

Who Were the Boxers?

By Peter Barry, M.M.

On October 1, 2000, 120 China martyrs were canonized as saints of the Catholic Church. Eighty-seven of these were Chinese and 33 were foreign missionaries. Seventy-six were lay people (including 2 catechumens), and there were 6 bishops, 23 priests, 8 seminarians and 7 religious Sisters included in the number. The Chinese were mainly from the provinces of Hebei, Shanxi, Sichuan, and Guizhou, while the foreign missionaries came from Belgium, France, Italy, Holland and Spain. The martyrs gave their lives for their faith over a period of nearly 300 years, from 1648 to 1930.



About two thirds of their number, 86, died in one year alone, 1900, during the Boxer Uprising. Of these, 66 were Chinese Christians. The 20 European missionaries included 4 French Jesuits, 8 Franciscans, 7 Sisters Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, and one Italian PIME Father. Two large groups among the Boxer martyrs include those killed in Hebei during June, July and August 1900, and the Franciscans who died in Taiyuan (along with many Catholic and Protestant Christians) on July 9, 1900. Altogether 30,000 Christians were said to have died during the Boxer turmoil.

This brings us to the topic of this article: who were the Boxers? The Boxer movement arose in western Shandong Province in 1895. However, their origins can be traced back to 1778 to a branch of the White Lotus Sect, which had spread through the provinces of Shandong, Zhili (Hebei), Henan, and Jiangsu. Some also came from the Big Sword Society. The Boxers were mostly young farmers or manual laborers. Some women also participated in the movement. They ordinarily worked at their trades during the day, but during their free time they would gather at village “boxing

squares” to practice martial arts under the direction of a master. They also practiced *qigong* (breathing exercises). Adherents also included migrant workers, or workers who had lost their jobs.

There was no common faith to which all the Boxers adhered. There was no one leader who could formulate a body of theory in which all could believe. Rather, they got their beliefs from traditional Chinese novels and plays, like *Journey to the West* (*Xi You Ji*) and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo Yanyi*). They would call upon the gods depicted in these novels to protect them when they were in battle. Formerly anti-Qing dynasty in sentiment, the Boxers of the last years of the 19th century changed their battle cry from “Oppose the Qing and Restore the Ming” to “Support the Qing and Destroy the Foreign.”

The Treaty of Nanjing (1842) signed after the first Opium War had permitted foreigners to reside in five open ports only. The treaty signed between the foreign powers and the Qing government in 1860 (the Treaty of Beijing) after the second Opium War permitted foreigners to reside in the interior of China. Thus after 1860, Christian missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant, began to move in large numbers into the interior of China. Sporadic incidents of violence between Christian communities and local citizens, known as *jiao an*, or missionary cases, took place in the subsequent decades leading up to the Boxer Uprising. Boxer-like elements might have been involved in these activities, but there were no unified, large-scale Boxer operations until after the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95.

After the Sino-Japanese War, many Chinese people felt that the foreign powers had imperialistic designs on China, and were setting out to carve China up, “like a melon.” Beginning in 1895, thousands of Japanese troops were active in Shandong. The Japanese occupied Weihaiwei for three years, until that port was taken over by the British in 1898. In 1897, the Germans, using the pretext of the murder of two German SVD missionaries, Fathers Henle and Nies, in that year in Juye County in southwestern Shandong, occupied Jiaozhouwan, near Qingdao. They set about establishing a “sphere of influence” there and began to build railroads, open mines and develop the land. The local people considered that all these activities disturbed the *fengshui* of the land. Foreign churches, over 1,000 of which sprang up in the Shandong countryside in the years after the Sino-Japanese War, were considered harmful to the souls of the ancestors.

At the same time, Shandong in the last years of the 19th century witnessed several natural disasters. In 1898, dikes of the Yellow River burst, causing disastrous floods. This was followed by a two-year drought in 1899-1900. Many peasants lost their livelihoods, as they could not till their fields. Famine stared them starkly in the face, and many people died of starvation. Blame for all these disasters was laid squarely at the feet of the foreigners. Indeed, local superstitious people believed that the drought was punishment from the gods for the incursion of the foreign religion into Shandong. The general feeling arose among the local populace that if the foreigners could be expelled from China, then the people would enjoy peace and prosperity. The Boxers became the focal point in the struggle to obtain this goal.

The Spirit Boxers in northwest Shandong, who were not at first anti-Christian, became so after the winter of 1898-99. In 1899, they adopted the name "Militia United in Righteousness" (*Yihe Tuan*), instead of *Yihe Quan*, "Boxers United in Righteousness." In December 1898, Yuan Shikai, who was anti-Boxer, replaced Yuxian as governor of Shandong. He began a campaign to suppress the Boxers. So they moved to the neighboring province of Zhili, present-day Hebei, where they linked up with Boxers from that area. Governor Yulu of Zhili was weak, and could not control the Boxers. Zhili was heavily Catholic, and it was not long before tragic confrontations took place. One such incident took place in Laishui, midway between Beijing and Baoding, on May 12, 1900. On that day the Boxers burned down the church, killed all the Catholics, over 30 families in all, buried them in a mass grave, and then proceeded to burn down the Catholics' homes. Laishui County was also the scene of the killing of the first Qing commander, Yang Futong, by the Boxers on May 22.

The Boxers were moving closer to Beijing, and large groups of them gradually occupied the city. Alarmed foreign envoys summoned the legation guards from the coast, and several hundreds of them arrived by rail in Beijing on May 31. On May 31, four French and Belgian engineers were killed by the Boxers as they tried to escape from Baoding to Tianjin. On June 1, two British missionaries were killed just south of Beijing. As Prof. Paul Cohen remarks (p. 47), the Boxer movement seemed to have turned a corner. The summoning of the legation guards strengthened the hand of the pro-Boxer faction in the Qing court. On June 3, explicit orders

were given not to annihilate the Boxers. Shortly thereafter Prince Duan, a pro-Boxer, replaced Prince Qing, an anti-Boxer, as head of the Zongli Yamen (the Foreign Ministry).

The situation was rapidly deteriorating; war looked imminent. On June 13, the South Cathedral (Nantang) was burned to the ground, resulting in the death of many Catholics. On the same day, without Chinese government authorization, an international expeditionary force of 2,000 men, under the leadership of British Admiral Edward Seymour, set out from Tianjin to help protect the foreigners in the capital. On June 16, the Dagu forts (which protected Tianjin) were captured by the foreigners, so that there would be no hindrance of movement for their troops. As a result, on the same day, June 16, the Qing government issued a declaration of war. On June 17, the German envoy, von Ketteler, was killed by government troops while on his way to present a complaint to the Zongli Yamen. On June 18, government troops under the command of Nie Shicheng and Dong Fuxiang joined forces with the Boxers to attack the international expeditionary army at Langfang, and inflicted a serious defeat upon them. Ironically, and showing the vacillation of the Qing government over support or suppression of the Boxers, Nie Shicheng's imperial troops had killed 480 Boxers near Langfang 12 days previously, on June 6. In the June 18 Chinese victory 62 foreign troops were killed and 212 wounded. Seymour was forced to retreat back to Tianjin, where he arrived on June 26.

With the Boxers enlisting as militia under Qing government command, the attack on the foreign legations and the North Cathedral commenced on June 20. Three thousand Catholics along with foreign priests and nuns had taken shelter in the North Cathedral. They were guarded by 43 Italian and French marines. Another international expeditionary force of 20,000 men, made up of troops from 8 nations, got underway from Tianjin on August 4, and this time they handled easily any opposition thrown up at them. The siege of the legations and the North Cathedral was finally lifted on August 15, 1900. Actually the attacks on these targets by government troops were intermittent, and seemed at times to be only half-hearted. Outside Beijing, the Boxer movement had spread to Shanxi, Henan, Mongolia and Manchuria. Over 200 foreigners died, and as was noted, at least 30,000 Chinese Christians. The governors of the Yangzi provinces and Yuan Shikai in Shandong did not support the Boxers, and curtailed their activities.

In the Boxer Protocol of 1901, a huge indemnity was imposed on the Chinese: 450 million taels of silver (U.S.\$333 million) to be paid in 39 annual installments, along with 4 percent interest on the unpaid principal. However, over the years, some of the indemnity was waived, or returned to China in the form of scholarship aid to students.

Professor Cohen (p. 67) lists five elements, which coalesced to produce the special atmosphere of fear and anxiety, which prevailed throughout north China during the spring and summer of 1900. These were (1) the protracted drought which brought hunger to a great number of people, (2) the expanding foreign presence, which was seen as a threat by many, (3) the Boxers, with belief in spirit possession, who arose to oppose foreign expansion, (4) rumors, which at times reached epidemic proportions, were rampant, and (5) an atmosphere of fear of death prevailed among both Chinese and foreigners. All these elements, according to Cohen, converged and fed upon one another to produce the extraordinary environment of that tragic spring and summer one hundred years ago.

However, if all the elements were social ones, as listed above, what about the claim of martyrdom, and the bestowing of sainthood on the 86 Christians from Boxer times among the 120 who were canonized on October 1 this year? The excesses of the Boxers can be forgiven, due to their ignorance. Mob psychology seemed to have played a role in their violent opposition to what they perceived to be a foreign invasion of their country. As was seen above, a certain segment of the Qing Court did not support the Boxers, nor did many of the provincial governors. Finally, the pro-Boxer faction in the Qing government won out, and the Court threw its support behind the Boxers, with tragic consequences. Just as the Qing Court a hundred years ago was divided in regard to the Boxers, Chinese historians today are likewise divided on the question of the fanaticism of the Boxers.

The Christians who died at the hands of the Boxers are considered martyrs because they died for their faith. In many cases they were told that their lives would be spared if they gave up their faith. Those who refused to deny their faith were summarily executed. Thus they were considered martyrs by the Church, and became subjects for canonization. Regarding the accusation that some of them were "criminals," reliable evidence for this must be

presented from all sides (not just one side) for public scrutiny and judgement.

As tragic as the incidents of the spring and summer of 1900 were, they can still be a cause for great rejoicing. It is a great honor for a country if its citizens are singled out for sainthood. Almost every country has its Catholic saints, to whom the citizens of the country can pray to and emulate. Saints were declared in Korea and Vietnam in the 1980s. The shrine of the North American martyrs is located only about 25 miles from the present author's home in upstate New York. In it are commemorated the heroic witness of the Jesuit missionaries Isaac Jogues, Jean de Brebeuf and companions, as well as native American martyrs, like Kateri Tekawitha. I can testify that the shrine, staffed by Jesuit Fathers, is a tremendous source of spiritual strength to the people of our area, as well as to visitors from throughout the United States. The same can be said for China. After so many years, China now has its own saints. They can be called upon to intercede with God for help in time of need by Catholics and non-Catholics alike. As for the controversial decision to hold the canonization ceremony on China's national day, what better day is there to declare officially that the great country of China, representing almost one-fourth of the world's population, now has its own advocates in heaven, who can ask God to bestow His blessings, not only on the Chinese Christian community, but on the country and Chinese people as a whole.

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