

Causes of the Boxer Rebellion (1900-1901)

Topic

- According to Mary Wright, “Rarely in history has a single year marked as dramatic a watershed as did 1900 in China.”
- From 1900-1901, the Boxers, or “Society of Harmonious Fists” emerged in northern China out of an upsurge of anti-foreign, anti-Christian sentiment in society
- Under the aegis of Empress Dowager Cixi, the Boxers expressed their hatred of Western imperialist powers by besieging foreign embassies and killing missionaries and Christian converts
- However, the movement was quickly quashed, culminating in the humiliating Boxer Protocol in 1901

Anti-Foreign Sentiment

Topic Sentence

Long-term Western imperialism, compounded by the invasion of Christianity and economic hardship, led to an upsurge of anti-foreign nationalism, which materialised in the form of the Boxer movement.

- China had been repeatedly defeated, invaded, and subjected to humiliation by the Western imperialists under the unequal treaties since the mid-19th century, which had deeply wounded China’s national pride and self-respect
- Fuelled resentment among the Chinese people towards the foreign powers
- The Scramble for Concessions in the late 1890s, which saw the tangible risk of China being broken up and shared out as colonies among the foreign powers, only served to accelerate this gnawing sense of injustice and desire for revenge
- Furthermore, Western encroachment was perceived as disruptive to the social order and economic livelihood of the people, which exacerbated anti-foreign sentiments and increased support for the Boxer movement
- Under the 1858 Treaties of Tianjin and 1860 Conventions of Beijing, missionaries were allowed to operate freely in China and rent and buy land for the construction of churches, in a bid to spread the Christian faith
- However, these missionaries along with their converts challenged old traditions and were perceived as socially disruptive and a threat to the very fabric of Chinese society
- This drove people to support the Boxers, who gained popularity with their attacks on missionaries and Christian converts from 1898-1900
- In addition, foreign domination of trade, domestic markets and industries strengthened anti-foreign sentiments
- Cheap foreign imports had driven many domestic industries out of business, leading to unemployment and financial hardship
- Rising income taxes due to a massive government trade deficit of 69 million taels in

The Qing Court’s Patronage of the Boxers

Topic Sentence

In the short-term, the Qing Court’s tolerance and patronage of the Boxer Movement not only prevented its demise, but also allowed it to gain momentum.

- By the 1890s, strong anti-foreign sentiment had permeated the court under Empress Dowager Cixi, as well as Manchu conservatives such as Kangyi and Prince Duan
- The Qing Court had continually favoured the Boxers, admonishing officials such as Yuan Shikai who had adopted a policy of suppression
- Legalized the Boxer movement by preventing them from being classified as bandits
- Ignored the indiscriminate massacres of Westerners
- By 1900, Cixi had given her personal backing to the Boxers, hoping to use them as a tool to eliminate the foreign threat for good
- The Boxer Uprising reached its climax in June 1900 when Cixi demanded the withdrawal of all foreign legations, before issuing a declaration of war on the foreign powers
- Thus, the Qing Court’s support, particularly by Cixi, was critical to the development of the Boxer movement

1899 only served to worsen the livelihood of the people

- As their hardship increased, people sought alleviation in banditry, secret societies and many joined the Boxer movement
- Thus, with intense feelings of xenophobia in society, the Boxer movement was able to gain momentum and eventually reached a crescendo in 1900

Limitations

- However, while the Boxer movement had achieved considerable momentum by the late 1890s, it is unlikely that a full-scale uprising against the foreign imperialists would have happened without the Qing Court's patronage
- The Boxers had been brutally suppressed by Yuan Shikai in Shandong in December 1899
- **Victor Purcell** focused on the transformation of the Boxer movement from anti-Qing to pro-dynastic in 1899 when the Boxers fought government forces at Pingyuan and were defeated