

From opium wars to Boxer Rebellion: The Boxer Rebellion

The Boxers had begun as an anti-Christian/foreign movement in Shandong province. They spent their time practising martial arts and they advocated a return to traditional ways and ideas. The roots of their secret society dated back to the early 18th century, and it was not unusual for such secret societies to function in the Chinese countryside where peasant unrest often led to resistance against central authority. By 1900 bands of Boxers gathered around Peking. The Boxers were initially anti-Qing as well, as the Qing or Manchus were foreigners in China themselves. The Manchus had taken control of China in the 17th century and ousted the Ming Dynasty. They were an ethnic minority of two to three million people, who were considered barbarians or outsiders by many Han Chinese, in spite of the fact that the Qing Dynasty embraced Chinese culture and promoted it.

The Boxers were initially seen as a grave danger to Qing rule and were considered outlaws. Even during the height of Boxer anarchy in the north, when the imperial government removed its opposition to the Boxers, some imperial administrators continued their opposition to the Boxers.

The Empress Dowager, influenced by some of her anti-foreign advisers, began to encourage the Boxers and saw them as a means of driving the foreigners out without committing official Chinese policy to this course of action. The Boxers, after all, could be dismissed as bandits. The Boxers were persuaded to drop their anti-Qing stance and focus on foreigners. Imperial troops began to side with the Boxers and take part in some of their attacks on foreigners. The Empress Dowager finally issued an edict ordering all foreigners to be killed. When the German Ambassador in Peking was murdered by the Boxers, along with his family, the foreign diplomats took refuge inside the foreign legation (the compound where foreign diplomats resided). The Boxers attacked the legation and the Empress Dowager took the dangerous step of committing imperial troops to the attack.