Sometimes wars are caused by the smallest things. In 1857, it was a new bullet that started the First Indian War of Independence, an attempt by the Indians to rid themselves of British control. The Indians lost, and defeat brought upon them direct rule by London and incorporation into the British Empire -- from which India did not win its freedom until after World War II.

The mutiny was set off by the introduction of a new rifle, the Pattern 1853 Enfield, to the native troops serving the British in India. If this weapon was the spark, then the tinder that flamed into the rebellion was the religious sensibilities of the Hindu and Muslim soldiers, who disliked not the weapon, but the negative impact on their religious status that using it would bring.

Prior to 1857, much of India had been taken over by the aggressive tactics of the British East India Trading Company. The British government had sent a few British troops to India, ostensibly to protect the company, but, in reality, to assist in subjugating India. These troops served primarily as officers for an army consisting of native Hindus and Muslims.

The Hindu soldiers were almost exclusively high-caste Brahmans, whose religious status required them to maintain strict rules of ritual purity. The Muslim soldiers were rajputs, an elite warrior class who had over the centuries served the Islamic Delhi Sultanates, the Mughal Empire and, finally, the British. The religious status of these two groups served the British well, for it provided strong unit cohesion and made them a coordinated fighting force. But, when friction appeared between them and their officers, that cohesion worked against their commanders.

By the 1850s, that friction was mounting. Pay increases were falling behind inflation, and bonus pay had dried up. While in previous decades the British had encouraged the soldiers’ religious identity as a means of securing the troops’ loyalty, now many Christian officers were preaching Christianity to them and calling for conversion. This was seen as insulting and disrespectful, and caused the troops to distrust their officers’ motives.

The introduction of the Enfield 1853 rifled musket tipped the soldiers into open rebellion. Like its predecessor, the Baker rifle, the Enfield was loaded through the gun’s muzzle. But, it was fired by a percussion cap, which enabled it to be fired in all weather, even India’s monsoon rains.

The problem lay in the cartridges used to load it. The Enfield still used paper cartridges containing powder and the shot ball. To load it, the rifleman would bite off the cartridge top, pour the powder down the muzzle, put in the paper and then the shot, tamping it all down to the bottom.

In 1857, the barracks were rife with rumors. Among the Muslims, the rumor was that the cartridge was sealed with pig grease. Since Muslims were forbidden to consume pork of any kind, the act of loading the weapon would cause these elite troops, serious Muslims all, to transgress this important religious law. Among the Hindu Brahmans, the rumor was that the cartridges were sealed with tallow, grease made from the fat of cattle. Not only were cattle sacred to Hindus, but consuming their meat products would render the Brahmin soldiers ritually impure.

The British repeatedly denied the rumors, even suggesting that the soldiers remake the cartridges with a neutral sealant such as beeswax. In the soldiers’ minds, this proposal simply confirmed the rumors. They were certain that the greased cartridges were a British plot to render them impure and, thus, separate them from their families and communities. This would, the reasoning went, make them more vulnerable to Christian missionizing.

In the end, the officers had little patience with their soldiers’ concerns. All they could see was a refusal to use the new weapons technology. When they forced the matter, troops at several forts rebelled, firing on the officers and refusing to take orders. As the mutiny spread, it became a general rebellion. When it was finally put down a year later, the British Raj had come to stay.

While the Great Mutiny had several causes, British insensitivity to and disrespect of the religions practiced in India, both Hinduism and Islam, provided the spark that began the rebellion. The soldiers objected not to the new gun itself, but to the religious transgression that biting its paper cartridges would cause. Ironically, less than 10 years later, the Pattern Enfields were converted to Snider-Enfields, the Army’s first metal-cartridge rifle. Cartridge biting was no longer required.