**Spartacus Educational Classroom Activity**

[**1517 May Day Riots: How do historians know what happened?**](http://spartacus-educational.com/ExTEU17.htm) **(Questions & Answers)**

# <http://spartacus-educational.com/ExAnTEU17.htm>

**Q1**: 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?

**A1**:

(a) Hostility towards foreigners increased in London in 1517 because it was believed that they "stole Englishmen's livelihoods and seduced their wives and daughters". The riot took place because [Henry VIII](http://spartacus-educational.com/TUDhenry8.htm) and Cardinal [Thomas Wolsey](http://spartacus-educational.com/TUDwolseyT.htm) tried to impose a curfew to stop the May Day celebrations taking place. A group of about 2,000 people, upset by this decision, attacked foreigners and burnt down the houses of Venetian, French, Italian, Flemish and German merchants.

(b) People in London at the time disagreed about the number of people executed for their participation in the May Day Riot. They gave the following figures: [Charles Wriothesley](http://spartacus-educational.com/Charles_Wriothesley.htm) (11), [Edward Hall](http://spartacus-educational.com/Edward_Hall.htm) (13),[Sebastian Giustinian](http://spartacus-educational.com/Sebastian_Giustinian.htm) (20) and [Francesco Chieregato](http://spartacus-educational.com/Francesco_Chieregato.htm) (60).

**Q2**: Select passages from the sources that helps to explain why Londoners in 1517 were unhappy.

**A2**:

**Economic problems**:

"The multitude of strangers was so great about London that the poor English could get any living... 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 2)

"deprived the English of their industry and of the profits arising there from" (source 3)

"denounced the foreign merchants and their servants who, he alleged, robbed, cheated and exploited the native inhabitants of London" (source 4)

**Attitude of foreigners towards Londoners**:

"The foreigners... were so proud that they disdained, mocked, and oppressed the Englishmen." (source 2)

**Foreigners given preferential treatment**:

"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." (source 2)

**Seduced their wives and daughters**:

"dishonored their dwellings by taking their wives and daughters" (source 3)

"seduced their wives and daughters" (source 4)

**Q3**: Read sources 8, 9 and 10. Who was responsible for the 400 people involved in the May Riot being pardoned?

**A3**: [Peter Ackroyd](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Ackroyd) (source 8) claims that it was Cardinal [Thomas Wolsey](http://spartacus-educational.com/TUDwolseyT.htm) who was responsible for the 400 people involved in the May Riot being pardoned? [Sharon L. Jansen](http://sharonljansen.com/) (source 9) points out that some "London chroniclers" also supported the Wolsey theory. However, others suggested it was [Henry VIII](http://spartacus-educational.com/TUDhenry8.htm). Jansen also refers to a letter written by [Francesco Chieregato](http://spartacus-educational.com/Francesco_Chieregato.htm) (source 10) that indicates that it was [Catherine of Aragon](http://spartacus-educational.com/TUDaragon.htm) who obtained the pardon.

**Q4**: 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"?

**A4**: Sharon L. Jansen is suggesting that sometimes historians use information that they cannot confirm as being true because it is a "good" story.

**Q5**: 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?

**A5**: This unit quotes from primary sources produced by [Edward Hall](http://spartacus-educational.com/Edward_Hall.htm), [Charles Wriothesley](http://spartacus-educational.com/Charles_Wriothesley.htm), [Sebastian Giustinian](http://spartacus-educational.com/Sebastian_Giustinian.htm) and [Francesco Chieregato](http://spartacus-educational.com/Francesco_Chieregato.htm). All four men were living in London during the 1517 May Day Riot. Wriothesley was only nine years old whereas Hall was a 20 year-old student. Giustinian and Chieregato, were older and both worked as diplomats for foreign governments. Historians would be interested in discovering if these men actually saw the events they described or were they relying on second-hand accounts. They would also be interested in discovering their political opinions to see if this might have influenced what they wrote. For example, Hall's account, which is the most detailed account that we have of the riot, is clearly sympathetic to the plight of English people living in London at the time. It is important to note that Hall's account was not published during his lifetime. This gave him the freedom to be critical of Henry VIII. The same is true of Wriothesley whose diaries were published over 300 years after his death.

The accounts of Giustinian and Chieregato were produced for their governments and were also not published until many years after their deaths. As they were both foreigners and therefore targets of the rioters, we cannot expect them to show the same sympathies as Edward Hall. They were also interested in sending information that might please their governments. It is clear from reading their letters that a large amount of information they sent was based on rumours they had heard. Even so, their account of the way Londoners felt towards foreigners was probably fairly accurate and was not that different from those provided by Hall and Wriothesley.