

SIEGE OF LUCKNOW 1857

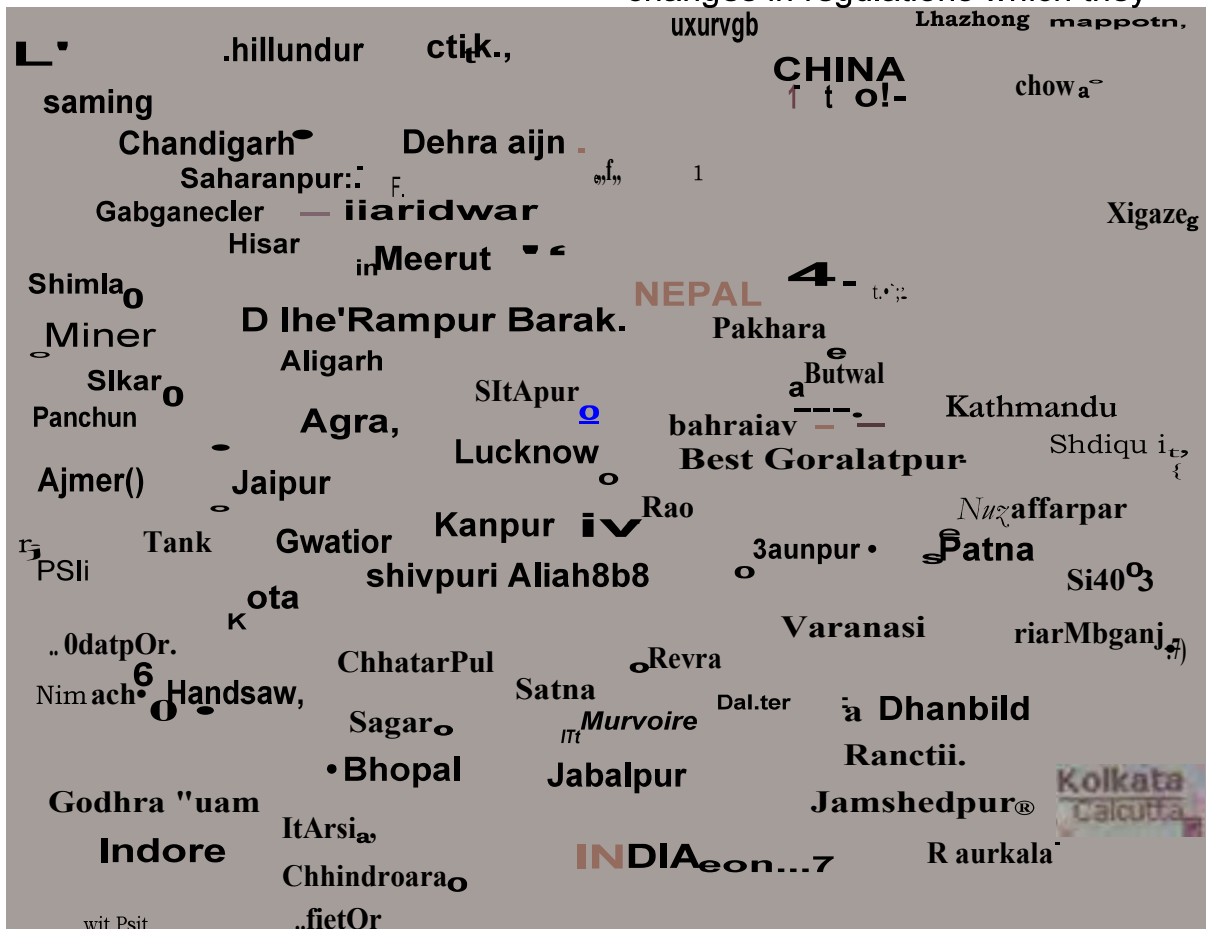
A SHORT SYNOPSIS (Part 1)

Introduction

There were many social and political factors that created the climate for unrest amongst the local population of India in 1857 culminating in the Sepoy Rebellion (Indian Mutiny). Many books and articles have been written on the subject over the years and this précis is not designed to subjugate past historians. This précis will however; attempt to give an overview on the military aspects of the Siege at Lucknow and endeavour to put you closer to your man.

Background

Indian soldiers of the British Indian Army, drawn mostly from Muslim units from Bengal, mutinied at the Meerut cantonment near Delhi on the 10th May 1857, starting a year-long insurrection against the British. The insurrection was sparked in part by the introduction of Lee Enfield rifles that fired a .303 cartridge. The rifle was single loading and required the firer to bite the end off the cartridge prior to loading. The cartridges were coated with pig fat and beef tallow both objectionable to Muslims and Hindus. The Indian soldiers were also dissatisfied with their pay and changes in regulations which they



interpreted as a plot to force them into Christianity.

Cawnpore (Kanpur) Massacre

Some historians note that the massacre at Cawnpore was the defining event of the mutiny. Over 1000 British soldiers with their wives and children took refuge in a fortified magazine at Cawnpore with the sepoys laying siege for twenty days. With out any water the defenders could not hold on any longer and on the 25th June 1857 they surrendered. The massacre commenced on the 27th and continued until all captured British personnel were killed. Most of the women and children were flung down a well at Bibighar.

Lucknow

Lucknow, situated on the banks of the River Gomti, was the capital of Oudh State. Oudh State was annexed by the British (East India Company) the year before in a move that caused great resentment amongst the Indians. Sir Henry Lawrence was the colonial representative at Lucknow and he had the foresight to prepare for possible reprisals from the local inhabitants. Lawrence had a number of units at his disposal but only two of these were regular British units of the line. On the 3rd May 1857 the 7th Oudh Irregular Infantry was disarmed after its soldiers refused to use greased cartridges. Lawrence then feared the worst and made preparations for any subsequent attack. The military garrison was located in an old fort known as Machhi Bhawan, however Lawrence selected the Residency area as the main area to be defended. The Residency originally built in 1780 was located in the northern part of the city and its buildings occupied the highest

elevation dominating the city. On the night of the 3^e May 1857 almost all of the native troops at Lucknow rebelled but were successfully defeated and dispersed. About 712 Indian troops remained loyal to the British at this point however 230 were to desert during the subsequent siege. 1008 Europeans made up the remaining fighting force with 1280 non combatants including women and children. All were located in the compound of the Residency which spread over about 33 acres surrounded with a high mud wall strengthened with earthworks, trenches, wire entanglements, booby traps and gun pits.

Regiments of the Line

The only two British Regiments at Lucknow were the 32nd (Cornwall) Regiment of Foot and the 9th (York and Lancaster) Regiment of Foot. The 32nd was stationed at Dublin, Ireland in 1843 and in 1846 it was recorded as being at Fermoy in India. The unit was actively on the move in India and in 1847 it was at Meerut unaware of what significance this cantonment was to play in history. During the Second Sikh War, the 32nd was at Ambalia and Ferozepore in 1848. During the period September 1848- 21st January 1849 the unit experienced first hand siege conditions at Mooltan. In the latter part of 1849 the unit was again on the move to Cheriote, Goojerat, Punjab and Jullumber. In 1852 to Peshawar, Rannazgce Valley, 1853 at Kussowlie, Subatha. In 1856 the 32nd under command of Colonel Inglis moved to Lucknow leaving a detachment of invalids under the command of Captain John Moore at Cawnpore (Kanpur) which was

77kms SW of Lucknow. The unit earned four Victoria Crosses at Lucknow and lost 15 Officers and four hundred and forty eight soldiers collectively at Cawnpore and Lucknow.

The 84th was stationed in Burma in 1842 then moved to India in 1845. The unit was at Madras and Rangoon in early 1857 before moving to Lucknow leaving sixty soldiers at Cawnpore and a reserve company at Calcutta. During the Cawnpore Massacre only one soldier of the detachment survived. During the hostilities at Lucknow six Victoria Crosses were awarded to members of the 84th. The unit returned to England in 1859 after 17 years in India and earned credit from Queen Victoria when she designated the unit as Light Infantry.

The Lucknow Siege

When the mutiny broke out in Lucknow, the sepoy tried to storm the walls but were always driven back. Twice the sepoy breached the perimeter but British sallies regained lost ground. The main problem was the constant barrage of artillery and musket fire that poured into the compound. One of the first shells killed Lawrence and command passed to Colonel Inglis. The sepoy also started tunnelling to undermine the walls with some of the underground charges exploding within the compound. The 32nd were forced to counter mine and fierce hand to hand fighting took place within the tunnels. Food started to run short, the casualties started to mount, rats swarmed everywhere and the July sun burnt down on the filthy, hungry and dispirited defenders. In the middle of August there were only 350 British soldiers and 300

loyal sepoy left to defend the compound with over 500 women, children, sick and wounded to look after. A note was received at the Residency that a relief column would arrive in four days however; the days became weeks and it wasn't until the 25th September that gunfire was heard on the outskirts of the city.

Next Issue, Help is on the way — or is it?

Bibliography:

1. *Battles of the Indian Mutiny*, Michael Edwardes, Pan, 1963.
2. *The Great Mutiny*, Christopher Hibbert, Penguin, 1978
3. *Our Bones are Scattered, The Cawnpore Massacre and the Indian Mutiny of 1857*. Andrew Ward, John Murray, London 1996.

Ron Sutton

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