

The Boxer Rebellion, 1900

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The Boxer rebellion in China in 1900 has many interesting parallels to events in the early 21st century. It saw an uprising in a non-western country against what was seen as the corrupting influence of western practices and ideologies. In some respects a foretaste of the current war against terrorism, in that a basically grass roots organisation fought what they saw as a holy war against a technologically superior collection of foreign powers to preserve their values and beliefs.

On one side of the rebellion were the so-called Boxers known as the *I Ho Ch'uan* or Righteous Harmonious Fists. This was originally a secret society that dated back before 1700 and whose origins are cloaked in myths and legends. What is clear is that in 1747 a group of Jesuits were expelled from China due to Boxer influence. A series of bad harvests, plagues, and harsh sanctions imposed by the Western powers and Japan (after the war of 1894-5) had caused much bad feeling. There was a growing fear that the Chinese would be reduced to servants of the western powers, into this environment the Boxers started preaching anti western beliefs. The Boxers saw anything Western as evil and practiced traditional martial arts and used Chinese weapons such as curved halberds and spears. All foreigners were 1st class devils and Chinese who had converted to Christianity were 2nd class devils, those who worked for the foreigners were 3rd class devils. The Boxers were very superstitious, believing in spells and magic that would mean they were immune to western bullets and such incantations would be used to create a trance like state among the followers. The Boxers were not above using printing presses to publish huge numbers of leaflets spreading their propaganda accusing the catholic church of abusing Chinese women and children.

By 1900 the Boxers had many powerful sympathizers in the Chinese court although little official recognition. Their most notable supporter was the Dowager Empress Tzu His. China was at this time very vulnerable, struggling to bring an almost feudal society into the 20th century without destroying the traditions upon which Chinese society was based. The Western powers had virtually taken over some areas seeking to exploit China in her weakened state. Military technology for the Chinese army was very slowly improving but it was still far too weak to mount any kind of opposition to the Western powers. For the Empress it was a difficult political situation. It was in her best interest to appease the Western powers for fear that they would just resort to force to take what they wanted and to gain trade income and access to new technology. On the other hand she had to recognise the growing anti western feeling among all levels of Chinese society. She would be well aware that traditionally a ruler only held the mandate of heaven if they were seen to be able to rule. To allow Christianity and western beliefs to flourish would undermine the traditional authority that the power of the Chinese court was based on. The Boxers could be the solution as an outlet for rising tensions; if they failed many of the more radical anti western elements would be killed and their influence broken, if by some miracle they succeeded in driving the westerners out then the court could easily deny any Imperial involvement when the Western backlash came, while gaining popularity among the people for their unofficial support of the Boxers.

The Western powers saw China as primitive and ripe for exploitation - in many respects the last area of the world where territorial gains could be made as the days of rapidly expanding Empires were over. For the Americans, late to the scramble for an empire, China offered a chance to make up for missed opportunities and create a new market for its goods. At no point did the Western powers see China as an equal despite the fact that Chinese civilisation pre-dated their own. When in January 1900 the Empress released an Edict explaining that secret societies were part of Chinese culture and not to be confused with criminal elements the Western powers were furious as this gave almost official support to the Boxer movement. The Diplomatic protests fell on deaf ears and the Empress even warned one Chinese General about using only military force against the Boxers. The Boxer movement started to spiral out of control and massacres of Chinese Christians began, along with anti Western riots and destruction of foreign property. At the end of May a riot in Pao Ting Fu led to the death of two British missionaries, the Western Diplomats in Peking gave the Chinese 24 hours to put down the Boxers or they would use force themselves calling up troops from the foreign enclaves on the coast. Riots and acts of sabotage cut the railway and telegraph lines and the Western powers ordered their troops to move up to Peking before the Chinese had gave their answer. After some delay by the Chinese the Western troops finally advanced in-country on 31st May 1900, with 340 marines entering the foreign legation quarter that night with another 90 troops arriving 4 days later. These would be the last reinforcements the Western compounds would receive in Peking until the siege by the Boxer forces was lifted on 14th August.

On 9th June the Boxers burned down the Racecourse, the first attack on western property in Peking, The British minister Sir Claude MacDonald immediately requested a British relief force be sent. Telegraph lines were soon cut and mail stopped - it was clear that the Western delegations would be the next target, Chinese Imperial troops were seen openly aiding the Boxers and on the 11th the Japanese Chancellor of the legation was murdered. Chinese Christians and westerners now sought refuge in the two remaining western areas of Peking, the Legation quarter and the Pei T'ang Cathedral. On the 16th the Boxers set a fire and destroyed over 4,000 shops which dealt with westerners. On the 19th the ministers received an ultimatum for all foreigners to evacuate the city in 24 hours or their safety could not be guaranteed. The ministers refused to move and requested an audience with the Chinese foreign office. When no reply was forth coming the German foreign minister set out for the Chinese

Foreign office, was stopped and murdered by Chinese Imperial troops. At 4pm on 20th June Chinese forces opened fire on the Legation and the Siege of Peking had begun. Within the Legation quarters were troops from Austria-Hungary, France, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia and the United States, totaling about 400 men and officers, plus 75 ex military volunteers and 50 civilians who called themselves Thornhill's Roughs armed with a variety of hunting weapons and nicknamed the Carving Knife Brigade because of the kitchen knives they used as bayonets. At the Cathedral there were just over 40 French and Italian troops. The siege has been made famous by the historically dubious film '55 Days in Peking', which starred a host of British and American actors. What is certain is that the defenders fought bravely and were highly organised with committees dealing with everything from food to sanitation - no one was without a job. Sporadic fighting took place including the Chinese use of mines to destroy some legations with the 7th Rajputs and British General Gaselee finally lifted the siege on 14th August. The Cathedral was also the site of fierce fighting but the skill of the defenders held out against almost 2000 Boxers including one volley of 58 rounds which killed 43 Boxers, although many children died in the Chinese mine attacks on the Cathedral including one group of 66 children in the care of the nuns.

The relief expedition under Admiral Seymour had expected to be in Peking within a day of leaving and only packed rations for 3 days despite having 100 miles of railway across hostile countryside to travel on. Boxer attacks and destruction of the tracks led to delay after delay and finally the Force decided to halt at Hsiku when they discovered they had captured a Chinese army depot with food and supplies. They were met by a force of Cossacks on the 26th June. Other allied operations were carried out against the forts at Taku with the Chinese laying siege to Tientsin. The Chinese officially declared war against the allies on 21st June. 10,000 Imperial troops surrounded Tientsin where they faced 2,400 western troops but the defenders had the advantage of good defences planned by a young American engineer, the future president Herbert Hoover. Various serious assaults on the Western positions were beaten back and finally aid was summoned by an Englishman James Watts and three Cossacks escaping the besiegers to get to Taku and the Western forces there. The Western forces then believed reports of a massacre in Peking so felt in no rush to liberate the city. It came as a surprise when a messenger made it through to the Allies in late July informing them that the Legations still held, meanwhile a huge International force under the command of General Albrecht Graf Von Waldersee was on its way but would arrive too late to see much if any action.

The Relief force from Tientsin left on the 4th August and numbered around 20,000 men (over half of which were Japanese) under the Command of General Gaselee. This cooperation didn't last long as the planned four pronged assault on Peking fell apart as the Russians moved early and attacked the wrong gate without support, the Americans under General Chaffee not wanting the Russians to steal the show also broke camp early and the Japanese also competing with the Russians moved out early as well. American forces reached the 30ft wall with no ropes or ladders and were stuck until a young Bugler called Calvin Titus climbed the walls to find that section undefended - he was later awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. The final stages of the assault were a confused unprofessional scramble with some street fighting and some traffic jams of rushing Allied troops.

The relief of Peking did not end the Boxer Rebellion but fighting continued throughout September and October as the Allies moped up pockets of Boxer resistance. The official Peace protocol was signed 7th September 1901 but by that time most Western armies had left China. The price for China was high with a huge bill to pay for the cost of the allied expeditions and memorials built in the honour of the killed diplomats. The foreign powers gained huge concessions to China's mineral wealth and trade. For China it showed her armies to be weak and outdated and sparked a more rapid industrialization of the country and modernising of her armed forces. The rivalry between the Japanese and Russians was soon to spill over into war and in less than 14 years the Allies that had fought side by side would be killing each other on the battlefields of Western Europe. The Boxer rebellion offers an insight in some respects to recent Western operations in Iraq with the main difference being that the Chinese Government was not replaced by a Western backed one. What it does show is how fleeting gains can be if the political will to sustain the victory and win the peace is lacking.



[The Boxer Rebellion](#), Diana Preston, 464 pages, 2001. Best selling book on the Boxer Rebellion, well rooted in the many first hand accounts of the rebellion produced by participants in the events of 1900. [\[SEE MORE\]](#)



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