The Boxer Rebellion in China

In 1900, a violent anti-foreign uprising of young martial-arts militants called Boxers provoked a war between China and nearly a dozen other nations.

Dynasties of emperors ruled China from about 2000 B.C. until the early 20th century A.D. At the beginning of the 1600s, invaders from Manchuria, the Manchus, swept southward into China and overthrew the Ming Dynasty. The Manchus established their own ruling dynasty in Beijing’s “Forbidden City” of palaces and temples.

The Manchus adopted China’s traditional form of government and appointed many Chinese as officials. They accepted the traditional view in China that its civilization was the best and other peoples were “barbarians.”

The Manchus tripled the size of the Chinese Empire. For a while, government surpluses grew, the arts flourished, and the country prospered. The population tripled in 200 years. After 1800, however, the rapidly increasing population resulted in smaller farm plots and increasing poverty. The Manchus put down numerous rebellions when floods and droughts caused famine.

European traders had long sought China’s tea, silk, and porcelain. During the 1700s, the Manchus opened the door for Britain, other European countries, and the United States to trade with China, but only at the port of Canton (in the south of China).

The Chinese had little desire for European products. So European traders had to pay in silver for Chinese products. The British, seeing their treasury of silver diminish, desperately sought a product that the Chinese populace would buy. They found one in opium, a highly addictive narcotic produced in India. By 1830, the value of opium imports exceeded that of all other goods traded to China.

While the British dominated the opium trade, all the other nations trading at Canton, including the United States, participated in it. Seeing the harm opium caused, the Manchu government tried to outlaw its importation. But the trade was too profitable, both for the foreigners and corrupt Chinese customs officers, and it continued.

In 1838, the Manchu government threatened to cut off all trade unless the foreign traders at Canton surrendered their opium and posted a bond to assure they would not engage in this traffic in the future. The Americans largely accepted these demands, but the British refused. British traders began using American ships to land their opium along the coast north of Canton. When the Chinese attempted to stop these evasions, Britain declared war on China in 1839.

After easily defeating the Chinese with their warships, the British forced the Manchu government to grant them special trading privileges in four major Chinese ports in addition to Canton. China also handed over to Britain the valuable port city of Hong Kong.

Over the next 20 years, Britain and the other nations trading in China forced the Manchu government to accept formal trade and diplomatic relations. The foreigners also secured immunity from prosecution in Chinese courts for any crimes their citizens committed in China. In addition, the Manchu government agreed to open China to Protestant missionaries. (European Catholics had been converting Chinese to Christianity since the 1500s.) The emperor even decided to legalize the opium trade.

In 1894, Japan invaded and conquered Korea, an ancient Chinese possession. The Japanese victory against China encouraged the European nations to demand more concessions from the Manchu government. These included such things as exclusive trading ports, foreign residential areas, and railroad rights-of-way.
By 1900, the British, French, Italians, Russians, Germans, and Japanese all controlled areas in China called “spheres of influence,” where they monopolized trade. These European countries began talking about dividing China into colonies as had recently been done in parts of Africa.

The United States, which was fighting a war against rebels in the Philippines, was only interested in trade. It did not seek Chinese territory. In 1899, U.S. Secretary of State John Hay argued for an “Open Door Policy” allowing all nations equal access to Chinese ports.

The weakened Manchu government was not sure how to handle the increasingly arrogant European powers in China. Many common Chinese people, however, grew to hate the foreigners.

**The Anti-Foreign Reaction**

When foreigners introduced changes in China, they often disrupted old patterns of life. For example, the northern province of Shandong was a cotton-growing region. Many women worked at home, spinning yarn and weaving cloth. When British traders sold cheap machine-made cloth, many of these women were put out of work.

Some Chinese welcomed new foreign technology, especially the military, which quickly adopted modern European weapons. Others, however, lost jobs when foreigners introduced railroads and steamboats.

The foreigners demanded concessions of land so they could build railroads from the ports they controlled to markets inland. In many cases, they destroyed villages and graveyards while constructing their rail routes.

Christian missionaries followed the traders. By 1900, about 850 Catholic and 2,800 Protestant missionaries lived in China. Some aggressively protected their new Christian converts. They often put pressure on Manchu government officials to decide legal cases in favor of Chinese Christians, causing bad feelings between them and their non-Christian neighbors.

Germany, a late comer to the scramble for Chinese concessions, sought an excuse to grab its own sphere of influence. In 1897, after a mob in Shandong killed two German Catholic priests, the German navy seized the province’s main port, Qingdao. The Germans forced the Manchu government to sign a 99-year lease for Qingdao along with railroad and mining concessions in Shandong. German missionaries became bolder in converting Chinese. When some Chinese rebelled, German soldiers marched into the countryside to kill the troublemakers and burn their villages.

The Chinese populace grew increasingly bitter. Shandong and other northern provinces around Beijing suffered severe floods followed by a long drought. Unemployment and famine struck. Many people blamed the foreigners for angering the traditional Chinese gods. A rumor began to spread: “Wipe out the foreigners, and the rain will come.”

**The Boxer Uprising**

The martial arts had long been a folk tradition in China. Those versed in the martial arts fought with their hands and feet along with weapons such as knives and swords. Some fighters formed secret societies and practiced rituals that they believed gave them magical powers. They would write charms on papers, burn them, mix the ashes with water, and drink the potion. After doing this, they believed swords or even guns could not harm them.

In 1898, foreign missionaries in Shandong province demanded that the Manchu government punish Chinese villagers who had been fighting Christian converts for possession of a temple. Hundreds of martial arts fighters responded by attacking the converts.

In another part of Shandong, martial arts fighters known as “spirit boxers” believed they could call on gods to possess their bodies and protect them from harm in battle. Soon they and the other martial arts fighters in Shandong were calling themselves “Boxers United in Harmony.” The Boxers shrewdly began to use a new slogan: “Support the Dynasty, Destroy the Foreigners.”

In 1899, thousands of young men, often poor and unemployed, and even a few women flocked to the Boxer cause against the foreigners. Posters with sayings appeared everywhere in Shandong and throughout northern China. One poster read:

> The will of heaven is that the telegraph wires will be cut, then the railways torn up, and then shall the foreign devils be beheaded.

The Boxers first targeted the Chinese Christian converts, whom they called “second devils.” Boxers attacked, looted, and burned their homes and churches. By the spring of 1900, Boxers, wearing red kerchiefs on their heads, streamed northward to Beijing. Along the way, they killed and often mutilated thousands of Chinese Christians. Then the Boxers began attacking missionaries and their families.

**Division in the Manchu Court**

Tzu Hsi was the mother of the former emperor who died in 1875. Known as the Empress Dowager, Tzu Hsi named her 3-year-old nephew, Kwang Hsu the next emperor. While
he was growing up, Tzu Hsi ruled from the Forbidden City in his name.

After Kwang Hsu became emperor, he made some decisions that angered the conservative Empress Dowager. In 1898, just as the Boxer Uprising was beginning in Shandong, the 26-year-old emperor ordered radical reforms to modernize the Manchu government. Infuriated, Tzu Hsi conspired with a top army general. They placed the emperor under house arrest and revoked his reforms. She resumed her rule in his name.

But the royal court was deeply split over the Boxers. A growing anti-foreign faction argued for the government to make an alliance with the Boxers to rid China of all the “foreign devils.” Some believed that the Boxers possessed magical powers. Others wanted to keep on friendly terms with the foreigners and called for the Chinese army to destroy the Boxers.

Tzu Hsi was torn. She feared that European nations might use the Boxer Uprising as a pretext to restore the emperor and use him as a puppet while they divided China among themselves. She also feared that if she tried to crush the Boxers, they might lead a revolution against the Manchu Dynasty. Finally, she cautiously ordered her armies to put down the Boxers, but not with too much force.

The European, Japanese, and American ambassadors lived with their families in an area of walled embassies called the Legation Quarter just outside the Forbidden City in Beijing. Most of the foreign diplomats knew little about the fears and divisions within the Manchu court. But they were beginning to panic about a possible Boxer massacre of foreigners in Beijing. In early June 1900, they fortified the Legation Quarter and sent for more guards from the port city of Tianjin.

Several hundred guards came, but without the permission of the Manchu government. Tzu Hsi nervously interpreted their arrival as evidence that the foreigners planned to overthrow her. The anti-foreign faction in the Manchu court persuaded Tzu Hsi to order her generals to stop fighting the Boxers.

The Boxer War

Boxers by the tens of thousands flooded unopposed into Beijing. Chinese army troops joined them in besieging the fortified Legation Quarter.

Believing that the Manchu Court was conspiring with the Boxers to massacre them, the foreign diplomats sent pleas to their home governments for more protection. On June 10, 1900, over 2,000 foreign soldiers, commanded by British Vice Admiral Edward Seymour, left Tianjin by train for the 70-mile trip to Beijing. Learning of Seymour’s advance on the capital, Tzu Hsi believed that the foreigners were about to take over China. She ordered her generals to stop Seymour.

Boxers tore up the railroad tracks and cut telegraph wires in front of and behind Seymour’s troop trains, trapping them. Boxers and units of the Chinese army attacked the foreign troops and slowly drove them overland back toward Tianjin. But Boxers died in large numbers. When they attacked the foreigners with swords and spears, their magical charms did not protect them from bullets.

Well-armed Chinese troops and thousands of Boxers occupied Tianjin. They attacked the foreign residential area of the city and slaughtered many Chinese Christians. But warships from several European nations and the United States, arrived with thousands of fresh troops at Tianjin’s port.

When the foreigners attacked Tianjin, they drove out the Boxers and Chinese soldiers after fierce fighting. The foreign troops looted Tianjin.

Cut off from telegraph communication with Tianjin, Tzu Hsi did not know what to do. She finally issued an ultimatum to the diplomats in the Legation Quarter to leave Beijing within 24 hours. But the diplomats feared they would all be killed if they left the city.

On June 21, Tzu Hsi received word that foreign troops had assaulted Tianjin. She declared war on the foreign powers in China.
Chinese troops and Boxers attacked the Legation Quarter with firearms and artillery. About 800 civilians and guards from 18 nations, along with 3,000 Chinese Christian refugees, huddled behind barricades and in embassy buildings. In another part of the city, Boxers assaulted a fortified Catholic cathedral, which harbored about 100 Europeans and thousands of Chinese converts.

Back in Tianjin, the foreign powers organized an international military expedition to Beijing. On August 4, about 20,000 Japanese, Russian, British, and American soldiers departed on foot to fight their way to the Chinese capital. A week later, they entered Beijing. Tzu Hsi and her court fled the city.

Although the Legation Quarter and cathedral had both withstood a 55-day siege, about 100 foreigners and many more Chinese Christians had died. Some evidence indicates that the Chinese generals restrained their troops and the Boxers, fearing that a massacre of foreigners in Beijing would bring on terrible vengeance by the foreign nations.

Soldiers, diplomats, and even missionaries started looting Beijing. Troops went on “Boxer hunts” into the countryside where they beheaded many young men—some who were Boxers and many who were not.

In 1901, 11 nations forced representatives of the Manchu government to agree to these provisions of the Boxer Treaty:

- A massive payment of $333 million ($4.4 billion in today’s dollars) to compensate the foreign nations for their injuries during the Boxer Uprising and war. (The United States later returned most of its share for the education of Chinese students studying in America.)
- The execution of over 100 Boxer leaders and Chinese officials who aided them.
- The exclusion of any Chinese residents from the Legation Quarter.
- The destruction of Chinese forts outside Tianjin.
- The permanent stationing of foreign troops at various places between Beijing and Tianjin.
- The death penalty for any member of an anti-foreign group like the Boxers.

Despite the harsh terms of the Boxer Treaty, the Manchu Dynasty remained in power, and China avoided being split up. Tzu Hsi returned to the Forbidden City in January 1902. She agreed to some modern reforms, but the Boxer Uprising and resulting war permanently weakened Manchu rule in China.

Tzu Hsi and the emperor, still under house arrest, both died in 1908. Pu Yi, whom the Empress Dowager had chosen as the next emperor, ruled only until 1911 when a revolution brought down the Manchu Dynasty, the last Chinese dynasty.

**For Discussion and Writing**

1. Who were the Boxers? Why did they hate the foreigners?
2. How did Christian missionaries add to anti-foreign feeling among many Chinese?
3. What, if anything, do you think could have prevented the Boxer Rebellion? Explain.

**For Further Reading**


**ACTIVITY**

**A Question of Responsibility and Fairness**

Form small groups to discuss the following questions. Then report your conclusions and reasons to the rest of the class:

1. Who was most responsible for the Boxer Uprising and resulting war?
   - Boxers
   - Tzu Hsi and the Manchu Royal Court
   - European nations
   - Christian missionaries

2. Was the Boxer Treaty of 1901 fair? Why or why not?

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