

Violence de masse et Résistance - Réseau de recherche

THE BOXER WAR - THE BOXER UPRISING

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CONTEXT

The terms “Boxer Uprising” and “Boxer War” refer to two different, but closely interconnected upsurges of collective violence that shook Northern China in the period between 1899 and 1901. The Boxers were a popular religious, social, and (at least indirectly) anti-imperialist group that came to threaten the presence of Westerners in China. The movement’s eventual support by the Chinese Imperial Court prompted international military intervention. Eight states (Austria-Hungary, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, Russia, and the United States) were engaged in this war and representatives of another three governments (Belgium, the Netherlands, and Spain) participated in the subsequent peace negotiations. In its early phase, this was an inter-state war, while in its later stages, it came closer to the “punitive expeditions” that were a typical feature of 19th and 20th century colonialism (Walter, 2006).

The war was not planned by either side, but resulted from the mismanagement of the Boxer crisis by both the Chinese government and the Allied powers. However, four structural factors also underlie the outbreak and course of the war. The first was the Western informal empire in China, i.e. the forcible integration of China into the imperialist world order. Although China was never formally colonized, the Western powers, including the U.S. and Japan, had wrested a number of legal and economic privileges from the Qing court at Peking. Most notable were the principle of extraterritoriality, which exempted foreigners from Chinese law, and the imposition of artificially low import tariffs that allowed Western products to compete favorably on the Chinese market. Moreover, in the late 1890s a number of foreign powers each seized at least one bridgehead along the coast to facilitate the economic penetration of the hinterland. For some years, Chinese and Western observers alike assumed that the partition of China into spheres of interest of the imperialistic nations was imminent. The so-called Hundred Days’ Reform of 1898 was a second factor behind the war whereby a handful of high officials and literati persuaded the young emperor to take the lead in a bold attempt to modernize China. However, they met with determined resistance from the conservative court faction around the Empress dowager Cixi, who staged a *coup d’état*, had some of the reformers arrested, and forced the rest into exile. The Emperor was placed under house arrest, but remained a symbol of change and a potential threat to the rule of the Empress dowager

(Xiang, 2003: 129-133). At local level, meanwhile, the power of Christian missionaries was provoking anti-Christian hostility as the missionaries were exploiting the provisions of the unequal treaties to support Chinese Christians involved in lawsuits and other conflicts. Finally, a series of natural disasters in the late 1890s provided the fuel for the conflict to come.

Amid these background tensions, the Boxer movement began to grow out of the numerous boxing schools, first spreading across the Northern Chinese provinces of Shandong and Zhili (the province surrounding the capital, Beijing) and then across the entire North China plain from Shanxi to Manchuria. Their European name is derived from one particular group which referred to itself as *Yihequan* ("Boxers United in Righteousness"); the entire movement was subsequently renamed *Yihetuan* ("Militia United in Righteousness") by the Chinese government, a name commonly used in Chinese and a few Western publications. The Boxers attacked Chinese Christians throughout 1899 and killed a foreigner for the first time on the last day of that year. Initially, the Qing government took steps to suppress the movement militarily. Owing to the heterogeneous structure of the movement, however, all attempts to check it were in vain.

In the spring of 1900, the spread of the Boxer movement caused considerable disquiet among the foreign community in China, leading to a spiral of escalation. The foreign diplomatic representatives pressured the Chinese government to instigate more energetic measures to suppress the Boxers. This attitude prompted the Beijing court to revise its policy and support the Boxers. The Chinese government's increasing lenience towards the Boxers prompted more forceful action by the foreign powers: foreign warships were concentrated off Dagu in April, marines reinforced the legations in Beijing in late May, and, in June, an international expeditionary force commanded by British admiral Seymour made a futile attempt to relieve the legations, which were already being besieged by the Boxers. The point of no return was reached when the foreigners occupied the Dagu forts on 17 June. Three days later, the German minister was killed – not by a Boxer, but by a soldier of the Imperial army. Notwithstanding the disagreement among high-ranking Chinese officials about the necessity of the war, the Chinese Imperial court issued a series of edicts on June 21, stating that hostilities had begun and committing the regular Chinese army to join the Boxers in their fight against the Allied armies. Although war remained formally undeclared by both sides, this was a *de facto* declaration of war.

Yet the Allied intervention was limited as the provincial governors of Central and South China reached agreements with the foreign powers and hence remained aloof from the fighting. The Allies were therefore able to limit their strategy to North China, first relieving the foreign concessions in Tianjin and the legations quarter in Beijing between mid-July and mid-August 1900, then carrying out "punitive expeditions" against "Boxer" strongholds, and bringing the province of Zhili under their control by January 1901. On September 7, the Qing court (which had relocated to Xi'an in Northwest China in the meantime) blamed the Boxers for the military disaster and reverted to its original policy towards them, ordering the provincial governors to suppress them militarily. By December 1900, most of the Allied contingents had withdrawn from the war, leaving the German and French troops to occupy the passes into the neighboring province of Shanxi. Throughout much of this period, Zhili was in a state of civil war, as pro and anti-Boxer factions fought against one another (Elvin, 1996).

The Allied representatives negotiated with the Chinese government from October 1900 while the war was still going on. A final settlement, the Boxer Protocol, was signed on September 7, 1901 and imposed severe symbolic and material penalties on China: compensation missions to Germany and Japan (prior to Ketteler, a member of the Japanese legation had been killed by Boxers) were to be undertaken, a number of officials

punished, State examinations for recruiting civil servants were suspended in cities in which foreigners had been massacred, a ban was imposed on the acquisition of weapons and war materials, a huge indemnity of £ 67.5 million was imposed, a glacis was to be built to protect the legations quarter against future attacks, a Western-style foreign ministry ranking ahead of all other ministries was to be created, and infrastructure measures were to be implemented to facilitate foreign commerce in China. This did not revolutionize Chinese-foreign relations and, instead, confirmed the *status quo* of imperialism in China.

DECISION-MAKERS, ORGANIZERS AND ACTORS

The conflict between the Chinese and foreigners between 1899 and 1901 featured instigators and perpetrators on both sides. We will first take a look at the Boxer movement and then examine the conduct of the foreign troops in China.

The Boxer movement was a social movement which was deeply rooted in Chinese peasant culture and combined religious, Luddite, and anti-elitist elements. It stemmed from the notion that the calamities that had befallen China in the 1890s were signs of a crisis of cosmic dimensions. Techniques for the identification of the cause of misfortune played an important role in Chinese popular religion. The Boxers saw foreigners and Chinese Christians and (at a later stage) all Western products as the root of all evil and argued that prosperity and stability could only be re-established by exterminating these adversaries. "Support the Qing, destroy the foreign (*Fu Qing mie yang*)" became their rallying cry. The Boxers dehumanized their adversaries by referring to Westerners as "(foreign) devils" (*guizi, yangguizi*) or "red-haired ones" (*hongmaozi*) and to Chinese Christians as "secondary hairy ones" (*ermaozi*). As the movement reached its climax in the summer of 1900, the Boxers placed a taboo on foreign products and even on the word and Chinese character for "foreign" (*yang*). When referring to killing their enemies, they used the word and character *zai*, which means "butchering (animals)" (Klein, 2006: 163; Cohen, 1997: 128, 185). The enemies listed in Boxer texts occasionally also included officials, whose incompetence and corruption they decried (Smith, 1902: 201; cf. Prazniak, 1999: 26 f.). According to some testimonies, the Boxers were careful to ensure that people not included in any of these categories were not killed (Cohen, 1997: 173).

At the core of Boxer ideology lay the magical beliefs drawn from popular religion and inspired by folk operas connected to religious festivities (Esherick, 1987: 64 f.). Boxers performed mass rituals, in which warlike deities from the popular pantheon took possession of them. In addition, they also practiced invulnerability techniques as taught in martial arts schools (Filipiak, 2007). These schools also served as the centers of Boxer activity and recruited followers, mostly young males, with the most skilled fighters assuming the lead (Esherick, 1987: 231). Boxer posters and songs denouncing the foreigners undoubtedly played an important role in the recruitment of new members. Female units also existed, however these were particularly renowned for their magical powers and did not engage in violence.

Due to its decentralized structure, the movement usually operated locally, killing Christians and setting churches on fire. This had been a common practice in conflicts between Christians and non-Christians since the 1860s and is referred to in Chinese as *jiao'an* (usually translated as "missionary cases"). These conflicts had, in turn, grown out of local feuds over economic resources and symbolic capital and were manifestations of an endemic culture of violence resulting ultimately from China's unprecedented population growth in the 18th century. Unlike earlier violent mass movements, such as the Taiping and Nian rebellions (1851-1864 and 1851-1868 respectively) which were

products of that same culture, the Boxers' focus remained local. What multiplied between 1899 and 1901 was the number of incidents. To give one example: in Shanghe County where a conflict between Catholics and non-Christians had existed since at least 1895, around 2000 Boxers encircled the village of Xiaozhangcun some time in 1900, destroyed its enclosing wall (probably a mere wooden palisade) by fire and killed the Catholic leader and another 108 Catholics, 60 of whom were from the village itself, the rest being outsiders (Lu Yao et al., 2000: 1095). Apart from taking the life of Christians, Boxer groups also set fire to churches and destroyed Christian homes and property. As weapons they usually used spears and swords, only in the early summer of 1900 when fighting with the foreigners had erupted, were some Boxers contingents equipped with modern firearms (Elliott, 2002: 515 ff.).

The situation differed only in Beijing and Tianjin. In the summer of 1900, thousands of Boxers from all over Zhili gathered in these two cities and combed the various quarters with blacklists which had required a great deal of preparation. Most of these actions were carried out without official support; Chinese officials only participated actively in atrocities occasionally. The most notorious incidents were the massacres at Baoding (June 30 to July 1) and Taiyuan (July 9) where 15 and 44 foreign missionaries, including women and children, were killed. In the latter case, Governor Yuxian of Shanxi, one of the Chinese government's most ardent supporters of the Boxers, was reported to have personally taken the lead in the killing.

Notwithstanding their varying composition and patterns of recruitment, the Allied troops, in contrast, were distinct social institutions held together by formal regulations of military discipline. The entire force of about 90,000 men was placed under the command of German Field Marshal Alfred Count of Waldersee. As is well known, the supreme commander arrived too late to command the first phase of the war up to the relief of Beijing and only presided over the "punitive expeditions" of the later stages, which nonetheless formed an integral part of the Allied strategy to inflict both physical and symbolic punishment on China for her alleged breach of international law (Hevia, 2003: 195-240).

Initially, the Boxer War was an interstate war, in which two regular armies fought against each other, although the Chinese troops were reinforced by irregular Boxer militia (Thompson, 2000; 290-294). However, the character of the war changed completely after the capture of Beijing with the Boxers becoming the main target of the "punitive expeditions". Although the Boxer war did not even come close to an all-out war of extermination, extermination was practiced in the framework of limited actions, probably even in the early stages of the war (Kuß, 2002). Local commanders could use their discretionary power to deal with alleged Boxers and frequently relied on information provided by missionaries, Chinese Christians, or local Chinese. Once the regular Chinese army had been neutralized, the conduct of the Allied troops was characterized by reckless use of superior firepower, indiscriminate killing sprees, torture and mass executions, deliberate destruction of villages, looting and forcible seizure of provisions. With the exception of the latter, these are characteristic features of colonial wars, in which the colonial armies typically denied the enemy the *ius in bello* (Walter, 2006: 35 f.). A particularly atrocious incident that combined all of these features was the capture of Liangxiang by a German contingent and a small British detachment on September 11, 1900, in which around one quarter of the small town's population was killed. It must be noted, however, that all national contingents engaged in this kind of warfare with some opting out earlier than others for political reasons.

However, neither the political decision-makers nor the military commanders at home or in China had ever planned these atrocities. The extent to which propaganda played a role is unclear. Public opinion in many of the involved States did cry for "vengeance" or

“chastisement”, the German Emperor Wilhelm II’s infamous “Hun speech” being just a particularly radical example. We know that the Kaiser’s exhortation to give no quarter and take no prisoners had a considerable impact on German soldiers in China. But given that other troops (especially those that did not sail from Europe) were less exposed to this kind of propaganda, it is striking to find an echo of the Kaiser’s words in a private letter written by an American marine who described how he and his comrades gave no quarter: “we killed all that fell in our hands” (Cohen, 1997: 191). Apart from situational problems arising on the spot and legal considerations (to be dealt with below), this reflects less the effects of conscious propaganda than an established discourse on how to deal with colonial peoples.

VICTIMS

The victims of Boxer violence may be categorized according to their nationality: around 250 foreigners and an unknown number of Chinese, with estimates ranging from several to tens of thousands (Cohen, 1997: 310), were killed. However, this categorization is somewhat misleading, because, given the religious and social motives of the Boxers, Western missionaries and Chinese Christians might also be lumped into one group and, indeed, if they were caught together by the Boxers, they were likely to share the same fate. It is important to note here that Christians were not always passive victims, but sometimes actively and successfully resisted the Boxers (Charbonnier, 1992: 241 f., 248 f.). Attacks on Chinese Christians had been going on for almost one year before the Boxers put the first Western missionary to death in late 1899. Although the Westerners’ presence had been presented as the cause of China’s troubles on Boxer posters for some time, it was only in the early summer of 1900 that the movement confronted Westerners other than the missionaries. At the same time, the enemy image of the Boxers broadened to include other categories, including not only officials, with whom they had been at odds for some time, but any Chinese whom they suspected to be sympathizers or even spies of the foreigners, mostly educated urbanites and shopkeepers (Cohen, 1997: 199-205).

As the Boxers came to realize that they were incapable of driving away the foreign troops, women became another group that aroused their increasing hostility as the Boxers feared that they might “pollute” them and thus destroy their magical powers. In their world view, neither the military nor the technological superiority of the Westerners provided a sufficient explanation for Chinese defeat. Only magic could be responsible, and stories soon circulated to the effect that the Westerners had placed naked women on city walls in order to destroy the Boxers’ power. The Boxers responded by placing restrictions on the mobility of women and killing all those who transgressed these regulations.

It is impossible to tell how many people died at the hands of the foreign troops. Felber and Rostek (1987) assume that around 10,000 people perished in the battle of Tianjin alone. In any case, the Allied commanders showed no intention of engaging in indiscriminate killing. In a proclamation issued on June 21, 1900, the admirals of the Allied fleet stated that they would limit hostilities to two categories of enemies: i.e. the Boxers themselves and all Chinese who offered resistance to the foreign troops (The Siege of the Peking Embassy 1999, 72). As long as the Chinese Imperial army was involved in the war, Chinese soldiers could be subsumed under the latter category. Although some contemporary reports state that the expeditionary forces made attempts to win over the peaceful segments of the local population through friendly behavior (Cohen, 1902: 177, 181; Voyron, 1904: 167-172), whether or not they were meant seriously, these attempts were bound to fail. For one thing, it was impossible to make a

clear distinction between Boxers and the rest of the population, particularly in view of the fact that information about “Boxer villages” was based on the accounts of missionaries or local people. The latter, in particular, appear to have resorted to false accusations, frequently with the aim of getting the foreign armies involved in local conflicts (Lessel, 1981: 225 f.). Ordinary people also were trapped when Allied troops encircled towns and villages and were killed along with real Boxers. Moreover, it was difficult to determine what exactly constituted an act of resistance. The order given by subordinate German officers that “every Chinese who carries a weapon or a similar object is to be considered an enemy and shall be put to death” (Haslinde, 1990: 48 f.) was more likely to exacerbate the problem than solve it. When Chinese fired on Allied units or attacked individual soldiers from ambush, the matter was relatively clear. However, despite the fact that German soldiers, for example, were equipped with a Chinese-German questionnaire in order to facilitate enquiries (Kuß, 2007), trouble often arose due to communication problems. According to some reports, Allied sentries shot harmless Chinese because the latter did not understand the language in which they were being addressed (Corbach, 1926: 20 f.; Haslinde, 1990: 45). The Allied troops often provoked hostilities themselves, especially when requisitioning provisions from a population that was unwilling to share much-needed resources with the foreign soldiers. Although requisitions differed from outright looting in legal terms, in practice the difference was not so great. In some cases, cultural fears combined with communication problems caused individual Westerners confronted with a multitude of Chinese to overreact, thus provoking resistance that the foreign military was then called in to suppress (Sharf/Harrington, 2000: 229; Haslinde, 1990: 46). There were instances of rape, and many Chinese women were reported to have killed themselves lest they might fall into the hands of the foreigners (Cohen, 1997: 182 ff.; cf. Qian, 2004: 97). Just how many ordinary Chinese also became victims of warfare is impossible to assess. However, it is certain that, in addition to the calculated brutality vis-à-vis the Boxers, Allied strategy and tactics took a great death toll among innocent Chinese.

WITNESSES

The first Chinese to record the events connected with the Boxer movement and the eight-power intervention were (urban) members of the educated elite, i.e. the gentry. Many of these accounts were published in a four-volume publication in the early 1950s (Jian Bozan, 1953) with only rare translations into European languages (one such translation being Becker, 1987). As a rule, the authors had suffered from Boxer persecution and meticulously recorded both the Boxers’ atrocities and those later committed by the foreign troops. Paul Cohen’s (1997) evaluation suggests that their accounts are highly credible. Several field surveys conducted by the University of Shandong and Nankai University from the late 1950s onwards collected oral testimonies of peasants and urbanites who were participants or victims of the movement or neutral bystanders (Lu Yao et al., 1980; Lu Yao et al., 2000; Nankai Daxue Lishixi, 1990). When assessing the validity of these testimonies, it must be taken into account that the interviewees had to recollect past events from memory. Moreover, the Shandong surveys cover only the early stages of the Boxer movement and provide no information about atrocities committed in the course of the foreign intervention. If we define the category of witnesses more broadly, indirect testimony can also be found in Chinese officials’ reports, many of which have been edited. These officials traced the spread of the Boxer movement and, in the wake of the peace settlement, carefully recorded the death toll among Christians and the damage done to their property (e.g. Liaoning Sheng Dang’anguan/Liaoning Shehui Kexueyuan Shi Yanjiusuo, 1981; 114-131). In doing this, they had to rely on oral and written testimony by missionaries and Chinese Christians.

An enormous amount of archival material also exists on the Western side, both in government and mission archives, and only small portions of this material have been put to scholarly use. In addition, a lot of eyewitness accounts were published, especially in the immediate aftermath of the war. As is the case on the Chinese side, Western witnesses encompass all categories. Of the Western men and women who were besieged in Beijing and Tianjin, many wrote accounts of the siege. Most of these accounts were strongly unsympathetic towards the Boxers, a notable exception being the posthumously published memories of the siege by the Austrian diplomat Arthur von Rosthorn and his wife Paula, who participated in the defense of Beijing's legation quarter, but also tried to understand the Chinese standpoint and characterized the Boxer movement as a patriotic one (Pechmann, 2001). As some of these people joined in the looting orgy that followed the relief of Beijing or took part in punitive expeditions, they assumed the double role of victims and perpetrators. The same is true of another group of witnesses, the missionaries, who formed the majority of the Boxers' foreign victims. Some of the survivors published accounts of hairbreadth escapes, often including lengthy descriptions of how their fellow missionaries were put to death by the Boxers. As Roger Thompson (2007) has shown with regard to the Taiyuan massacre, accounts of missionary suffering are not always trustworthy and more often reflect a (Protestant) discourse on martyrdom than present an accurate description of what actually occurred. On the other hand, missionaries were the only group of foreigners who sympathized with at least one segment of the Chinese population, i.e. the Christians, whose loyalty, steadfastness, and heroism they invariably praised. Some of them also described (and deplored) acts of violence committed by the foreign troops. Other missionaries accompanied the Allied expeditionary forces (e.g. Brown, 1902) or took part in punitive expeditions, acting as guides or interpreters.

Many eyewitness accounts of soldiers were published in the wake of the war, others posthumously, and a vast number of unpublished reports still slumber in the archives. Regardless of whether they were critical of the intervention and their own role in it, many of the published texts are quite outspoken about Allied atrocities, especially those not originally intended for publication (e.g. Haslinde, 1990; Ham/Ortner 2000). The same can be said of the private correspondence of German and French soldiers, some of which appeared in local newspapers. In Germany, *Vorwärts* ("Forward"), the central organ of the Social Democratic Party, collected and published these texts, which became known as "Hun letters", in support of the party's anti-war stance (Kaschner/Wieland, 2002; Klein, 2006: 167).

The last Western group were professional or amateur journalists who had set off for China, realizing the enormous potential of the warlike events there (Wegener, 1902; Loti, 1902). Apart from their articles in newspapers and magazines, many of them published book-length accounts on their return to Europe. Much like the other foreign groups, they were divided in their opinion: some ardently supported the war (e.g. Zabel, 1902), others vociferously opposed it, providing detailed accounts of the appalling conduct of the foreign troops in China (e.g. Lynch, 1901 and 1902).

MEMORY

Memory of the Boxer War on both the Chinese and Western sides did not focus on the victims, the only noteworthy exception being the martyrologies produced by mission societies (Broomhall, 1902; Coerper, 1902; Planchet, 1922). For the most part, memory served immediate political interests. On the Western side, where the production of memory commenced almost with the outbreak of the war, it was the partly conscious, partly subconscious, result of a collective effort to legitimize the intervention in China and

to get the better of its discontents. It should not be forgotten that public opinion in the Allied States was not unanimous in its support of the Boxer War and that a substantial and vociferous minority challenged the legitimacy of the war and criticized the way it was conducted (Klein, 2006: 163-172).

One important function of memory being the justification of the war, there were numerous ways to achieve this end. One was to impose on China a specific interpretation of the causes of war, namely that China had broken international law and committed crimes against humanity and civilization. This interpretation was enshrined in the diplomatic documents pertaining to the peace settlement, most notably in the powers' joint note of December 22, 1900, that was later explicitly referred to in the preamble of the Boxer Protocol (Macmurray, 1921: 279 and 309). Some measures dictated by the protocol, in particular the monument to the slain German minister erected in Peking and the Chinese atonement missions to Berlin and Tôkyô, symbolically re-enacted and confirmed this view. Another important strain of politically charged collective memory was the cult of what may be called the heroes of civilization, i.e. soldiers who had died in battle or achieved important victories over the Chinese (Klein, 2006: 173-176). No doubt there was another side to this coin, namely an irrational fear of the Chinese as epitomized in the discourse on the "yellow peril", a fear that was usually repressed but occasionally resurfaced in the form of nightmarish literary fantasies, such as those revolving around the demoniac Chinese fanatic Fu Manchu (Hevia, 2003: 316-326). By and large, however, the officially instituted memory was rather successful, all the more so as personal recollections of the Boxer War began to fade and other events (notably the two World Wars and the mass violence connected with them) shifted to the center of Western collective memory. In the long run, novels, films, and popular historical accounts, such as Peter Fleming's "Siege at Peking" (1959), transformed historical events into a plot that focused on the sieges of Beijing and Tianjin from a Western perspective, leading all the way from a vague sensation of some unknown danger to the triumphal rescue that brings the action to a happy ending. Only a few attempts were made to draw attention to the perspective of the (Chinese) victims. In 1958, teachers and students of Oberlin College, Ohio, erected a memorial facing the "Oberlin Arch", a monument dedicated to Oberlin missionaries who had been slain by the Boxers. The college authorities immediately ordered that the new monument, which commemorated the Chinese killed by the Allied troops, be pulled down (Hevia, 2003: 349). The suffering of the Chinese victims has, however, been marked there by a commemorative plaque since 1995. In contrast, the Free University of Berlin failed in its attempt to have the nearby streets Takustraße, Iltisstraße, and Lansstraße renamed, despite the fact that all three street names refer to the capture of the Dagu forts in June 1900 (Kuenheim, 1998).

In China, several narratives of the Boxer movement and the subsequent war competed with each another. One version, championed by Confucian literati and modern intellectuals, decried the Boxers as superstitious rabble and held them responsible for the calamities that had befallen China. This view, which probably originated during the war, dominated the first two decades of the twentieth century and occasionally resurfaced thereafter. A second discourse focused on Western atrocities and Chinese suffering. It first emerged in the years after the war, but did not reach its peak until the 1920s when it merged into the discourse on "national humiliation" (*guochi*) to form a powerful anti-imperialist narrative. The concept of *guochi* identified events connected with foreign imperialism (then still a force to be reckoned with) as undermining Chinese self-respect, focusing not so much on individual victims, but on the suffering of the Chinese nation as a whole (Cohen, 2003; Hevia, 2003: 332 ff.). This was the dominant narrative in the 1920s and some former champions of the first version defected to it, most notably the intellectual-turned-Communist Chen Duxiu, one of the most influential thinkers of his time. A third approach focused on heroic Chinese resistance in the Boxer War. Both official memory of the regular military and unofficial memory of the Boxer movement existed in

the decade after the war. For example, a memorial was erected in Tianjin which was dedicated to General Nie Shichen who had tried in vain to defend the city against the Allied invasion and committed suicide after his defeat (Koberstein, 1906: 20). At the same time, recollections of the Boxers as popularized in folk operas fuelled peasant resistance against the policy of modernization advocated by the Qing dynasty in the last decade of its rule (Prazniak, 1999: 20). In the first decades of the People's Republic after 1949, this version came to supersede all others, as Communist propaganda now portrayed the Boxers as a popular anti-imperialist movement that contrasted favorably with the "corrupt" Qing government (Kaminski, 2005: 224-228; Hevia, 2003: 335-338), and those who insisted on blaming the Boxers incurred the wrath of none other than Chairman Mao Zedong himself (Cohen, 1997: 262 ff.). Few referred to the victims of the Allied invasion, one notable exception being the famous writer Lao She, who in the early 1960s planned to write a play about the Boxer Uprising and recalled the sufferings of his family in Beijing (Lao She, 1992). It was not until the 1990s, however, as nationalistic government propaganda began to revive the concept of *guochi* that the discourse shifted again. This time individual suffering was given greater prominence. At the same time, the Chinese government tried to silence all voices that were at odds with its own interpretation, especially those abroad. In 2000, it engaged in a press war with the Vatican, as Pope John Paul II announced his intention to canonize 120 Chinese martyrs (both missionaries and Chinese Christians), many of whom had been killed by Boxers. And in early 2006, it closed down the magazine *Bingdian* ("Freezing-point") after the publication of an article that challenged the nationalistic interpretation of the Boxer war in Chinese textbooks. However, the picture has become more diversified. The immensely successful TV series "Toward the Republic" (*Zou xiang gonghe*), broadcast in 2003 and watched by millions of people (Müller, 2007), portrayed the Boxers as superstitious country bumpkins who are no match for the Allied troops. On the other hand, it rehabilitated political leaders who were previously condemned for having struck a compromise with the foreigners, most notably the Empress dowager Cixi, as genuine patriots committed to preserving the integrity of the Chinese nation-state.

GENERAL AND LEGAL INTERPRETATIONS

Interpretations of the two sets of collective mass violence in North China must begin with the very names that are being used to refer to them. All of them, including the Chinese ones, are posthumous interpretations of the conflict. To begin with, the term "Boxer Uprising" is, at best, ambiguous for an uprising implies resistance to some sort of legal, if not necessarily legitimate form of authority – a ruler, a political or social elite. Unlike the Taiping movement, the Boxer groups in North China did not conceive of themselves as rebelling against the Imperial government. Instead, they rallied in support of the ruling Qing dynasty, singling out foreigners and Chinese Christians as targets of their attacks. From the viewpoint of the Court at Beijing, this assistance was unwelcome. With the exception of a brief period in the summer of 1900 when they were designated as militia, the government regarded the Boxers as illegal and in fact treated them as rebels. It would therefore appear that the term "uprising" was coined by Westerners and unilaterally reflects the imperialist perspective. From this vantage point, the Boxers revolted against the treaty system that legitimized the informal empire in China. Indeed, in contemporary China, the Boxers are referred to as a social-political "movement" (*yundong*) rather than an "uprising" (*qiyi*). The term "Boxer War", or similar terms, recently coined by historians as a substitute for the arguably obsolete term "uprising", is not without problems either. As previously mentioned, war was never formally declared, and the conduct of Allied troops after the relief of Beijing was a punitive expedition in the colonial fashion rather than a Western-style war with all its legal restraints. That the word "war" is conspicuously

absent from the titles of contemporary newspaper articles and eyewitness accounts (Klein, 2006: 169) may be due to political and legal considerations. However, it also reflects the uncertainty of people at the time about the nature of what was going on in China. The posthumous Chinese term *Baguo lianjun* (“United Army of the Eight States”) is far more successful in evoking the ambiguity surrounding the Allied intervention.

More immediately, legal interpretations underpinned the foreign powers’ actions in China in 1900, not only legitimizing the military intervention at a theoretical level, but also shaping the concrete practices of the Allied troops in China. The discourse among political decision-makers and public opinion that evolved in the spring of 1900 had a lasting impact on Western interpretation of the Boxer War. Whereas in the early stages, intervention was justified on the grounds that the Chinese government was either unwilling or unable to fulfill its duty to protect the foreigners, in the summer, China’s alleged breach of international law began to occupy a pivotal role in the debate. Not surprisingly, the news of the siege of the legations and especially of the murder of the German minister (and to a lesser extent, the Japanese diplomat Count Sugiyama) was crucial in bringing about this change. It is perhaps no coincidence that the only attempts to provide a scholarly perspective on the legal issues connected with the war in China were made in Germany. Both Wolfgang Heinze’s (1901) and Friedrich Kleine’s (1913) studies confirm the Western interpretation, arguing that the resistance of the legations quarter constituted an act of legitimate self-defense. Interestingly, a few Chinese officials also came to a similar conclusion. In July 1900, the high-ranking officials Yuan Chang and Xu Jingcheng repeatedly warned the throne that the murder of envoys was not only forbidden by the “Spring and Autumn Annals”, but also by international law, and that a punitive action by the powers was sure to follow. This challenge of the hawks at court brought about their downfall; both were subsequently executed (Zhao Jianli, 2001: 111-117; Teng/Fairbank, 1954: 191 f.). Although legal interpretations were an important factor in Allied warfare, resort to some kind of legal action was limited to the execution of Chinese officials and members of the Imperial family. These were partly conducted by the foreign troops themselves, partly (and especially with regard to high-ranking persons) delegated to Chinese authorities. Unfortunately, we still do not know whether these punitive measures were preceded by regular legal procedure, and on which legal provisions they were based.

A corollary of this discourse was the question as to whether the norms of international law were applicable to China. The Qing Empire had been represented at the Hague Peace Conference in 1899, but the Chinese delegate had not signed its most important document, the Laws and Customs of War on Land. The ensuing legal insecurity made it possible for violations not only of international law, but also of national military penal law – as has been demonstrated for the German case (Kuß, 2007: 142) – to go unpunished. One of the few critics who explicitly denounced the disregard for international law shown by the Allied troops was the journalist George Lynch (1901: 303 ff.). Legal discourse thus created a double ambivalence on the Allied side: at a theoretical level, the intervention was designed to enforce international law in a country that refused to acknowledge it. At a practical level, the method of enforcing international law consisted in its constant violation.

Both Chinese and Western scholars have mostly eluded considerations of this kind in the course of around 100 years of academic research. The victims of both the Boxers and the Allied troops aroused their marginal interest at best. For the most part since the foundation of the People’s Republic of China, Chinese historians have felt themselves obliged to follow politically defined paradigms. In line with the revolutionary interpretation of history that dominated the Mao era, they have portrayed the Boxers as a progressive, anti-imperialist social movement. After the master narrative of modernization had become the dominant approach in the reform era that began in the late 1970s, historians enjoyed

more freedom to point to the conservative and rural character of the movement (Dabringhaus 2007). Western scholars, on the other hand, initially trod the established paths of political history and focused on the diplomatic maneuvers of the great powers in China (Tan, 1967). From the 1960s onward, attention shifted to the complex origins of the Boxer movement, while the ensuing war was largely ignored (Purcell, 1963; Grimm, 1977; Esherick, 1987). Finally, some authors have interpreted the conflict between China and the eight powers as a cultural conflict (Duiker, 1978; Dabringhaus, 1994), a viewpoint that has its merits but glosses over fault lines within the Chinese and Western sides and neglects political, economic, and legal aspects (Mühlhahn, 2007: 224; Klein, 2002).

The 1990s witnessed considerable change on both sides. Although Chinese research focused mostly on the origins, growth, and world view of the Boxer movement (cf. Su/Liu, 2000), a number of Chinese scholars devoted their attention to the intervention of the Allied army and the violence directed at the Chinese population, while at the same time emphasizing the Chinese people's resistance and struggle for national survival (e.g. Zhuang, 2002). Others, however, pointed to the number of Christians slaughtered by the Boxers. Attributing the rise of the Boxer movement to cleavages within Chinese society, they acknowledged that Chinese Christians were Chinese in their own right, not denationalized traitors as implied in the nationalist discourse (cf. Mühlhahn, 2007: 224). At the same time, Western scholarship also discovered the dimension of violence and human suffering that swept China between 1899 and 1901. One of the first studies in this vein, Nat Brandt's (1994) account of the massacres of missionaries in the summer of 1900, followed a pattern long established in missionary discourse. In contrast to this book, Paul Cohen's 1997 study provides a balanced account of suffering on both sides. But although Cohen pays attention to the different perspectives of perpetrators and victims, he interprets violent death in terms of universal anthropological experience rather than as injustices that can be attributed to individual perpetrators, while at the same time pleading for a perspective that humanizes the Boxers (Cohen, 1997: 173-208). Other studies have developed a critical assessment of Allied warfare in China, pointing to the contradictions that accompanied the self-proclaimed "punitive expedition in defense of civilization" (Klein, 2006; cf. Hevia, 2003; Kuß, 2002 and 2007). It is this perspective that enables us to compare the Boxer Uprising and the Boxer War with other historic examples of mass violence.

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