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*George Orwell: "Shooting an Elephant"*

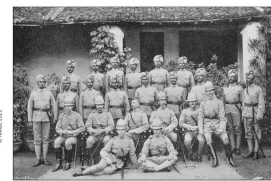
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### George Orwell: *Shooting an Elephant* – Analysing an essay about colonialism

by Liam Cleary



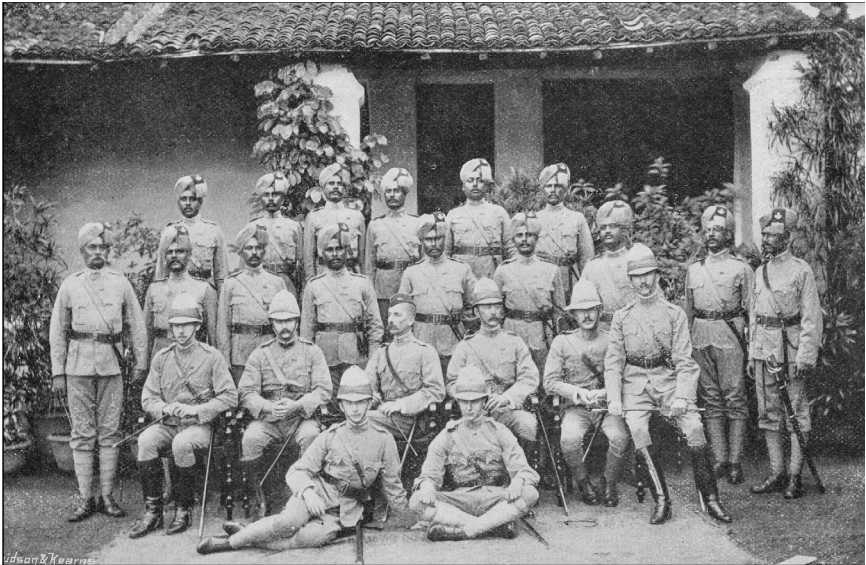
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Die Einheit bietet den Schülerinnen und Schülern einen historischen Hintergrund zu den komplexen Ursachen des Imperialismus und eine Gelegenheit, kontroverse aktuelle Themen zu diskutieren. Das Thema britischer Kolonialismus und seine Abstände waren selten so umstritten wie heute im Zuge des Brexit, der Bewegung in Richtung eines zweiten schottischen Unabhängigkeitsreferendums und der Rassismuskonflikte im Buckingham Palace. Diese tiefen Verwerfungen innerhalb der britischen Gesellschaft machen einen genauen Blick auf Orwells Sicht der britischen imperialistischen Geschichte und sein Unbehagen über die Art und Weise, wie moderne Staaten Individuen kontrollieren und übersehen können, aktueller denn je.

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## Competences and skills:

In this unit, students acquire further **intercultural knowledge** and background information on the British Empire. They improve their **reading** and **essay writing skills** while working on the texts. Students also get the chance to hone their **listening comprehension skills** in the course of their work on this topic. **Vocabulary** is extended and **debating style** improved as students grapple with moral questions such as how history should be presented and how we make important decisions.

## Overview:

List of abbreviations:

|  |                                 |                               |
|--|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <b>A</b> Analysis                          | <b>C</b> Comment                | <b>CT</b> Creative Task       |
| <b>D</b> Discussion/debate                 | <b>G</b> Group work             | <b>L</b> Language             |
| <b>LVC</b> Listening/viewing comprehension |                                 | <b>M</b> Mind map/visualising |
| <b>P</b> Working with a picture/cartoon    |                                 | <b>PR</b> Presentation        |
| <b>R</b> Research                          | <b>RC</b> Reading comprehension | <b>S</b> Summary              |
| <b>T</b> Working with a text               | <b>VI</b> Working with a video  | <b>W</b> Writing              |

| Topic  | Material | Methods/Skills    |
|--|----------|-------------------|
| 1: The British exploitation of Burma   | M1–M2    | A, C, L, RC, T, W |
| 2.1: <i>Shooting an Elephant</i> by George Orwell (Part 1)<br>2.2: <i>Shooting an Elephant</i> by George Orwell (Part 2) | M3–M6    | A, D, L, RC       |
| 3: George Orwell and modern Burma  | M7       | LC                |
| 4: Monuments in public places  | M8       | D, G, P, R,       |
| 5: State surveillance today  | M9       | C, VI, W          |

# George Orwell: *Shooting an Elephant* – Analysing an essay about colonialism

## Facts

“[...] he had grasped the truth about the English and their Empire. The Indian Empire is a despotism – benevolent, no doubt, but still a despotism with theft its final object.”  
– George Orwell, *Burmese Days*<sup>1</sup>

In the words of historian Niall Ferguson, British colonisation was “a vast movement of peoples, a *Völkerwanderung* unlike anything before or since. Some quit the British Isles in pursuit of religious freedom, some in pursuit of political liberty, some in pursuit of profit.”<sup>2</sup> Ferguson’s controversial book *Empire* stresses the positive achievements of the British Empire. He mentions the triumph of capitalism, the anglicisation of North America, the enduring influence of the Protestant version of Christianity and the internationalisation of English as positive long-term legacies. Yet, in so doing, Ferguson fails to understand that many people around the world would see these particular legacies as negative developments that have stained the history of their individual story, their individual nation. People who had to endure the heavy hand of British imperialism, its slavery and racism, its xenophobia and intolerance, all of which Ferguson himself acknowledges took place, often have a different view on these issues.

Author George Orwell, who had first-hand experience of life in Burma, understood well the viewpoint of the oppressed and dispossessed in far-flung corners of the globe. He took it upon himself to acknowledge and expose the evils of imperialism. This does not mean Orwell was unbiased. Far from it. Orwell’s left-wing beliefs coloured his views as much as Ferguson’s membership of what he terms “the neo-imperialist gang”<sup>3</sup> colours his. Regardless of one’s standpoint, the theme of British colonialism and its

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1 George Orwell (1934): *Burmese Days*, Harper & Brothers: New York, p. 68.

2 Niall Ferguson (2004): *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World*, Penguin Books: London.

3 “a fully paid-up member of the neo-imperialist gang” at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Niall\\_Ferguson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Niall_Ferguson) [last access 11 June 2021]

legacy has seldom been as contentious and newsworthy as it is today in the wake of Brexit difficulties, a move towards a second Scottish independence referendum and accusations of racism within Buckingham Palace.

Close scrutiny of the deeds and legacy of the British Empire has long been overdue. The recent past has seen numerous newspaper articles reporting the fact that over a quarter of a million people in Britain have signed a petition demanding that the teaching of Britain's colonial past and its role in the transatlantic slave trade become a compulsory part of the school curriculum. Simultaneously, a Tory schools minister has rejected this demand because it would "lower standards" while a report by the government-appointed Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities has stated that they found no evidence of institutional racism in Britain. Such attitudes and outcomes shock many people as does the British government's failure to help atone for historical wrongdoing such as South African concentration camps, the Amritsar massacre, the Irish famine or the more recent Windrush scandal. These deep fault lines within British society make taking a close look at Orwell's view of British imperialist history, and his unease at the way modern states might control and monitor individuals, more timely than ever.

Orwell's essay, *Shooting an Elephant*, which is the main focus of this unit, was first published in the autumn of 1936 in the literary magazine *New Writing*. This magazine was a literary periodical which had just been founded by the poet John Lehmann. It was anti-fascist in outlook. The story centres on the experience of an English narrator who, while working as a policeman in Burma, is tasked with killing a rampaging elephant. Although the narrator has no desire to shoot the elephant who, in the course of the story, has quietened down, he goes ahead and kills the animal. The account concludes with the narrator explaining that he had done so to avoid "looking a fool".

One of the central issues around this essay is whether the story is a true account of an actual event. Orwell's biographer, Bernard Crick, spent a great deal of time trying to ascertain what had actually taken place and he believed it was unlikely that Orwell shot the elephant. Other sources, including Orwell's wife and colleagues of his from his time in Burma, are on record as having testified to the truth of the account. In addition, shortly before submitting the piece, Orwell wrote to John Lehmann that "it all came

back to me very vividly the other day [...] the incident had stuck in my mind”.<sup>4</sup> A final possibility worth considering in this context is the suggestion that Orwell did shoot an elephant during his time in Burma but perhaps not in such dramatic circumstances as outlined in his account.

Leaving the veracity of the tale to one side, it is interesting to note what Orwell himself later said concerning imperialism and the British presence in Burma. Writing in 1929, a period during which he was working on *Burmese Days*, Orwell stated that the Burmese “relationship with the British Empire is that of slave and master. Is the master good or bad? That is not the question; let us simply say that his control is despotic and, to put it plainly, self-interested.”<sup>5</sup> In the same essay, Orwell speaks of an English control which reaches “into every domain.”<sup>6</sup> And this reminds us of the importance of *Shooting an Elephant* as a work which reveals the development of Orwell’s political thinking. Not only is it one of his finest early essays but it is also a signpost on the road to *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Based on first-hand experience, Orwell came to despise imperialism. He believed it destroyed everything it touched, both the conqueror and the conquered. His position as a British official whose job it was to impose law and order placed him in conflict with the local Burmese people for whom he had great sympathy. This conflict lies at the heart of *Shooting an Elephant*. The essay also asks moral questions concerning the individual and the state, questions which students who read *Shooting an Elephant* should be encouraged to answer. It is therefore, in some ways, a forerunner of the ideas which Orwell embraced in *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. This makes the essay the perfect introduction for students who may want to go on to read one of these two famous novels. To this day, it remains a standard work in textbooks geared towards teaching the art of good essay writing.

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4 George Orwell (1968): *The Collected Essays Journalism and letters* Volume 1, Secker and Warburg: London, p. 221.

5 <http://theorwellprize.co.uk/george-orwell/by-orwell/essays-and-other-works/how-a-nation-is-exploited-the-british-empire-in-burma> [last access 11 June 2021]

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## Notes on the material

The unit provides students with historical background on the complex crimes of imperialism and an opportunity to discuss controversial modern issues. There is also a focus on the characteristics of the short story. As *Shooting an Elephant* is generally referred to a personal essay rather than a short story, the unit provides students with material that examines the similarities and differences between these two literary genres.

**Topic 1** focuses on the British presence in Burma. There are comprehension and language questions as well as material which allows for the discussion of the monarchy, Churchill's role in the British Empire and the link between Brexit and Empire. **Topic 2** contains the first section of the central text in this unit *Shooting an Elephant*. Although the story can be read in one sitting, it has been decided to divide the text in two and to end the first extract at a point which allows the teacher scope for discussion of the central character's decisions up to this point. One might even consider not informing students that the story is only half-complete. The compact worksheet on this first section has comprehension, language and style questions which allow students to show they have grasped matters thus far. *Shooting an Elephant* (Part 2) follows the first extract and brings the story to its conclusion. The worksheet provides material for teacher and students to revise the story, assess the genre it belongs to and also discuss whether the decision to shoot was correct.

**Topic 3** is an interview with an author on the topic of Orwell, his place in Burmese history, and the modern society the country has evolved into. **Topic 4** focuses on the theme of monuments in public places and how we should deal with history and historical figures. This question has grabbed newspaper headlines in the wake of the *Black Lives Matter* movement and students have the opportunity to learn about and discuss how we deal with historical figures in public. Photos of three statues are provided which students must research, describe and analyse. This is then followed by a discussing/role play opportunity which might double up as an oral exam. **Topic 5** rounds off the unit with a test for senior students. This has been chosen to allow the teacher the opportunity of explaining the position of *Shooting an Elephant* in Orwell's literary development and to lead on to further work by him such as *Animal Farm* or *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The test consists of a listening comprehension section and composition tasks.



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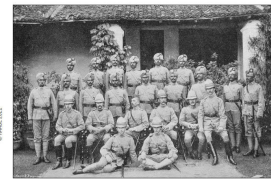
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