

Impact of the first world war history essay



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Do you agree with the view that Indian desires for independence from British were caused mainly by the impact of the First World War? There is certainly a considerable amount of evidence pointing towards the Indian desire for independence as being initially sparked by the First World War, the idea of self-determination which was brought about during World War One can be interpreted as the driving force and justification for desires for independence grew greater than before the war. On the contrary there is also a larger more significant amount of evidence suggesting that the desires for independence were present long before the First World War such as, the partition of Bengal, the Swadeshi movement, the Lucknow Pact and also the existence of a Nationalist movement. The existence of the Indian National congress from 1885 and its development in the beginning of the 19th century and the great rebellion of 1857 suggest that there was already a desire amongst the Indians for independence even before the event of the First World War, this suggests that the Indian desire for independence was created by the First World War to a certain extent. In addition to the knowledge of events mentioned above, I will be using sources by historians Nial Ferguson, O. W. Simpson and also from Gandhi who became the preeminent leader of Indian nationalism in British-ruled India, to show their support or opposition to the view of the statement.

There is a high significance in overviewing the relationship between the Indians and the British, they had a rather cooperative relationship with one another prior to the First World War which suggests that the Indian desires for independence were not that widespread compared to after the First World War, large amounts of Indians were fairly happy to work with the

British in the Indian Civil Service to get involved in the administration of their own country. The introduction of the Morley-Minto reforms in 1909 also show how the British were willing to allow Indians to have more of a say in controlling their country, as Lord Morley for example appointed two Indians to be his personal advisers and the number of the Indian members of the Legislative Council at the Center was increased from 16 to 60. Looking at this it is clear that both the British and Indians were on agreeing terms well before the outbreak of the First World War. This view is also supported by a speech made by Gandhi after the outbreak of the First World War which states that the duties of the Indians are clear: 'to do our best to support the British, to offer our lives and property in the fight'. The fact that Gandhi states one of their duties is to 'offer our lives' allows a clear understanding into the fact that the Indians were willing to support the British during the war, suggesting a positive relationship between the two and disregarding any signs of major desires for independence.

On the contrary the creation of the Indian National Congress shows that there were already present desires for independence before the First World War and the Great rebellion of 1857. Supporting evidence is provided by historian Niall Ferguson who suggests that Indians definitely wanted more say in the way they were being governed by the British, he says 'Though initially intended by its British founder to defuse Indian anger, Congress would quickly become the cradle of modern Indian nationalism.', this suggests that the Indians were slowly building up a foundation to their opposition towards the Raj and would soon rebel against the British in order to gain independence once and for all. He also stated that the congress was

causing the Indians to become more conscious about the problems that they were facing in regards to not having any say in how their government was being run, which would contribute to nationalism becoming a widespread mentality within India. Not only did the congress provide evidence that the First World War wasn't the main reason for desires for independence, before the war British had already experienced terrorism, boycotts etc.

The war did without a shadow of a doubt have an impact and did trigger desires for independence to become more widespread for the Indians. The war had a great negative influence on the economic and political states in India. In order to adequately defend themselves Britain had to increase their expenditure, this rapidly increases taxes within India, during the war prices of food grain rose drastically, at one point by 93% and Indian made goods also rose by 60%^[i]. By the time the war had ended an estimated total of over £146m^[ii] of Indian revenues had been used for war effort. All these unnecessary losses for the Indians were beginning to anger them, the consequences of the war on India's behalf were vast. At the end of the war the British had shown no appreciation for the contribution the Indian soldiers showed when fighting alongside the British, this added to the frustration within Indian society as it felt like they had lost all those soldiers for nothing as Britain did not even show a slight appreciation for them. This view is supported by W. O. Simpson as he suggests that the British had angered the Indians to the point of no return, although the British had promised ' the gradual development of self-governing institutions' the Indians had had enough of Britain's false promises and wanted clear independence from the Raj, by then ' indianisation' was far-fetched and an unlikely option. The

Congress and Muslim league joined forces and signed the Lucknow Pact which consisted of an agreement for joining two groups to lead India to a widespread independence from the Raj. The Lucknow Pact sparked the nationalist movement within India as both Hindus and Muslims had united together to overthrow British rule in India. Historian W. O. Simpson definitely supports the fact that the war was the main trigger for the desire for independence as it caused a widespread awareness of nationalism due to the formation of the Lucknow Pact. Although W. O. Simpson supports this view historian Niall Ferguson opposes it and suggests that there were already desires for independence long before the First World War, he illustrates this by saying the ' British had already faced economic boycotts and terrorism over the clumsy attempt to partition Bengal'. Ferguson's interpretation is proven to be correct as there were many boycotts prior to the First World War such as the event of the Swadeshi movement proved this to be true, as the extremist National Congress leader figure Lokmanya Tilak, known for his belief ' Swaraj is my birth right, and I shall have it!', encouraged a boycott that would stop the buying of all British production goods.

Despite the fact that the war did contribute significantly to Indian desire for independence, the Amritsar Massacre was a devastating event which shook India and caused large amounts of hatred towards the British, provoking the Indian desire for independence to be stronger than ever. The killing of 379 and wounding of over a thousand of Indian's in Amritsar Massacre undoubtedly encouraged nationalist attitudes in India as lives had been lost for an unjustifiable cause of General Dyer thinking the Indians were planning

an uprising or strike, when in fact were gathered to take part in a festival. The event also greatly changed the attitudes of Mahatma Gandhi who before encouraged support for the British by stating 'offer our lives and property' to help the British emerge victorious in the war. Amritsar however greatly encouraged Gandhi to drastically change his views of the British raj. Gandhi believed that the number of Indians were far too vast (300 million) compared to the mere 351 officials in India, he believed that if the Indians rebelled there was no way the British could stop them. Gandhi put this theory into action by creating a non-cooperation boycott where Indians stopped buying foreign goods and spinning cotton. This encouraged a large number of Indians to begin to desire independence drastically as British behaviours towards the Indians had finally caused a widespread nationalist attitude.

In conclusion I believe that the Indian desire for independence was always present long before the First World War however it was not as widespread and common within Indian society, the First World War caused these minor nationalist thoughts to become widespread and highly trigger a large opposition from the Indians towards the British Raj. This is shown when the Lucknow Pact was signed after the First World War, the uniting of Hindus and Muslims through the Muslim League and Indian National Congress created a larger awareness within India and triggered the most significant acts of independence.