

The Life and Legacy of Sir Winston Churchill

Britain and its Empire: Could the Bengal Famine have been avoided?

Guidance Notes and Lesson Plan

By the end of the lesson students will

- Develop their understanding of the nature of the British Empire
- Evaluate Churchill's view of Empire
- Analyse the causes of the Bengal Famine
- Assess Britain's role in the Bengal Famine

Introduction

Britain's relationship to its empire is an area of contention. Whilst there are aspects of British imperialism that can be considered beneficial to its colonies, the costs to local populations and the economies of colonies need to be central to any discussion. Moreover, the continuing discussion on how Britain reflects on its imperial history raises questions about how the country sees itself in the present day. This lesson uses the case study of the Bengal Famine of 1943 to bring into focus questions of British attitudes towards its empire, local people and what Britain gained from colonising far reaching corners of the globe. Students will develop their knowledge and understanding of what the empire was, as well as how the British, including Churchill, viewed it. By studying the Bengal Famine, students will take a deep dive into one event which can shed light on how British attitudes, among other circumstances, impacted colonial people and evaluate what such an episode can teach them about Britain then and now.

Key Information

This lesson is designed for students aged 12 and above. It is devised for History classes.

Timings are suggested on the basis of a one hour lesson, and may need adapting based on circumstances.

The lesson is designed to follow lesson four of the scheme of work on World War 2. Prior knowledge is not needed. However, recognising that students may arrive with knowledge, ideas and preconceptions is embraced and should be utilised to explore and resolve misconceptions.

The lesson plan provides one way to navigate the content and tasks. Teachers are encouraged to use and/or adapt the resources based on the needs, abilities and prior knowledge of their classes.

Resources

- Lesson plan
- PowerPoint
- Accompanying Video files on:
 - [The British Empire](#)
 - [BBC report on the Bengal Famine](#)
- Mind map handout for British Empire film activity (Slide 4)
- Questions sheet for Bengal Famine Report activity (Slide 7)
- Bengal Famine causes worksheet and handouts (Slides 10 – 15)

Lesson Plan

Starter: Think Pair Share (3 minutes)

Start the lesson by showing the students the 19th century military officer's song on the board (slide 1). Use the Think Pair Share technique to give students time to consider what they can infer about British attitudes to its empire, before taking whole class feedback. Use questioning to draw out the possible meanings of phrases within the poem such as 'Far across the sea', 'Ruler of the Empire', and 'Great White Motherland'. Encourage students to consider how the poem characterises Britain and those she ruled over.

Having held this discussion, introduce the lesson title (slide 2) and explain that in this lesson students will develop their understanding of the British Empire and, using the case study of the Bengal Famine, be able to assess Britain's attitude to its empire.

You may also wish to take the chance at the start of the lesson to ask the group what they already are aware of about the British Empire or what questions they might have about it.

Activity: What was the British Empire? (10 minutes)

Introduce the short film on the British empire (slide 3) and ask students to add to their mind map (handout – Slide 4, or could be done in student books) as they watch. Students do not need to write extensive notes, rather they should focus on developing an overall understanding, therefore the prompt questions on the mind map are relatively open.

Once the video has been watched, give students a minute to review their notes with a partner before taking whole group feedback on each prompt question.

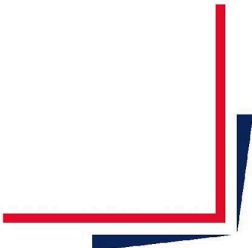
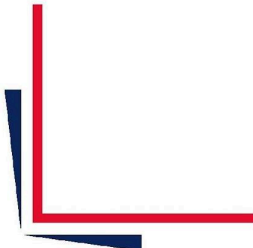
Use this discussion to draw out the vastness of the Empire and how it was a mark of power, prestige and global position for Britain. In discussing the importance of the Empire, encourage students to reflect on the themes of expansion, trade, prestige, control and military stability. When discussing reasons for the end of the Empire, draw out themes of changing values and principles around colonialism, the cost of running an empire, for Britain and for the people under their rule, and Britain's changing status in global politics. When discussing Churchill's view of the Empire, refer back to the lesson on his life to encourage students to see his viewpoint within the context of his personal and family background.

Activity: Bengal Famine Introduction (10 minutes)

Having discussed the nature of the British Empire in general terms, explain to students that they are now going to focus on one place and one event in the History of Britain's empire: the Bengal famine. Use the maps on Slide 5 to show where Bengal is and explain that what we know as India, Pakistan and Bangladesh today was known as the British Raj during the imperial period.

Distribute the note sheets (Slide 7) and invite students to complete their sheet as they watch a short report made by the BBC which looks back on the famine from one woman's perspective (slide 6).

Having watched the film hold a brief discussion to go through the questions on the handout to secure knowledge and allow for questions. You may wish to add summary notes to Slide 7. Explain that having seen one person's perspective we are now going to look at how the famine unfolded and come to our own conclusions on whether it could have been avoided.



Activity: Causes of the Bengal Famine (25 minutes)

Use the information on Slides 8 and 9 to outline the key facts of the famine before introducing the activity for students.

Split the class into groups and explain that they will look at a range of causes of the Bengal famine one by one. As they look at each cause info sheet, they should add notes to their causes handout to (a) build a picture of how events unfolded, and (b) evaluate the impact of the different causes.

Give students 4/5 minutes per factor to complete their causes sheet before moving on to the next cause info sheet.

Once they have looked at all five cause info sheets they should give each factor a rating to determine importance. Explain to students that all five factors were relevant, so their task is to try to order them by significance (rather than discount any factor entirely). You may wish to prompt this analytical thinking by suggesting questions such as: would the famine have still happened without this? Was this factor preventable? Was this a long term or short term cause? Did the human actions help?

Before moving onto the next activity get whole class feedback to show which factor they think was the most significant. They could show this using whiteboards, fingers, pointing to different parts of the room etc. Having seen all responses, ask a few students to explain their viewpoint using the evidence they have seen.

Activity: Could the Bengal Famine have been avoided? (6 minutes)

Using the previous activity and prompt questions on slide 12 invite students to write an answer to the key question: Could the Bengal Famine have been avoided?

If time allows, you may wish to start this activity as a class discussion, drawing out different responses. Encourage students to avoid heaping all the responsibility on one factor – the evidence shows that a conflagration of events happening simultaneously led to the famine. The task here is to identify key elements that made a bad situation worse.

If time is tight, this activity could be done as discussion in class and set as a homework assignment to write a summary paragraph.

Plenary: Enduring Questions (6 minutes)

Use the remaining time to invite students to discuss at least one of the questions on slide 13 and be ready to share their thoughts. Students should pick the question they feel most resonates with them based on the learning in the lesson.