**Spartacus Educational Classroom Activity**

# **1517 May Day Riots - How do historians know what happened?** <http://spartacus-educational.com/ExTEU17.htm>

During the reign of [Henry VIII](http://spartacus-educational.com/TUDhenry8.htm) people living in [London](http://spartacus-educational.com/ITlondon.htm) complained about the large number of foreigners living in the city. [John Lincoln](http://spartacus-educational.com/John_Lincoln.htm), a second-hand dealer, persuaded Dr. Beal, the vicar of [St Mary's Church](http://www.spitalfields.co.uk/spitalfields-history/) in [Spitalfields](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spitalfields), to preach against the foreigners in his sermon in Easter week of 1517. Beal agreed and to a great congregation in the fields outside the city he "denounced the aliens who stole Englishmen's livelihoods and seduced their wives and daughters; he said that even birds expelled interlopers from their nests, and that men were entitled to fight for their country against foreigners."

On 28th April 1517 John Lincoln posted a bill upon one of the doors of [St Paul's Cathedral](http://spartacus-educational.com/LONpauls.htm), complaining that "the foreigners" were given too much favour by the king and council. It claimed that "the foreigners" had "bought wools to the undoing of Englishmen". Rumours began to circulate that the "people would rise and kill the foreigners on May Day". Cardinal [Thomas Wolsey](http://spartacus-educational.com/TUDwolseyT.htm) ordered the Lord Mayor and the city officers to enforce a curfew on the eve of May Day, when large crowds always assembled and trouble sometimes occurred.

Sir [Thomas More](http://spartacus-educational.com/TUDmoreT.htm), the Under-Sheriff of [London](http://spartacus-educational.com/ITlondon.htm) and his men, patrolled the streets that night. Some young apprentices broke the curfew and when an officer tried to arrest one of them, a riot broke out. More's men charged the rioters with their staves. This only made them angrier and soon afterwards a large crowd of young people were attacking foreigners and burning the houses of Venetian, French, Italian, Flemish and German merchants. The rioting continued all night and on the morning and afternoon of May Day. It was reported that rioters ran through the city with "clubs and weapons... throwing stones, bricks, bats, hot water, shoes and boots, and sacking the houses of many foreigners". It is estimated that 2,000 Londoners sacked the houses of foreign merchants. This became known as the [Evil May Day Riots](http://spartacus-educational.com/Evil_May_Day_Riots.htm).

That afternoon, [Thomas Howard](http://spartacus-educational.com/TUDhowardT2.htm), Earl of Surrey, brought 1,300 soldiers into the city and mass arrests began to take place. The first batch of 279 people were brought before the courts later that day. [Edward Hall](http://spartacus-educational.com/Edward_Hall.htm) described the prisoners as "some men, some lads, some children of thirteen years... there was a great mourning of fathers and friends for their children and kinsfolk." [Charles Wriothesley](http://spartacus-educational.com/Charles_Wriothesley.htm) claimed that eleven men were executed. Hall thought it was thirteen but [Sebastian Giustinian](http://spartacus-educational.com/Sebastian_Giustinian.htm) said it was twenty and Francesco thought it was as high as sixty. Those executed suffered the penalty of being "hanged, drawn and quartered".

##### Primary Sources

##### (Source 1) 19th century illustration of 1517 May Day Riots



#### (Source 2) [Edward Hall](http://spartacus-educational.com/Edward_Hall.htm), [History of England](http://www.amazon.co.uk/chronicle-containing-history-succeeding-monarchs/dp/1176411136/ref%3Dsr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1421751360&sr=1-1&keywords=Edward+Hall,+Chronicle) (1548)

The multitude of strangers was so great about London that the poor English could get any living... The foreigners... were so proud that they disdained, mocked, and oppressed the Englishmen, which was the beginning of the grudge... The Genoans, Frenchmen, and other strangers said and boasted themselves to be in such favour with the king and his council that they set naught by the rulers of the city... How miserably the common artificers lived, and scarcely could get any work to find them, their wives, and children, for there were such a number of artificers strangers that took away all the living in manner.

#### (Source 3) [Sebastian Giustinian](http://spartacus-educational.com/Sebastian_Giustinian.htm), letter to the Signiory of Venice (April, 1517)

After Easter, a certain preacher, at the instigation of a citizen of London, preached as usual in the fields, where the whole city was in the habit of assembling with the magistrates. He abused the strangers in the town, and their manners and customs, alleging that they not only deprived the English of their industry and of the profits arising therefrom, but dishonoured their dwellings by taking their wives and daughters. With this exasperating language and much more besides, he so irritated the populace that they threatened to cut the strangers to pieces and sack their houses on the first of May.

#### (Source 4) [Jasper Ridley](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1466429/Jasper-Ridley.html), [The Statesman and the Fanatic](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Statesman-Fanatic-Thomas-Wolsey-More/dp/0094662703/ref%3Dsr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1422281485&sr=1-1&keywords=The+Statesman+and+the+Fanatic) (1982)

There was a widespread resentment against foreigners in London which throughout the sixteenth century made England, and especially its capital city, notorious in Europe for nationalist intolerance. At the end of April 1517 a speaker harangued an open-air meeting in the fields just outside London, and denounced the foreign merchants and their servants who, he alleged, robbed, cheated and exploited the native inhabitants of London and seduced their wives and daughters.

#### (Source 5) [Edward Hall](http://spartacus-educational.com/Edward_Hall.htm), [History of England](http://www.amazon.co.uk/chronicle-containing-history-succeeding-monarchs/dp/1176411136/ref%3Dsr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1421751360&sr=1-1&keywords=Edward+Hall,+Chronicle) (1548)

Diverse young men of the city assaulted the aliens as they passed by the streets, and some were stricken and some were buffeted, and some thrown into the canal... Then suddenly was a common secret rumour, and no man could tell how it began, then on May Day next the city would rebel and slay all aliens, in so much as diverse strangers fled out of the city.

#### (Source 6) [Sebastian Giustinian](http://spartacus-educational.com/Sebastian_Giustinian.htm), letter to the Signiory of Venice (May, 1517)

So great is the malignity... that what they are now unable to do for fear of death is done by their women, who evince immense hatred towards foreigners.

#### (Source 7) [Jasper Ridley](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1466429/Jasper-Ridley.html), [*Henry VIII*](http://www.amazon.co.uk/s/ref%3Dnb_sb_noss?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-keywords=Jasper%20Ridley%2C%20Henry%20VIII) (1984)

For the first time since he became King, Henry risked his popularity with the people by his severe repression of the anti-foreign rioters of Evil May Day. The resentment felt against the foreigners; the sympathy for the young apprentices; the grief of the parents when their boys of thirteen were executed; the feeling that in many cases the more innocent had been punished while the more guilty escaped; and the tales, which Hall reported, of the brutality of the Earl of Surrey's soldiers who suppressed the disorders, all aroused great sympathy of the rioters.

#### (Source 8) [Peter Ackroyd](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Ackroyd), [Tudors](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Tudors-History-England-II-Vol/dp/1447236815/ref%3Dsr_1_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1420644603&sr=1-2&keywords=Adams,+Leicester+and+the+Court) (2012)

On the evening of 30 April 2,000 Londoners - with apprentices, watermen and serving men at their head - sacked the houses of the French and Flemish merchants. They also stormed the house of the king's secretary and threatened the residents of the Italian quarter. Wolsey, wary of trouble desfite the assurances of the mayor, called in the armed retainers of the nobility as well as the ordnance of the Tower. More than 400 prisoners were taken, tried and found guilty of treason. Thirteen of them suffered the penalty of being hanged, drawn and quartered; their butchered remains were suspended upon eleven gallows set up within the city.

In a suitably elaborate ceremony the other rioters, with halters around their necks, were brought to Westminster Hall in the presence of the king. He was sitting on a lofty dais, from which eminence he condemned them all to death. Then Wolsey fell on his knees and begged the king to show compassion while the prisoners themselves called out "Mercy, Mercy!" Eventually the king relented and granted them pardon. At which point they cast off their halters and, as a London chronicler put it, "jumped' for joy".

#### (Source 9) [Sharon L. Jansen](http://sharonljansen.com/),[*Dangerous Talk and Strange Behaviour*: Women and Popular Resistance to the Reforms of Henry VIII](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Dangerous-Talk-Strange-Behavior-Resistance/dp/0312160909/ref%3Dsr_1_4?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1428485933&sr=1-4&keywords=Sharon+L.+Jansen) (1996)

One curious aspect of the Evil May Day riots involves the reasons why Henry pardoned these remaining prisoners. They were paraded before the king with halters around their necks. In a letter written by Francesco Chieregato, papal nuncio to England, Henry pardoned these prisoners, otherwise destined for the gallows, because of (Catherine of Aragon)... Chieregato's seems to be the only report that Queen Catherine secured the pardons; Hall indicated that the prisoners themselves cried "Mercy, Gracious Lord" and that, following Wolsey's advice and the pleas from the lords who had assembled at Westminster, the king pardoned them. Other London chroniclers attribute the pardon variously to the pleas of the prisoners themselves, to Wolsey, or to the king's own judgment. Nevertheless, the story that Catherine sought the pardon, interceding on her knees for the prisoners, has proven irresistible to historians.

#### (Source 10) [Francesco Chieregato](http://spartacus-educational.com/Francesco_Chieregato.htm), letter to Pope [Leo X](http://spartacus-educational.com/TUDleoX.htm) (19th May, 1517)

Our most serene and most compassionate queen, with tears in her eyes and on her bended knees, obtained their pardon from His Majesty, the act of grace being performed with great ceremony.

##### Questions for Students

Question 1: Read the introduction: (a) Describe the reasons for the 1517 May Day Riot. (b) How many people were executed for their participation in the May Day Riot?

Question 2: Select passages from the sources that helps to explain why Londoners in 1517 were unhappy.

Question 3: Read sources 8, 9 and 10. Who was responsible for the 400 people involved in the May Riot being pardoned?

Question 4: What does Sharon L. Jansen (source 9) mean by the comment "the story that Catherine sought the pardon, interceding on her knees for the prisoners, has proven irresistible to historians"?

Question 5: Use the information in this unit to describe the primary sources that historians have to consult when writing about the 1517 May Day Riot. What sort of questions would these historians have had to ask about the people who produced these sources?