” when Italy’s colonial ambitions fully manifested themselves a few decades later, the Indian event had a deeper colonial significance, as Flaminia Nicora’s article also shows. British colonialism could be seen as an example of “bad colonialism,” but this idea of “bad” could mean different things: it could be perceived negatively because it was too violent or too concentrated on economic interests and had thus awaked the hatred of those that were subject to it, as the 1857 happenings had shown; or because it was too tolerant towards local religions and should have invested more on Indian Christianization, as the Portuguese and the Spanish had done. However, in other Italian accounts, in earlier or later periods, British colonialism was praised for its “civilizing” aim, while Britain’s position within European balances was valued because of its position against despotism. The Italian case is perhaps the most explored within the book, with many different articles devoted to different kinds of responses. Some concentrate on newspaper articles or on travel accounts, while others analyze the very popular tales of Emilio Salgari, a familiar name amongst a vast European readership, mostly boys, as from the late nineteenth century, when he first published his adventure books, and throughout the twentieth century. They were reprinted in many different languages, and characters such as “Sandokan” became part of children’s games and imagination. Salgari also used the Indian 1857 rebellion as a backdrop to one his books as Nicora explores in her article: in it the British are not portrayed in a very favorable light, in contrast with characters from other nationalities, such as the French, the Portuguese or the Italian, who somehow project their individual qualities into the wider idea of different national colonialisms, some better than the others.

Along with the Italian Emilio Salgari, another nineteenth-century author that has a significant presence in this book is the French writer Jules Verne. Beyond the fact that both were extremely popular authors, especially amongst the young, being translated into many different languages, they also shared other things: an uneasiness towards British colonialism, that sometimes led to an open criticism, and also the choice of using the 1857 episode or some of its characters—such as the Indian Nana Sahib—as the plot for their fictional stories. Swati Dasgupta’s article, “Lost in Translation: Jules Verne and the Indian Rebellion,” is particularly

interesting. By confronting the original French text with some of its nineteenth century English translations, the author concludes that many negative references to “British” actions in colonial context were simply omitted from the English versions. This conscious and non-innocent censorship was present for example in the popular *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, where Nemo’s denunciation of the British treatment of Indian pearl divers, was absent from the version prepared for a British readership. As Suchitra Choudhury also demonstrates in her article, in Verne’s book *The Steam House*, “the ‘mutiny’ is no longer the glorified site of British valour but rather a culpable scene of war crimes.” This position was not necessarily an anti-colonialist one. As both authors show, Verne’s position towards French colonialism was very different, and much more tolerant.

A few of the articles in the book are devoted to how the Indian event was received in Eastern Europe, from the Hungarians to the Czech. The latter, under the German rule of the Habsburg Empire, sometimes described themselves as the “Indians” of the Habsburg monarchy, as Sarah Lemmen refers to in her article. Therefore, this book also has the originality of putting together different “Europes,” Europes that usually are not historically confronted with each other. The main dividing line that comes through in this book is that of the European countries which were colonizers in the second half of the nineteenth century, in different degrees and with differing experiences, and that of the European countries that were not colonizers and that often were the ones that felt “colonized” by other European nations. These were the nations that were not yet nations, and that only became so much later, after the World War II. This historical specificity had an enduring historiographical implication: as Lemmen writes “historians of east central European history rarely come across debates on post-colonialism in the context of their work.” Therefore, all the theoretical approaches that have been present in most Anglo-Saxon approaches to colonial history since at least 1978, the date when Edward W. Said published *Orientalism* (and much later in countries such as Portugal or Italy) have not engaged at all with historians from a significant part of Europe.

France, Italy and Spain are some of the countries analyzed in this book. Portugal does not enter this list. It would have been especially interesting, and poignant, to know how this revolt was perceived in the Portuguese context. On the one hand, this was a nation that was herself a colonizer of India, and that could not be indifferent to what was happening in the neighboring colony. On the other, Portuguese colonial India had already been the site of similar revolts in different periods and could project a comparative approach that could hardly be felt by the Spanish or the Italian. Nonetheless, *Insurgent Sepoys* contains two articles that introduce Portuguese India in the narrative. Even if they do so through the writings of an author that

cannot represent how the 1857 was perceived in Goa, and who has to be read in his specificity and individuality. The author is the Goan intellectual Francisco Luis Gomes (1829-69) and the text, his fictional work *Os Brahamanes* (Lisbon, 1866). One article on him is that by Balaji Ranganathan, “Francisco Luis Gomes’s *Os Brahamanes*: The uprising and Anglo-Indian Society,” while the other which concentrates on the same book is written by Everton V. Machado, “The Rebellion in a 19th century Indo-Portuguese Novel.”

Machado, who is also the editor of a recently published French version of this book, argues that Gomes’ fictional work is the first novel of Indo-Portuguese literature and an anti-colonialist novel in the sense that he “demonstrates and criticizes severely the harmful effects of colonial practices in terms of human relationships and of a people’s culture.” However, as Machado also explains, it would be more accurate to say that this anti-colonialism was directed specifically at what he perceived as the British way of colonising—non-religious and mercantile—in opposition to the “humanistic values incarnated by the Christocentric vision” of Portuguese colonialism. It was this Christianity that would overcome both the inequalities of colonialism as well as those of the Hindu caste system. A doctor and a writer, Gomes was also a member of the Portuguese parliament, something possible due to the “citizenship” that empowered Catholic men born in the Portuguese colonies. From this privileged position he could both defend the redemptive qualities of Christianity, while also reclaiming Goa’s colonial autonomy. To analyze a novel that takes place in British India in 1857 and has so many relations to the uprisings makes a lot of sense, but it would also have been interesting to know more about the impact of the 1857 revolts in the context of Portuguese India in historical and journalistic accounts. Even if this, it is true, would not have fit neatly in the subtitle of the book—*Europe views the revolt of 1857*. José Gerson da Cunha (1843-1900), for example, a Goan historian and doctor who lived in Bombay, argues that long before the 1857 revolts and other signs of proto-nationalism, he could already see in the last decades of the nineteenth century that the natives of Goa had already contested the power of the Portuguese colonizers. He was referring to the *Conjuração dos Pintos*, in 1787, embodied with French revolutionary ideas, but also to earlier events such as the sixteenth-century union of the kings of Bijapur and Ahmadnagar against the Portuguese.

These materials were not written in English but in a wide array of European languages, and only a book such as this one, combining scholars from different countries, could purvey this panoramic vision, one that manages to give centrality to the discourses that have remained in a peripheral dispersion (the exception is in a section of a book published in 1957, *Rebellion 1857*, by P.C. Joshi, as Shaswati Mazumdar also acknowledges). The identity of Mazumdar, the editor of

this volume, can also suggest a reflection on the ways and the places in which knowledge is produced. In the period in which the book concentrates—second half of the nineteenth century—Germany was one of the major centers for Indian studies, usually concentrated on its literary Hindu past. Now, the woman responsible for the research project, which started on the 150th anniversary of the 1857 revolt, and that culminated in this volume, is an Indian specialist in German studies and professor at the University of Delhi. Therefore, one of the great contributions of this book is precisely that of showing the “cacophony of voices,” as Suchitra Choudhury describes, that reacted to the Indian revolt. While the great majority of British reactions, from the late 1850s, portrayed the British in India as victims of native violence, the non-British writings that this book analyses are characterized by their diversity, ambivalence and even critique of British Imperialism.