

## Independence Movements in India

Opposition to British rule in India continued to build after the Great War. One million Indian soldiers had served in the war; more than 75,000 died. Indian nationalists argued that these sacrifices had earned India greater autonomy. British politicians proposed some reforms, but supreme power remained with the viceroy (the top British official in India), including the unilateral authority to suppress dissent. Brigadier General Reginald Dyer horrifically demonstrated the extent of these powers in April 1919 when he ordered his troops to fire on an unarmed crowd in a public square gathered in defiance of his ban on public meetings. Dyer's troops fired for some ten minutes, targeting the plaza's exits. Estimates of those killed range from around four hundred to almost fifteen hundred. The **Amritsar Massacre** widened the rift between Indian activists and British officials. At the end of 1919, Parliament passed the **Government of India Act**, introducing more shared governance between elected Indian officials and appointed British ones; but in the shadow of the massacre, this attempt at compromise found little favor among Indian nationalists.

In this atmosphere, Mohandas K. Gandhi rose to the leadership of the Indian nationalist movement. Gandhi played a key role in turning the political consciousness raised through Indian participation in World War I and the 1919 massacre into action, but he opposed violence in the pursuit of Indian independence. In 1924 he became president of the **Indian National Congress**, a political party formed to promote self-rule and independence. Gandhi's popularity and the party's attempts at eradicating caste differences, poverty, and religious and ethnic divisions made the Congress a forceful and dominant group that became the party of the masses. Although its members were predominantly Hindu, it had members from other religions, economic classes, and ethnic groups.



Many British laws were at odds with Indian traditions, such as those regarding the collection of salt, a staple element of the Indian diet. Under the colonial system, the British monopolized the salt industry; and Indians could not gather or sell salt—instead, they had to purchase it from the British and pay a heavy tax. In 1930, Gandhi began a protest known as the **Salt March**, in which he led his supporters on a two-hundred-mile, twenty-four-day march to the Arabian Sea to collect salt from the seawater. Despite British efforts to obscure the salt deposits at the beaches, Gandhi and his followers did collect salt, in violation of British law. He and approximately sixty thousand others were arrested for these acts of civil disobedience. In numerous locations over the next several weeks, other nationalists similarly began collecting salt at coastlines in defiance of the law. Gandhi was not released from jail until the following year and agreed to suspend the mass act of civil disobedience.

While the British were not inclined to embrace India's independence movement, they did begin to gradually shift toward policies of self-rule. While retaining control of the military and foreign policy functions, they turned other government operations over to Indians via another **Government of India Act** in 1935. This was an important step toward more autonomy for India. Muslim representation in India remained an issue, however. For example, the Indian National Congress was dominated by the Hindu majority, but rather than recognizing that body as representing all those living in India, the British recognized the separate **Muslim League** as the representatives of the Muslim population. These issues would define roughly two decades of the independence movement and leave a deeply lasting legacy long after India finally gained independence in 1947. The Indian National Congress had achieved a measure of its agenda in favor of self-rule, but India was still clearly under British control. However, during WWII, Indians would continue challenging British rule as Gandhi launched yet another nonviolent

movement—the Quit India movement. By the end of WWII, the British would decide to cut their losses in India.

## Independence in Vietnam (French Indochina)

Hindsight is 20-20, but it's hard not to speculate about what might have happened had Woodrow Wilson heeded the words of a petition sent to Wilson at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. In his letter, Minh, a Vietnamese independence leader, appealed to Wilson's call for self-determination in order to call for more civil rights for Vietnamese in the French colony of Indochina (Vietnam).

Instead, the snub might have helped radicalize the young Ho into a revolutionary determined to free his country of foreign influence. Inspired by the Soviet Union, he turned toward the growing communist movement. He involved himself in radical activities in post-World War I Europe and was a founding member of the French Communist Party in 1920, publishing an anticolonial newspaper in France in 1922 and making his first trip to the Soviet Union in 1923. Over the years, he met with communist leaders like Joseph Stalin and studied the writings of Marx and Lenin.

Although he couldn't return home (Vietnam was still under French control), he formed a revolutionary youth league of Vietnamese exiles in China until China's Nationalist Party cracked down on communists in 1927. In 1930 he established the Vietnamese Communist Party. His involvement landed him in jail for two years after his arrest by Hong Kong's colonial rulers in 1931, where he narrowly escaped extradition back to Vietnam and a likely death sentence from French authorities. After his release, he returned to the Soviet Union.

He then founded the group that would later be called the Viet Minh while in China, before returning to Vietnam in 1941 to fight the invading Japanese occupying forces. After Japan's defeat, Ho led the Viet Minh in a popular uprising across the country to expel the remaining French authorities. They captured key cities and declared Vietnam's independence, with Ho as president of the new republic. However, the French would not relinquish their colony, leading to the outbreak of a full-scale war that would eventually involve America in one of its longest wars in history: the Vietnam War.

