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RUSSIA'S AMBIVALENT RESPONSE TO THE BOXERS

IN 1963, NICHOLAS RAY released his last major feature film, *Fifty-five days in Peking*. Set in the Chinese capital during the summer of 1900, the movie recounts the siege of the Western legations by mobs who want to drive all foreigners out of their homeland.¹ The Boxers, as the xenophobic insurgents came to be known, enjoyed the sympathy of the sinister Empress Dowager, Cixi, and members of her decadent court in the mysterious Forbidden City, only a stone's throw from the action. Before the disturbances began, the eight foreign powers in the compound — America, Britain, Russia, Germany, France, Japan, Spain and Italy — were rivals in the contest to dominate the enfeebled Qing empire. Now, led by the dashing Major Matt Lewis, USMC (played by Charlton Heston) and the impeccably-groomed British Ambassador, Sir Arthur Robertson (David Niven), the civilized nations all unite to defend themselves against the savage yellow hordes that threaten to breach the walls of the diplomatic quarter.

Even the Russians joined in, although their ambassador, Baron Sergei Ivanoff (Kurt Kaszner) is suitably repulsive and dishonorable; after all the movie was made at the height of the Cold War. Conveniently, his beautiful sister-in-law, Nathalie

1. Dates are according to the Julian calendar, which was then being used in Russia. In the nineteenth century, this calendar was 12 days behind the Gregorian calendar commonly employed in the West, whereas in the twentieth century it followed by 13 days. Transliterations from the Cyrillic alphabet adhere to a modified form of the US Library of Congress system, except for names and words traditionally known in English by other spellings. As for Chinese words, I generally follow the Pinyin system, again with the exception of very commonly used names, such as Peking and Kiaochow.

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Ivanoff (Ava Gardner) is in town, and there is a brief but tragic romance between the exotic Russian baroness and the handsome American marine.

David Niven later described *Fifty-five days in Peking* as “a [...] Western in Chinese.” The actor was mostly referring to its plot, which favored swift-paced cowboys-and-Indians action over subtle character development. But there were also parallels in the way the film portrayed the adversary. Like the stereotypical braves of Hollywood matinées, the Chinese are a malevolent, Saidian “other,” a nihilistic, alien force that must be contained at all costs. This is perhaps not altogether surprising. In 1962, when the film was shot, the China of Mao Zedong and his little-red-book-waving hordes seemed highly ominous. In the Western popular mind, Mao’s peoples’ republic aroused many different fears, combining Cold War phobias of communism with the atavistic terror of the Yellow Peril.

The historian will find much to quibble about in the way Nicholas Ray retold the story of the Boxer Rebellion. But the screenplay was entirely accurate when it came to the way it presented the Chinese, at least as Europeans saw them at the time. Contemporary English, American, French and German accounts of the siege, as well as histories written in its wake, naturally did not show the Qing Empire in a favorable light.

However, if *Fifty-five days in Peking* would have us conclude that Russians were of one mind with the other powers about the Boxers, that is a very different matter. In fact, in 1900 St. Petersburg was highly sympathetic to the Qing Dynasty. Four years earlier, tsarist officials had signed a defensive treaty with their eastern neighbor, and they still considered the Middle Kingdom to be an ally. Meanwhile, Russian public opinion was much less concerned about the violence wrought by the Boxers in Peking, since it did not appear to be directed so much against their compatriots as against the Western powers, such as England and Germany. Tsarist troops did participate in the expedition to crush the Boxers, but their orders were given very reluctantly.

European contemporaries saw Russia’s muddled behavior as entirely self-serving. To be sure, some aspects of tsarist diplomacy were motivated by extensive interests across the border in Manchuria. Yet there were hints that St. Petersburg’s motives were more complicated, and reflected deep disagreements over Russia’s identity. This ambivalent response to the Boxer Rebellion provides a fascinating example of how Russia saw its own role in the world at the turn of the century. On the one hand, St. Petersburg considered itself to be a leading player among the West’s Great Powers, and was hyper-conscious of anything that might slight its status as a member of the club. Yet at times, many Russians expressed a profound disquiet about their relationship with Europe.

Because until recently the relevant documents were inaccessible, it was very difficult to determine precisely why Russia acted the way it did. Now that the situation has improved, historians can begin to ask more complicated questions about tsarist diplomacy. This article will look at Russian opinions and policy during the Boxer Rebellion in Peking. To set the stage, it will begin by presenting a brief summary of the start of the rising itself. Then, based on research in tsarist Foreign

Ministry archives and other official sources, it will describe how St. Petersburg dealt with the crisis. At the same time, it will examine educated opinion, as expressed in the Russian capital's newspapers and journals.

*

The last Year of the Dog during Emperor Guangxu's reign, known to Europeans as 1898, began inauspiciously in Peking. Late afternoon on the Chinese New Year's Day, its residents interrupted their merrymaking to see the sun vanish and the heavens darken. For a moment the imperial capital was black as night. When the sun reappeared in the western sky, at first it looked like the new moon. One long-time British resident, Robert Hart, sensed a mood of "general gloom and depression" among the population. He added that, to the Emperor, the solar eclipse "foreboded calamity."² Other foreigners also felt that somehow all was not well. A few months later, the Russian legation's physician, Dr. Vladimir Korsakov, recalled that "despite an outward calm, life in Peking [...] seemed to be pregnant with impending upheaval."³

Events at the Qing court during the coming months appeared to confirm the ill omen. Formally all power in the Middle Kingdom rested with "the Son of Heaven," the Guangxu Emperor. Yet it was well known that China's real ruler was the twenty-four-year-old monarch's aunt and former guardian, the Empress Dowager Cixi. In Spring 1898, in part because of alarm at the prospect that the Western powers might soon eviscerate his realm, much as they had India, Burma and Indochina, Guangxu began seriously to consider radical reforms. There was probably also a desire to shake free from his overbearing aunt. At the end of May, the Emperor started issuing edict after edict in an effort to shock China into the modern age.

For some hundred days Guangxu had his way, but on September 9, Cixi reasserted herself. Within days, she had her nephew isolated in his palace under guard, executed a number of his leading advisors, and proclaimed that, due to his "weakness" and "inexperience," Guangxu was imploring his aunt to resume her regency.⁴ Although there was some unrest in the streets of Peking, no one doubted who was once again in charge in the Forbidden City.⁵

2. R. Hart to J. D. Campbell, letter, 23/1/1898, in Sir Robert Hart, *The I.G. in Peking: Letters of Robert Hart, Chinese Maritime Customs, 1868-1907* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 2: 1149; Robert Hart, "Peking legations: A national uprising and an international episode," in Robert Hart, *"These from the land of Sinim:" Essays on the Chinese question* (London: Chapman Hall, 1901): 8.

3. Vladimir Vikentevich Korsakov, *V starom Pekine* (SPb: Trud, 1904): 343.

4. Henri Cordier, *Histoire des relations de la Chine avec les puissances occidentales, 1860-1902* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1902) 3: 408-409.

5. The "Hundred Days" and their immediate aftermath are described in A. I. Pavlov to N. M. Murav'ev, despatches, 19/8/1898 - 10/9/1898, Arkhiv Vneshnei Politiki Rossiiskoi Imperii (Archive of the Russian Empire's Foreign Policy, Moscow, hereafter AVPRI), f. 143, op. 491,

Most Europeans were dismayed by the Dowager's coup. Their sympathies lay with the young sovereign who had hoped to refashion his empire along western lines, much like a latter-day Peter the Great or Meiji Emperor.⁶ On the other hand, the acting Russian minister, Aleksandr Pavlov, was delighted with the failure of the "Bogdykhan's childish attempt to emancipate himself from the Dowager Empress."⁷ In his view, had Guangxu succeeded, the Middle Kingdom would have come under the sway of progressive officials much more sympathetic to England and Japan than to Russia.⁸ Pavlov also probably agreed with one of the tsarist army's leading China-watchers, General Staff Colonel Dmitrii Putiata, who had written not long ago:

"Left to its own devices, China will never be a dangerous neighbor to Russia. Under the charge of foreign agents, furnished with their weapons, instructors and strategic plans, in league with the West — for this kind of China we would have to be on our guard."⁹

One clear indication of the reformers' hostility to St. Petersburg had been the ouster in August from the Zongli Yamen (then China's Foreign Office) of Li Hongzhang, "the only Chinese official [...] able to sway his government in our favour," as Pavlov lamented.¹⁰ Now, with the Guangxu Emperor out of the way, the diplomat expected his country to regain the high standing it had until recently held in Peking.¹¹

At the time, St. Petersburg still believed it had a special relationship with its Eastern neighbor. Five years earlier, in 1895, Russia had led a diplomatic intervention with Germany and France to come to China's help. The Middle Kingdom was unexpectedly losing a war with Japan, and Tokyo had demanded the strategically-important Liaodong Peninsula near the capital as part of its peace

d. 115, ll. 105-130; Jung-Pang Lo, ed., *K'ang Yu-wei: A biography and a symposium* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1967): 83-114; Hosea Ballou Morse, *The international relations of the Chinese Empire* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1918), 3: 128-155. For more recent studies see Luke S.K. Kwong, *A mosaic of the Hundred Days: Personalities, politics and ideas of 1898* (Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1984) and Sergei Leonidovich Tikhvinskii, *Dvizhenie za reformy v Kitae v kontse XIX veka* (Moscow: Nauka, 1980).

6. Mary H. Wilgus, *Sir Claude MacDonald: The open door, and British informal empire in China, 1895-1904*, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987): 233-240; V. V. Korsakov, *op. cit.*: 344; S. L. Tikhvinskii, *op. cit.*: 248-254.

7. A. I. Pavlov to N. M. Murav'ev, 10/9/1898, AVPRI, f. 143, op. 491, d. 115, l. 118.

8. *Ibid.*, l. 120. On Japan's involvement in the "Hundred Days," see Marius B. Jansen, *Japan and China: From war to peace, 1894-1972* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1975): 138-140; Richard C. Howard, "Japan's Role in the reform program of Kang Yu-wei" in J. P. Lo, ed., *op. cit.*: 280-312.

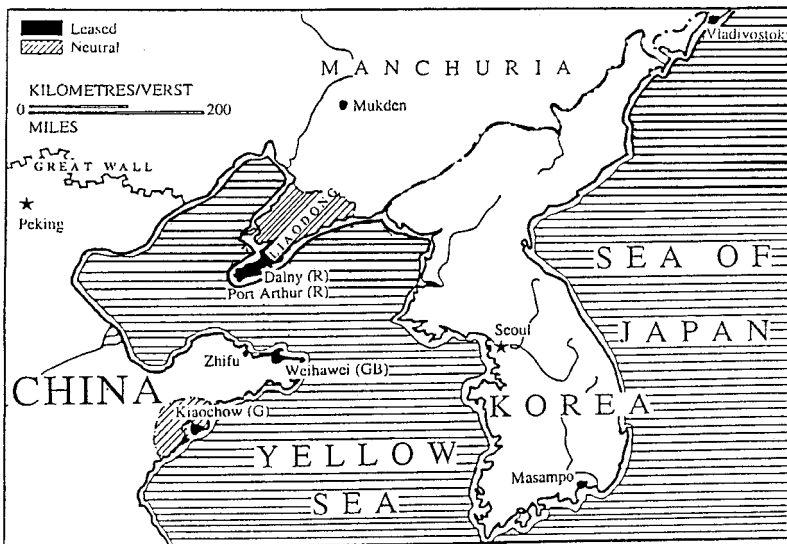
9. Dmitrii Vassilevich Putiata, *Kitai. Ocherki geografii, ekonomicheskogo sostoiianiia, administrativnogo i voennogo ustroistva Seredinnoi imperii* (SPb: Voennaia tipografiia, 1895): 265.

10. A. I. Pavlov to N. M. Murav'ev, despatch, 28/8/1898, AVPRI, f. 143, op. 491, d. 115, ll. 116-117; Finance Ministry, "Istoricheskaia spravka.": 82-83n; B. B. Glinkii, ed., *Prolog russko-iaponskoi voiny: Materialy iz arkhiva Grafa S. Iu. Vitte* (Petrograd: Brockgauz-Efron, 1916): 97.

11. A. I. Pavlov to N. M. Murav'ev, 10/9/1898, AVPRI, f. 143, op. 491, d. 115, ll. 124-125.

terms. Russian-led pressure forced Japan to give up this demand, and a grateful Chinese government rewarded St. Petersburg with a concession to build a railway in northern Manchuria, which would greatly benefit the Trans-Siberian Railway then being built. Relations between the two empires were sufficiently intimate for their representatives to sign a secret defensive alliance in 1896, pledging Russian support should Japan again try to seize Qing territory.

The pact did not provide for assistance should any other powers forcibly annex Chinese lands, as Peking discovered to its dismay within little over a year. In November 1897, on a flimsy pretext related to the murder of some German Catholic missionaries, German marines seized the Chinese port of Kiaochow (Jiaozhou), which was soon leased to its navy as a coaling station. Although at first it vigorously protested the move, St. Petersburg suddenly changed its mind. In early 1898 its warships suddenly grabbed two Chinese harbors of their own, Port Arthur (Lüshun) and Dalny (Dalian), on the Liaodong peninsula — the very same territory it had denied the Japanese three years earlier, in 1895.



The foreign leases in northern China in 1900.

Adapted from W. L. Langer, *The diplomacy of imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1956): 455.

As far as the Qing were concerned, this act showed Russia to be just as wicked as the other foreign devils, and their affections for their erstwhile allies cooled considerably in the coming years. Yet, remarkably, many Russians were oblivious to Chinese anger over this act of aggression, and still continued to believe that ties between the two great autocracies of the East were intimate. Any turbulence, their reasoning went, was probably caused by internal squabbles related to the Hundred Days, and would no doubt disappear once the Empress Dowager was once again firmly in control.

Nevertheless, Cixi's restoration did not return Russia to favor with the Qing. When the new minister, Mikhail Giers, finally arrived in the Chinese capital in early 1899, he found the Zongli Yamen (China's Foreign Office) to be growing increasingly hard-line.¹² This development was reflected in the mood of the Dowager's new counsellors, such as her favorite, the Manchu general Ronglu, who were highly isolationist in their outlook. It seemed to the Russians that the only foreigners still welcome in Peking were the Japanese; in the current climate of xenophobia in the Forbidden City there was much respect for the Asiatic neighbor's accomplishments. Giers was particularly alarmed to learn of a covert mission by Chinese officials bearing a letter from Cixi to the Mikado, as well as about rumors of Japanese instructors in China's armed forces.¹³ By December 1899, the new minister began to suspect the existence of a secret alliance between Peking and Tokyo.¹⁴

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The Year of the Dog proved to be unhappy outside of Peking too. There was unrest throughout much of China: Harvests failed in Zhejiang, and open rebellion broke out around Canton, as well as in Hubei and Sichuan.¹⁵ But to the peasants in the countryside south of the capital, it must have seemed that the gods were particularly angry. Heavy summer rains caused the Yellow River's waters to rise, until the dikes burst in July, flooding much of Shandong's northern plain and driving over a million farmers from their homes. Meanwhile, the province's south continued to be in the grip of a severe drought.¹⁶ As if these natural disasters were not enough,

12. M. N. Giers to N. M. Murav'ev, despatch, 21/1/1899, AVPRI, f. 143, op. 491, d. 116, ll. 1-3.

13. M. N. Giers to N. M. Murav'ev, despatch, 2/8/1899, AVPRI, f. 143, op. 491, d. 116, ll. 120-126; Ministerstvo Inostrannykh Del, "Otchet MID 1899," AVPRI, f. 137, op. 475, d. 128: 117; Ministerstvo Finansov, "Istoricheskaja Spravka," 70-78; B. B. Glinskii, ed., *op. cit.*: 91-95.

14. M. N. Giers to N. M. Murav'ev, despatch, 28/12/1899, AVPRI, f. 143, op. 491, d. 116, ll. 232-234.

15. H. B. Morse, *op. cit.*: 161-169.

16. Paul A. Cohen, *History in three keys: The Boxers as event, experience, and myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997): 69-95, 117-118; Joseph W. Esherick, *The origins of the Boxer uprising* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987): 173-181. Esherick's book is the most thorough social history of the Boxer rising's beginnings. The diplomatic and political background are ably covered in Victor Purcell, *The Boxer uprising: A background study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963) and Chester C. Tan, *The Boxer catastrophe* (New York: Octagon Books, 1967). Unlike most western-based scholars, Tan devotes a fair bit of attention to Russia's role. An interesting cultural approach is taken by P. A. Cohen, *op. cit.*

Among Russian works on the Boxers, the report written by Witte's agent in China, Dmitrii Pokotilov, remains an intelligent survey. D. D. Pokotilov to S. Iu. Witte, memorandum, 23/12/1900, Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Istoricheskii Arkhiv (Russian State Historical Archive, St. Petersburg, hereafter RGIA), f. 560, op. 28, d. 79, ll. 161-211. Although a bit dated, another valuable study, by a Russian Orientalist who used primarily Chinese sources, is A. Rudakov, *Obshchestvo I-khe-tuan i ego znachenie v poslednikh sobytiakh na Dal'nem Vostoke* (Vladivostok: T-va Sushchinskii i Ko., 1901). See also Nina Mikhailovna Kaluzhnaia, "O kharaktere tainogo soiuza 'Ikhetuan'," in V. P. Iliushechkin, ed., *Tainye obshchestva v starom Pekine* (Moscow: Nauka, 1970): 85-107.

Shandong's inhabitants were also subjected to a host of man-made calamities. The recent war with Japan had exerted severe fiscal pressures on the economy, leading to higher taxes, inflation, as well as large-scale troop cuts.¹⁷ Thus a large population of dissatisfied ex-soldiers was added to the restive legions of farmers driven from their homes by floodwaters and crop failures. It was an explosive mixture.

It was not uncommon in China for hardship, whether brought about by nature or misrule, to translate into anti-dynastic insurrection. Shandong was particularly prone to unrest. The province had seen several major uprisings during the past century alone, including a rebellion by the millenarian White Lotus sect in the early 1800s, followed by the Eight Trigrams shortly thereafter, and the Nian insurgency some fifty years later. Invariably such revolts were carried out by impoverished peasants, in league with bandits and others at the margins of existence, under the slogan "Revive the Ming, destroy the Qing."¹⁸

In 1898 a new threat to the established order emerged in Shandong in connection with a group dubbed *Yihequan*. Various translated as "Righteous and harmonious fists" or "Boxers united in righteousness," the name derived from a system of exercises involving highly ritualized arm and leg movements, controlled breathing, and meditation, not unlike the *Taijiquan* inoffensively practiced by millions in late-twentieth-century China.¹⁹ Along with their esoteric calisthenics, the Boxers, as they came to be called in the West, also engaged in shamanistic mass spirit possession, invulnerability rituals, and an ascetic way of life. Yet while these Boxers combined many elements of traditional popular rebellion, they also introduced one very important innovation. For unlike previous, anti-dynastic uprisings, the new movement had a different battle-cry: "Support the Qing, destroy the Foreign."

The patriotic folk of Shandong, which had given China its two great sages, Confucius and Mencius, had much reason to be angry with the big-nosed barbarians. Germany and England just seized leaseholds at Kiaochow and Weihaiwei, cutting like deep sores into the peninsula's shoreline. The rest of the province was invaded by overseas goods like machine-made cotton cloth, wreaking havoc on the cottage industries that supplemented meagre peasant incomes, while many bargemen on the Grand Canal were put out of work by new steamship lines along the coast. However, the most intrusive European import was the militantly-exclusionary faith of its missionaries.

17. J. W. Esherick, *op. cit.*: 170-173.

18. *Ibid.*: 38-63; Susan Naquin, *Millenarian rebellion in China: The eight trigrams uprising of 1813* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976); Jonathan D. Spence, *The search for modern China* (New York: Norton, 1990): 112-113, 184-188. Although somewhat one-dimensional, a reasonable summary of popular risings during the late Qing and Republican periods is Jean Chesnaux, *Le mouvement paysan chinois, 1840-1949* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1976). See also Albert Feuerwerker, *Rebellion in nineteenth-century China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975).

19. J. D. Spence, *op. cit.*: 30-31; V. Purcell, *op. cit.*: 162-164. Thus, although the *Yihequan* exercises involve fists, they bear little relation to the pugilism popular in the West. P. A. Cohen, *op. cit.*: 16; J. W. Esherick, *op. cit.*: xiii.

Traditionally, China accommodated various teachings, from Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism to a host of more informal peasant creeds.²⁰ The Chinese often adopted elements from all of these beliefs in their own daily lives, a practice tolerated by the authorities, as long as the dynasty itself was not questioned.²¹ What made Christianity so objectionable was its insistence that adherents reject all other forms of spirituality. “Superstitions,” such as ancestor-worship, kow-towing to idols, and festivals honoring local deities, were all condemned by the alien priests as incompatible with their doctrine. The refusal of Chinese converts to participate in such traditional rites made their neighbors resentful and suspicious. Further fuelling animosities were the privileges Western clergy bestowed upon those who agreed to be baptized in their creed, such as food, or help in resolving legal disputes before the magistrate. Thus villagers grew both contemptuous and envious of these “rice Christians,” while officials began to see the missionaries as meddling or even subversive. As a contemporary Russian Sinologist observed: “Little by little the Chinese became convinced that no respectable man could possibly be a Christian.”²²

Although there were missionaries in much of China, they seemed to be particularly intrusive in Shandong. Jesuits had been active there in the early seventeenth century, and after the Middle Kingdom was officially opened to Christian proselytization in the 1840’s, the province became home to a variety of French Catholics, Scottish Presbyterians, English Baptists, American Congregationalists, as well as Bishop Johann Baptist von Anzer’s militantly aggressive German Catholic Society of the Divine Word, the S.V.D. (It was the murder of two S.V.D. priests in 1897 which had led to the seizure of Kiaochow). In this atmosphere of territorial violations, economic dislocation, hostility to Christianity, and gentry xenophobia, Shandong’s masses readily concluded that the foreign devils were behind the natural calamities that befell their province in the late 1890’s. The “Righteous and harmonious fists” had little difficulty attracting recruits to their ranks with proclamations such as the one found by a Russian diplomat in Port Arthur:

“Three times on the night of the fourth day of the fourth moon Prince Qin had the following dream: God came to him and said that, by the Almighty Creator’s wishes, the Chinese must not go over either to Catholicism or to other Christian beliefs [...] otherwise they will be severely punished. The spread of Catholicism and other forms of Christianity are very harmful and untrue, and they must be stopped and eliminated throughout China.

Therefore we have imposed this divine sanction: The snows and the rains have ceased. God has sent eight million heavenly warriors to earth, to protect the

20. Edward Harper Parker, *China and religion* (London: John Murray, 1905): 2-16.

21. V. Purcell, *op. cit.*: 139.

22. A. Rudakov, *op. cit.*: 29.

Chinese people and help them expel all foreigners. Every misfortune will be imposed on those who do not obey this notice, as well as on their ancestors.”²³

*

The Boxers first became troublesome in Spring 1898, when their members began assaulting Chinese Christians in western Shandong. At first they attracted little notice on Peking's Legation Street. Diplomats had long ago become inured to reports of violence against their co-religionists in the countryside. Aside from the Catholic French, most representatives tended to shrug off such outrages as one of China's many quotidian hazards.²⁴ Besides, the disturbances in Shandong tended to involve native converts rather than Europeans.

For Mikhail Giers at the Russian mission such matters were doubly irrelevant, since the Orthodox Church had never really joined the Western competition for Chinese souls.²⁵ At any rate, the new minister had rather more pressing concerns: There were the endless negotiations involving his government's activities in Manchuria, encroachments by the other powers into Russia's northern Chinese sphere had to be resisted, and he was working hard to restore St. Petersburg's standing at the Qing court.²⁶

The legations did take note when the Boxers murdered their first foreigner, a British missionary, in December 1899. Several governments pressed the Zongli Yamen to quash the organization.²⁷ Giers refused to join these complaints, reasoning that they were merely excuses to exact more concessions from the Chinese government.²⁸ When some of the powers carried out a naval demonstration off the fortress of Dagu in February to underscore their concerns, Russian warships did not participate. As Giers commented: “It is not in our interest to take part in the

23. I. Ia. Korostovets to Foreign Ministry, attachment to despatch, 12/6/1900, *Krasnyi arkhiv*, 14 (1926): 13. Although most of the Boxers were peasants, their membership included elements of other groups, including unemployed bargemen, former soldiers and deserters, small tradesmen, and what one scholar calls the “lumpen intelligentsia,” i.e. dissident intellectuals, failed civil-service examination candidates, monks, geomancers, etc.

Soviet and post-1949 Chinese historiography notwithstanding, it would be misleading to see the Boxer rising purely as class conflict. Jonathan Spence's observation about unrest during the seventeenth century was still true two centuries later: “[...] the idea of class warfare presumes a level of economic cohesion and self-consciousness concerning one's role in society that seems to have been lacking in China at the time.” J. D. Spence, *op. cit.*: 45. See also A. Feuerwerker, *op. cit.*: 2-3; J. W. Esherick, *op. cit.*: 235-240; N. M. Kaliuzhnaia, *art. cit.*: 94-96.

24. H. B. Morse, *op. cit.*: 194.

25. Ralph Edward Glatfelter, *Russia in China: The Russian reaction to the Boxer rebellion* (PhD Dissertation: Indiana University, 1975): 66; E. H. Parker, *op. cit.*: 241-242, 244.

26. M. N. Giers to N. M. Murav'ev, despatches, 1899, AVPRI, f. 143, op. 491, d. 116; Ministerstvo Inostrannykh Del, “Otchet MID 1899,” AVPRI, f. 137, op. 475, d. 128: 109-121.

27. M. N. Giers to N. M. Murav'ev, despatch, 21/1/1900, AVPRI, f. 143, op. 491, d. 117, ll. 21-23.

28. M. N. Giers to N. M. Murav'ev, despatch, 29/2/1900, AVPRI, f. 143, op. 491, d. 117, l. 65.

protests of the other powers. Russia's goal in the Orient differs fundamentally from the politics of the European governments."²⁹

Meanwhile, by spring 1900 the rising had spread well beyond Shandong province. In April Boxers were already disrupting life on the outskirts of Peking. Like its southeastern neighbor, Zhili also proved to be fertile ground for the rebellious group, with its large Christian population, the foreign enclaves in Peking and the port of Tianjin, and the railways and telegraphs that cut across the province.³⁰

Another reason the Boxers were able to move northwards with such ease was the reluctance among many mandarins to resist them. Although officially proscribed as a "heterodox sect," the insurgents found much sympathy at Cixi's court, which largely shared their rabid hatred of the foreigners. Imperial decrees banning the troublemakers alternated with indications of the government's favor. At times even the Dowager Empress appeared to look upon the Boxers with a benevolent eye.³¹ Western complaints only seemed to intensify Cixi's fondness for the rebels, and in May her officials actually considered recruiting them into the militia.³²

In early May news of increasing Boxer activity in the capital itself began to alarm the small Western community in the Legation Quarter.³³ When diplomats met on May 7 to discuss the situation, Giers now supported summoning a modest contingent of troops from the nearby port of Tianjin to supplement the missions' guards. However, he did so reluctantly, and anguished about the consequences. "In my opinion," he wrote Foreign Minister Count Mikhail Murav'ev, "the prospect of such an extreme step is one of the most serious, if not the most serious, dangers of the current situation."³⁴ Meanwhile, the Russian envoy continued his own diplomacy, trying to convince moderates at the Zongli Yamen that only decisive

29. General-Maior Panteleimon Nikolaevich Simanskii, *Sobytiia na Dal'nem Vostoke* (SPb: Voennaia tipografiia, 1910), 2: 14-15.

30. P. A. Cohen, *op. cit.*: 36; J. W. Esherick, *op. cit.*: 285.

31. However, claims by Rudakov and other early twentieth-century Sinologists of the Qing dynasty's complicity in starting the rebellion have since been disproved. See C. C. Tan, *op. cit.*: 36-43.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 62; J. W. Esherick, *op. cit.*: 285-290.

33. On the situation in Peking during the Boxer rising, there are three published diaries by Russian government officials resident there at the time: Dmitrii Dmitrievich Pokotilov, *Dnevnik osady evropeitsev v Pekine* (Yalta: N. V. Vakhtin, 1900) and id., *Dnevnik s 2-go po 31-oe avgusta 1900 goda* (SPb: V. F. Kirshbaum, 1900); Dmitrii Pozdnev, *56 dnei pekinskogo sideniia v sviazi s blizhaishimi k nemu sobytiiami pekinskoii zhizni* (SPb: V.F. Kirshbaum, 1901); Pavel Stepanovich Popov, "Dva mesiatsa osady v Pekine," *Vestnik Evropy*, 36, 2 (Febr. 1901): 517-536; 3 (Mar. 1901): 5-37. See also V. V. Korsakov, *Pekinskie sobytiia: Lichnye vospominaniia uchastnika ob osade v Pekine* (SPb: A.S. Suvorin, 1901). First-hand Western accounts include Robert Hart, *art. cit.*: 1-59; Lancelot Giles, *The siege of the Peking legations: A diary*, edited by L. R. Marchant (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1970); Albert François Ildefonse Baron d'Anthouard, *La Chine contre l'étranger: Les Boxeurs* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1902). For Chinese perspectives see "Journal d'un bourgeois de Pékin," in A. d'Anthouard, *op. cit.*: 294-343; J. J. L. Duyvendak, ed., *The diary of His Excellency Ching-shan: Being a Chinese account of the Boxer troubles* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1924).

34. M.N. Giers to N. M. Murav'ev, despatch, 13/5/1900, AVPRI, f. 143, op. 491, d. 117, l. 116.

action against the rebels would forestall intervention by the powers.³⁵ On May 14 Giers told its ministers:

“I stand outside of the whole conflict. But because our relations are the very best, and since our two empires both operate under an autocratic government, I can only hope that China will restore order by itself. For were the other powers to intervene, China would suffer far greater calamities than the one being caused by the Boxer uprising.”³⁶

Although Europeans fretted about their own physical safety, Russians were still relatively sanguine. A Finance Ministry official wrote a friend back home: “The disorders in this country do not affect us. Don’t believe the newspapers, which repeat the false British and the German reports.”³⁷ Nevertheless, the situation in Peking worsened steadily. On May 21, Boxers murdered two more British missionaries, and the following day severed the only railway to the city. Throughout the capital walls were plastered with posters calling upon the citizenry to expel all foreigners and Christians. Meanwhile it became evident that the insurgency’s supporters had the upper hand in Cixi’s court.

Giers now became concerned as well. When Boxers torched an Orthodox church in the countryside and menaced the venerable Russian Ecclesiastical Mission north-east of the Forbidden City, he understood that his countrymen were not exempt from their xenophobic fury. Resigned, he informed Murav’ev on May 27: “The role of the diplomats in Peking is over, and matters must now be turned over to the admirals. Only the speedy arrival of a strong force can save the foreigners here.”³⁸ Two days later, Dmitrii Pokotilov, who managed the local branch of the Russo-Chinese Bank, wired that the Russian legation was under siege.³⁹ It was the last cable from Peking that would reach St. Petersburg for a while. Within hours the only remaining telegraph link to the outside world was cut.⁴⁰

35. M.N. Giers to N. M. Murav’ev, despatch, 7/5/1900, AVPRI, f. 143, op. 491, d. 117, ll. 106-109; 13/5/1900, ll. 116-121; N. M. Giers to Guangxu Emperor, letter, 23/5/1900, AVPRI, f. 143, op. 491, d. 117, l. 143; D. D. Pokotilov, *op. cit.*: 4; P. N. Simanskii, *op. cit.*: 234.

36. R. E. Glatfelter, *op. cit.*: 70.

37. D. M. Pozdneev to Bulgakov, letter, 22/5/1900, Rukopisnyi Otdel Rossiiskoi Gosudarstvennoi Biblioteki (Manuscript Division of the Russian State Library, St. Petersburg), f. 590, op. 1, d. 112, l. 483. Although probably apocryphal, the conversation described by the journalist Dmitrii Ianchevetskii with a diplomat at Port Arthur in mid-May nicely conveys this attitude as well. Dmitrii Ianchevetskii, *U sten nedvizhnogo Kitaia* (SPb-Port Arthur: P.A. Artemev, 1903): 5. See also Ivan Iakovlevich Korostovets, *Rossia na Dal’nem Vostoke* (Peking: Vostochnoe Prosveshchenie, 1922): 9-11.

38. M. N. Giers to N. M. Murav’ev, telegram, 27/5/1900, Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (State Archive of the Russian Federation, Moscow, hereafter GARF), f. 568, op. 1, d. 126, l. 14. Also in *Krasnyi arkhiv*, 14 (1926): 14; I. I. Korostovets, *op. cit.*: 16; P. N. Simanskii, *op. cit.*: 14-15.

39. D. D. Pokotilov to S. Iu. Witte, telegram, RGIA, f. 560, op. 38, d. 180, l. 88.

40. R. E. Glatfelter, *op. cit.*: 73.



“Someone’s pulling a fast one.”

This cartoon by Soré shares the common

Russian view that the West was exploiting China.

Cartoon by S. F. Sokolovskii (Soré), *Novoe vremia* (15/6/1901): 3.

The events in China aroused little outrage in the Russian press. “What a cruel irony this confrontation is for the Europeans now, after they condemned the Middle Kingdom’s millennial somnolence for so many years,” the conservative columnist Prince Vladimir Meshcherskii sniggered.⁴¹ Newspapers had no compassion for the foreigners who suffered the wrath of the Boxers. Soré, a cartoonist for the capital’s *Novoe vremia*, often poked fun at their predicament in his cartoons, while one of the paper’s writers argued:

“If we examine China, and consider what the Jesuits, preachers and merchants have wrought there, it is not hard to understand why the Chinese joined together and took up arms [...] Europe is paying the price in China for its sins.”⁴²

The rapacity of the “capitalist powers” was a common theme among conservatives and liberals alike. Another editorial writer, Vlas Dorosevich, pressed this point in a highly polemical piece in the progressive daily *Rossiia*. Describing a trip to China, he quoted an acquaintance, who told him: “Did you know that colonial troops like

41. V.P. Mesherskii, “Dnevnik,” *Grazhdanin* (13/6/1900): 21.

42. n.a., “Rossiia i Kitai,” *Novoe vremia* (8/6/1900): 2.



“Down with civilisation!”
 Like many Russians Soré felt that
 the Boxers’ anger at the West was entirely justified.
 Cartoon by Soré, *Novoe vremia* (26/5/1900): 3.

to go on a ‘Chinaman hunt’? [...] In the colonies, they hunt people much more often than tigers.” Dorosevich condemned “a whole army of missionaries,” whose preaching did more harm than good and disrupted people’s lives. There was also strong criticism for the opium dealers, merchants and factory owners, “who come from London and Paris to China, where they live like princes by exploiting the Chinese.” Dorosevich indignantly concluded:

“[The Boxer] rising is an outcry of horrible, unbearable pain, whose origins are in Europe, which has plunged its filthy, greedy claws into China. And these filthy claws of exploitation we call the benevolent hand of Civilization. Don’t fool yourselves! Europe is lying when it calls this supposed need to shed blood as a ‘war for Civilisation.’ No. This is a war for exploitation. And no ‘Boxers,’ no ‘Society of harmonious fists’ [...] no corrupt mandarins can rightfully be accused for this war. We must really blame the dirty paws of the European gentlemen, evil, cruel, treating people like dogs.”⁴³

Editorials were much more sympathetic to the Chinese, whose grievances seemed entirely justified. Like the Boers battling British troops in the Transvaal, the Boxers

43. Vlas Mikhailovich Dorosevich, “Kitai,” *Rossia* (13/6/1900): 2. Also published in Aleksandr Valentinovich Amfiteatrov and Vlas Mikhailovich Dorosevich, *Kitaiskii vopros* (Moscow: I.D. Sytin, 1901): 1-14. On Dorosevich’s views more generally, see Louise McReynolds, “V. M. Dorosevich: The newspaper journalist and the development of public opinion in civil society,” in Edith W. Clowes et al., eds, *Between tsar and people: Educated society and the quest for public identity in late Imperial Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991): 233-247.

were characterized as patriots who were fighting for their freedom against exploitative colonial powers.⁴⁴ The journalist Aleksandr Amfiteatrov invoked a metaphor closer to home:

“What is happening [in China] is really a peoples’ war. [As Russians] we cannot deny the great significance of peoples’ wars: In 1812 we won a peoples’ war against Europe, and crossed its territory to the very capital of the world [...] Paris.”⁴⁵

As tsarist troops joined the other powers to save the legations, another commentator reminded his readers who Russia’s true foes were: “[...] so you see, the Chinese are not our enemies; [our real enemies are] those countries that try to cause enmity between us and our neighbors.”⁴⁶

These sentiments were shared by many of the tsar’s senior officials. Even Tsar Nicholas II himself never condemned the Chinese. While he worried about the fate of his envoy in Peking,⁴⁷ the emperor blamed Catholic missionaries, rather than the Boxers, for being at “the root of all this evil.” Along with Western commerce, it was they who had “awakened China’s hatred towards the Europeans,” by exploiting them “in the Holy name of Christ.”⁴⁸

Finance Minister Sergei Witte predictably opposed harsh measures with regard to the Boxers. In his opinion, Russia’s occupation of the Liaodong Peninsula had contributed to China’s xenophobic revolt. The only way for St. Petersburg to salvage its interests, the Finance Minister reasoned, was to refrain from further aggression on the Pacific. On the contrary, the best tack was to support the Qing and to restrain the Europeans. Besides, the monarchy simply could not afford the risk of another Eastern adventure. Reminding the tsar of the unrest that had disrupted the empire after the Crimean and Turkish imbroglios during his grandfather’s reign, Witte advised him that “for the sake of the domestic situation [...] it is exceedingly important to avoid any actions that might lead to complications abroad.”⁴⁹

In sharp contrast to his position three years earlier, when he had championed taking Port Arthur, the Foreign Minister now also favored a soft line in the Far East.

44. See, for example, V. M. Dorosevich, “Gzha tsivilizatsii,” in A. V. Amfiteatrov and V. M. Dorosevich, *op. cit.*: 15-16. Ukhtomskii made the same comparison. Th. Schiemann, *Deutschland und die große Politik* (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1902), 1: 373.

45. Aleksandr Valentinovich Amfiteatrov, “Kitaiskaia groza,” in A. V. Amfiteatrov and V. M. Dorosevich, *op. cit.*: 28-29.

46. N. B., “K sobytiim na Dal’nem Vostoke,” *Sankt-Peterburgskie vedomosti* (14/6/1900): 2.

47. Nicholas II, annotation on N. M. Giers to M. N. Murav’ev, 15/6/1900, AVPRI, f. 143, op. 491, d. 115, l. 116; Nicholas II to Maria Fedorovna, letter, 11/8/1900, GARF, f. 642, op. 1, d. 2326, ll. 61-62

48. Nicholas II, annotation on V. N. Lamsdorf to Urusov, letter, 24/8/1900, *Krasnyi arkhiv*, 14 (1926): 31.

49. S. Iu. Witte to Nicholas II, memorandum, 11/8/1900, RGIA, f. 560, op. 28, d. 218, ll. 66-73. Also summarized in A. A. Polovtsov, “Iz dnevnika A. A. Polovtsova,” *Krasnyi arkhiv*, 46 (1931): 131-132; S. Iu. Witte, *The memoirs of Count Witte* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1990): 278-279; Anatolii Venediktovich Ignatev, *S. Iu. Vitte — diplomat* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1989): 130-132.

As the crisis came to a head, he devoted his energies to preserving his government's special relationship with Peking. His pronouncements repeatedly stressed the centuries of peaceful relations between the two autocracies. Like Witte, Count Murav'ev resisted military intervention as long as possible. When in early June the count could no longer reasonably abstain from sending troops to the region, he instructed Admiral Evgenii Alekseev, the Russian commander in the Far East:

"You must bear in mind that our units are on Chinese territory without any hostile intentions towards our traditional friend on the Eastern border. It is entirely in our interests, as soon as the disorders have been put down, to reestablish the friendliest relations possible."⁵⁰

Yet Murav'ev did not escape criticism for having bungled in China. He had long prided himself on his ability to retain the emperor's confidence and affection, and the latter generally backed the broad lines of his policies in China. However, as the Boxers were laying siege to the legations in Peking, Nicholas faulted the count for having minimized the seriousness of the unrest there. He was particularly displeased that Murav'ev had not ordered the mission's staff to evacuate the capital earlier in the year, while there was still time. When the Foreign Minister died suddenly on the night of June 8, after a heated argument with Sergei Witte over the Chinese question, it was believed that somehow his demise was linked to the events on the Pacific.⁵¹ Murav'ev's successor, Count Vladimir Nikolaevich Lamsdorf, made no major changes in his approach to the Far Eastern crisis.

There were advocates of a tougher stance in the Orient. Colonel Wogack, the Russian military attaché in China, had been sending alarming reports about the rising since early 1899.⁵² In Port Arthur, Admiral Alekseev thoroughly disdained the appeasement of the diplomats, and was eager to teach the Chinese a lesson.⁵³ The War Minister also advocated firmness. In contrast to the officials at the Foreign Ministry, General Aleksei Kuropatkin argued that the special relationship with the Qing was no more. After the Dowager's coup in 1898, Peking had become hostile to all foreigners, including Russia. "Our former peaceful and friendly relations with our Asiatic neighbor changed several years ago," the general explained to the tsar. Referring to the Boxers, he added that "the movement [...] has a patriotic and anti-Christian character and is directed against us just as much as against the other powers." Russia, he concluded, was now involved in a conflict with all of China: "From a political perspective, it has been useful for us to continue asserting that we

50. N. M. Murav'ev to E. I. Alekseev, telegram, 5/6/1900, GARF, f. 568, op. 1, d. 129, l. 33; Murav'ev's thinking about the Boxers is laid out in N. M. Murav'ev to Nicholas II, memorandum, 4/6/1900, *Krasnyi arkhiv*, 14 (1926): 14-15.

51. Aleksandra Viktorevna Bogdanovich, *Tri poslednikh samoderzhtsa* (Moscow: Novosti, 1990): 255; C. S. Scott to Salisbury, despatch, 28/6/1900, in Kenneth Bourne and D. Cameron Watts, eds, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs* (University Press of America, 1983-1989), I/ E/24: 28-29; H. Cordier, *op. cit.*: 507.

52. Istoricheskaia Komissiiia, *Russko-Iaponskaia voina*, pt. 1-a: 383-385; I. I. Korostovets, *op. cit.*: 12.

53. I. I. Korostovets, *op. cit.*: 20-21.

are fighting a rebellious army [in China] [...] but in fact, we are waging war with the government of China.”⁵⁴ Not all generals shared these views. Vannovskii, the former War Minister, strongly disagreed with his successor’s opinions, and accused Kuropatkin of cynically fabricating the war, so that he might “upgrade his George’s Cross.”⁵⁵

As the crisis deepened in the summer of 1900, the tsar tended to support those ministers who counselled moderation in China. The British embassy rightly observed:

“ [...] the policy followed has [...] been directly inspired by the peaceful disposition of the Emperor, and initiated by His Majesty with the warm support of M. Witte and Count Lamsdorff, who have thus formed a potent party of peace, and whose policy the powerful military party has strongly but so far ineffectually opposed.”⁵⁶

Nicholas would eventually sanction military participation in the intervention against the Boxers, and took pride in the performance of his troops during the Chinese campaign.⁵⁷ Yet the Emperor repeatedly pointed out that his government had a special mission in the Middle Kingdom. “Russia and the other powers have entirely different goals in the Far East,” he wrote his mother. “What’s good for us is bad for the rest and doesn’t suit them; this has long been apparent.”⁵⁸

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Russia’s actions during the Boxer crisis were largely determined by events beyond its control. When on May 25 the British Minister, Sir Claude MacDonald, took the unprecedented step of asking Giers to supply 4,000 troops from the Port Arthur garrison, his superiors in St. Petersburg felt obligated to comply.⁵⁹ A few days later,

54. A. N. Kuropatkin to Nicholas II, memorandum, 3/8/1900, RGIA, f. 560, op. 28, d. 218, ll. 13-19.

55. A. V. Bogdanovich, *op. cit.*: 254. The Order of St. George was Imperial Russia’s highest military decoration, and had four classes. V. A. Durov, *The orders of Russia* (Moscow: Voskresenie, 1993): 36-51.

56. C. Hardinge to Salisbury, despatch, 26/10/1900, in G. P. Gooch and Harold Temperley, eds, *British documents on the origins of the war 1898-1914* (London: H.M.S.O., 1927), 2: 17.

57. A. N. Kuropatkin, diary, 9/8/1900, Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Voenno-Istoricheskii Arkhiv (Russian State Military History Archive, Moscow, hereafter RGVIA), f. 165, op. 1, d. 1889, l. 94; Nicholas II to Maria Fedorovna, letter, 22/12/1900, GARF, f. 642, op. 1, d. 2326, ll. 101-102.

58. Nicholas II to Maria Fedorovna, letter, 27/8/1900, GARF, f. 642, op. 1, d. 2326, ll. 67-68. Nicholas made a very similar comment in the margin of a note from his foreign minister: “Russia’s mission in the East thoroughly differs from the policies of the European governments.” Nicholas II, annotation on M. N. Murav’ev to Nicholas II, memorandum, 4/6/1900, *Krasnyi arkhiv*, 14 (1926): 15.

59. N. M. Murav’ev to Nicholas II, memorandum, 25/5/1900, *ibid.*: 13-14; Boris Aleksandrovich Romanov, *Russia in Manchuria*. Translated by Susan Wilbur Jones (Ann Arbor: Edwards, 1952): 178.

Russian sailors joined a British-led multinational force as it set out from Tianjin in a vain effort to reach the beleaguered legations in the Chinese capital.⁶⁰ In early June, Russian ships joined five other navies in seizing Dagu's fortifications at the mouth of the Peiho River, and during much of that month Siberian infantry played a leading role in the battle for Tianjin.⁶¹

Every such action was accompanied by solemn pronouncements that Russia meant no malice towards the Qing. The speech given by Vice-Admiral Iakov Hildebrandt to sailors of the *Petropavlovsk* as they were about to set off for Dagu in late May was typical:

“Lads! Not far from us [...] an uprising of Chinese rebels has broken out, which threatens the capital of the Bogdykhan [...]. His Majesty the Emperor [...] sends his troops to Peking [...] to protect his representative to the Emperor of China, Russian subjects, as well as all foreigners, and to help the Chinese government, whose army cannot subdue the rebels on its own. So you are not being ordered to China for war, but in the interests of peace.”⁶²

After the failure of the first attempt to reach the missions, Nicholas dithered for weeks about whether his forces should join a second international expedition to Peking. He agreed to do so only when news reached him in mid-June that Boxers had murdered the new German minister, Baron Clemens von Ketteler.⁶³ Even then the tsar and his foreign minister agonized over who should command this force. Kuropatkin's suggestion that Admiral Alekseev have that honor was deemed inappropriate, given Russia's aspirations to a special relationship with China. Yet when Tokyo volunteered one of its generals, Lamsdorf was horrified. Ultimately, a German officer, Field-Marshal Count Alfred von Waldersee, turned out to be the least objectionable man for the job.⁶⁴

Meanwhile, St. Petersburg continued its own diplomacy. After the telegraph was cut, negotiating with the government in Peking became impossible. However, Li Hongzhang now reemerged from semi-banishment in Canton, and was drafted to offer his services as intermediary to the Qing. In a cable to Witte on June 13, Li proposed to intercede with the Dowager Empress to suppress the Boxers, if the

60. Istoricheskaia Komissia, *op. cit.*: 403-406. Russian participation in the campaign in Zhili province is also described in A. S. Grishinskii and V. P. Nikol'skii, eds, *Istoriia russkoi armii i flota* (Moscow: Obrazovanie, 1911), 13: 50-63.

61. Istoricheskaia Komissia, *op. cit.*: 411-443, 462-471.

62. n.a., “Otppravka iz Port-Artura v Taku ekspeditsionnogo otriada,” *Kronshtadtskii vestnik* (23/6/1900): 2.

63. A. N. Kuropatkin, diary entry, 23/6/1900, RGVIA, f. 165, op. 1, d. 1889, l. 87; B. B. Glinskii, ed., *op. cit.*: 107-108; Harold Perry Ford, *Russian Far Eastern diplomacy: Count Witte and the penetration of China* (PhD Dissertation: University of Chicago, 1950): 261-262.

64. Foreign Ministry, Annual Report, 1900, AVPRI, f. 137, op. 475, d. 130, l. 81; V. N. Lamsdorff to Nicholas II, memorandum, 30/6/1900, *Krasnyi arkhiv*, 14 (1926): 18-19; P. N. Simanskii, *op. cit.*: 78-79; A. V. Ignatev, *op. cit.*: 131-133; R. A. Glatfelter, *op. cit.*: 84-92.

Russian tsar helped restrain the Europeans.⁶⁵ Nicholas declared this idea “very desirable,” and Witte promptly instructed Prince Ukhtomskii to join the “old man” in China, while also ordering the Russian navy to place a cruiser at Li’s disposal for the journey to Peking.⁶⁶ In the event, the initiative came to nothing, since the other powers were sceptical of the notoriously pro-Russian official. By the time Li arrived in the Chinese capital in mid-September, Western troops had already been there for over a month.⁶⁷

In the early afternoon of August 1, a multinational force finally rescued the legations. Comprised mainly of Japanese, Russian, British, and American units, the 20,000-man expedition had taken ten days to battle its way from Tianjin. Ironically, the first troops to make it to the besieged compound were not Europeans, but sepoy of the 1st Sikh and 7th Rajput Infantry Regiments. The siege had lasted for nearly two months, and took 76 foreign lives, including five Russians. Damage to the Russian compound was relatively light, although the Russo-Chinese Bank’s building and the Ecclesiastical Mission were destroyed. With the capture of Peking, Cixi fled westward with her court to Xi’an, the capital of Shaanxi province. It did not take long thereafter for the Boxer rising in Zhili to come to an end.⁶⁸

In Manchuria, where Sergei Witte presided over extensive investments in the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER) concession, Russian interests were more directly affected by the Boxers. As unrest erupted in Peking that spring, at first it seemed that the three northeastern provinces would be spared. Despite occasional brushes with the notorious “Red Beards,” bandits who had long been the scourge of Manchuria’s countryside, the CER’s guards were still largely kept busy with the more mundane police work of any frontier.

The local population on the whole remained well-disposed towards the Russians, and seemed content to make a living from the new interlopers.⁶⁹ Dugald Christie, a Presbyterian missionary who had been living in the Manchu capital of Mukden (now Shenyang) since 1882, remembered that at the time “in Manchuria all was quiet, and very little anti-foreign feeling existed. The Russian railway and the presence of the Russians were sullenly accepted as facts which could be neither

65. Li Hongzhang to S. Iu. Witte, telegram, 13/6/1900, RGIA, f. 560, op. 28, d. 190, l. 1. Li also approached other governments, including the United States. William J. Duiker, *Cultures in collision: The Boxer rebellion* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978): 145-148. Tan’s suggestion that the Russian government rejected Li’s proposal is misleading. See C. C. Tan, *op. cit.*: 122;

66. S. Iu. Witte to Li Hongzhang, telegram, 20/7/1900, RGIA, f. 560, op. 28, d. 190, l. 35; S. Iu. Witte to Nicholas II, memorandum, 13/7/1900, RGIA, f. 560, op. 28, d. 190, l. 24; P. P. Tyrtov to S. Iu. Witte, letter, 30/7/1900, RGIA, f. 560, op. 28, d. 190, l. 57. Li Hongzhang to S. Iu. Witte, telegram, 6/1900, RGIA, f. 560, op. 28, d. 290, l. 9.

67. B. A. Romanov, *op. cit.*: 179-189; I. I. Korostovets, *op. cit.*: 65; A. V. Ignatev, *op. cit.*: 133; H. B. Morse, *op. cit.*: 273; C. C. Tan, *op. cit.*: 120-125; William L. Langer, *The diplomacy of imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1956), 2: 698.

68. D. D. Pokotilov to S. Iu. Witte, telegram, 4/1/1900, *Krasnyi arkhiv*, 14 (1926): 27; D. Ianchevetskii, *op. cit.*: 423-435; I. I. Korostovets, *op. cit.*: 70; H. B. Morse, *op. cit.*: 280.

69. P. N. Simanskii, *op. cit.*: 90; H. B. Morse, *op. cit.*: 169; R. A. Glatfelter, *op. cit.*: 59.

denied nor altered.”⁷⁰ As late as June 1, when Boxers were already besieging Peking’s legations less than 600 kilometers to the east, the Scottish minister was enjoying a peaceful church picnic on a river bank near Mukden.⁷¹

The three provinces’ governors-general also initially opposed the Boxers. Even after the allied naval assault on Dagu on June 8, when Cixi issued a decree ordering them to arms against the foreigners, they prevaricated.⁷² Meanwhile, Sergei Witte was doing his best to keep the conflict from spreading to Manchuria. In mid-June he authorized generous credits for the CER’s chief engineer to distribute at his discretion among the local administration.⁷³ Aside from augmenting his guards, the Finance Minister preferred diplomacy for the time being. For much of the month, he engaged in a war of memoranda to the tsar with General Kuropatkin, who was much more anxious about the threat to Russian lives and property in the region.⁷⁴ Witte repeatedly advised Nicholas that intervention would only “harm the good relations” that still existed between his subjects and Chinese in Manchuria.⁷⁵

Towards the end of June, the situation began to deteriorate. In southern Manchuria, where many men from Shandong were working on the CER, Boxer emissaries began to find a sympathetic hearing. Unlike the area around Peking, however, the deciding factor here was the Qing central government itself, which was now insisting that their governors drive out the Russians by force. The province’s weak-willed governor-general, Zengqi, eventually gave the insurgents his half-hearted support, but his radical lieutenant, Jinchang, proved to be much more zealous. On June 22 Jinchang arrested his superior and took command of a joint force of regular soldiers and Boxers. Over the next few days, reports of attacks all along the CER’s southern line began to pour into the headquarters at Harbin. Within a week, Aleksandr Iugovich, the chief engineer, ordered his staff to evacuate the railway, and by June 27 Harbin itself was under siege and its telegraph out of service.⁷⁶

70. Dugald Christie, *Thirty years in the Manchu capital: In and around Moukden in peace and war* (New York: McBride, Nast & Company, 1914): 130.

71. *Ibid.*: 132.

72. E. Kh. Nilus, ed., *Istoricheskii obzor Kitaiskoi vostochnoi zheleznoi dorogi, 1896-1923 gg.* (Harbin: Tipografiia K.V.Zh.D., 1923), 1: 190-193; P. N. Simanskii, *op. cit.*: 90-91.

73. B. A. Romanov, *op. cit.*: 180.

74. However, Kuropatkin was not as eager to march into Manchuria as Witte suggests. The Finance Minister’s recollection that his colleague was delighted with the rebellion because it would give Russia “grounds for taking Manchuria” seems apocryphal. S. Iu. Witte, *op. cit.*: 279.

75. S. Iu. Witte to Nicholas II, memorandum, 15/6/1900, RGIA, f. 560, op. 38, d. 180, ll. 104-105; S. Iu. Witte to Nicholas II, memorandum, 19/6/1900, RGIA, f. 560, op. 28, d. 190, l. 8; A.N. Kuropatkin to Nicholas II, memorandum, 3/8/1900, RGIA, f. 560, op. 28, d. 218, ll. 13-19; B. B. Glinskii, ed., *op. cit.*: 111-114; P. N. Simanskii, *op. cit.*: 100-101.

76. E. Kh. Nilus, ed., *op. cit.*: 190-215; B. B. Glinskii, ed., *op. cit.*: 113-114; D. Christie, *op. cit.*: 135-142; Andrew Malozemoff, *Russia’s Far Eastern policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958): 135-138; Michael H. Hunt, *Frontier defense and the open door: Manchuria in Chinese-American relations, 1895-1911* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973): 18.

Witte now knew he had no alternative. On June 26 he reluctantly gave General Kuropatkin his consent to send troops into Manchuria against the Boxers. That day, a contingent of Cossacks, infantry and artillery under the command of Major-General V.V. Sakharov set off by steamer and barge up the Sungari River from Khabarovsk to relieve Harbin. It would take another three weeks to organize a larger force for the overland invasion of Manchuria.

In mid-July, over 100,000 troops from the Siberian and Amur Military Districts crossed into Manchuria in five separate columns. The Russians cut into the three provinces like knives through soft butter. General Sakharov's flotilla lifted the siege of Harbin on July 22. Three weeks later, on August 15, Cossacks under the command of Major-General P. K. Rennenkampf stormed the fortified city of Tsitsihar in northern Manchuria, and, on September 18, Lieutenant-General D.I. Subbotich marched unopposed through the gates of Mukden. The operation had taken less than three months and cost about 200 Russian lives.⁷⁷

In Peking, the attention of the foreign powers now turned to exacting suitable compensation from the Qing for the troubles. For over a year complicated negotiations were carried out between the so-called Allies, Li Hongzhang, and the exiled Qing court, resulting in the "Boxer Protocol" of August 1901. Its terms were draconian, and included the execution of leading anti-foreign officials, severe restrictions on Chinese defences, monuments to commemorate the European victims, and the replacement of the Zongli Yamen with a Western-style foreign ministry. The most burdensome provision was a massive 450-million tael indemnity — more than twice that imposed by the Japanese five years earlier and over four times the annual revenues of the central government.⁷⁸

In the months following the capture of Peking, Giers continued to exasperate his colleagues by his reluctance to punish the Chinese.⁷⁹ Already on August 12, St. Petersburg issued a statement explaining that its only goals had been to protect Russian subjects and helping the Chinese government to restore order.⁸⁰ Meanwhile, tsarist officials expressed strong disapproval of Field-Marshal

77. A. S. Grishinskii and V. P. Nikol'skii, eds, *op. cit.*: 63-82; P. N. Simanskii, *op. cit.*: 102-106; E. Kh. Nilus, ed., *op. cit.*: 217-219. Other Russian accounts of the conflict include P. N. Krasnov, *Bor'ba s Kitaem* (SPb: Russkoe imenie, 1901); A. V. Vereshchagin, ed., *Na voine: Rasskazy ochevidtsev* (SPb: R. Golike, 1902); id., "Po Manchzhurii 1900-1901," *Vestnik Evropy*, 37, 1 (Jan. 1902): 103-148; 2 (Feb. 1902): 573-627; 3 (Mar. 1902): 130-173; Konstantin Porfirevich Kushakov, *Iuzhno-manchzhurskie besporiadki v 1900 godu* (Ashkabad: Ashkabadskaiia obshchina Zakaspiiskogo otdela Rossiiskogo obshchestva Krasnogo Kresta, 1902); D. Ianchevetskii, *op. cit.*: 507-618. The only English-language history of the campaign is George Alexander Lensen, *The Russo-Chinese war* (Tallahassee, FL: The Diplomatic Press, 1967).

78. C. C. Tan, *op. cit.*: 129-156, 215-236; J. W. Esherick, *op. cit.*: 311; John V. A. MacMurray, *Treaties and agreements with and concerning China, 1894-1919* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1921), 1: 278-308; H. Cordier, *op. cit.*: 537-545. The talks are described in John S. Kelly, *The negotiations at Peking 1900-1901* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1963).

79. P. N. Simanskii, *op. cit.*: 34-42; A. Malozemoff, *op. cit.*: 133-135.

80. V. N. Lamsdorf to diplomatic representatives in Paris, Berlin, London, Vienna, Rome, Washington and Tokyo, telegram, 12/8/1900, *Krasnyi arkhiv*, 14 (1926): 28-29.

Waldersee's sorties into the countryside during the fall, and were the first to withdraw their troops from the capital. As for the talks themselves, Nicholas remarked that "the Europeans have drunk enough Chinese blood already." The tsar's instructions to his envoy were clear:

"I want Giers to lessen his participation in the collective efforts by the Europeans to impose such severe conditions on the Chinese. It's time for us to separate ourselves from the Western powers in the Far East."⁸¹

Within weeks of the siege's end, the minister fulfilled the emperor's wishes quite literally, by temporarily moving his legation to Tianjin on the grounds that its presence in Peking was dilatory as long as Cixi's court remained in Xian. Robert Hart muttered that "The Russians are playing their own game."⁸²

St. Petersburg's dovish stance infuriated the West. Britain's prime minister, Lord Salisbury, at one point felt that "Russia, not China, seems to me to be the greatest danger."⁸³ Kaiser Wilhelm II dismissed Lamsdorf's statements as "Rubbish any self-respecting secretary from one of our legations wouldn't dream of writing."⁸⁴ Even a French diplomat charged that, "if it did not directly provoke [the Boxers, Russia] has perhaps encouraged them. It well knows how to benefit from the situation."⁸⁵

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Throughout the Far Eastern troubles of 1900, Russia kept its distance from the other powers. When unrest was first reported at the start of the year, its diplomats dismissed the news as alarmist and refused to consider expressing its displeasure to the Qing. As the disorders grew into a full-scale rising and the legation came under siege that summer, the tsar hesitated, temporized, and only participated in the multinational march on Peking with the greatest reluctance. There was also much resistance in St. Petersburg to the occupation of Manchuria. During the fall and into the following year, Russia's envoy pleaded with his European colleagues to soften their demands for retribution from the Qing.

Early in August 1900, shortly after foreign troops had stormed Peking, Count Lamsdorf directed his department's legal expert, Fedor Martens, to compose a

81. A. L. Popov, "Dal' nevestochnaia politika tsarizma v 1894-1901 gg.," *Istorik-marksist*, 11 (1935):50.

82. R. Hart to J. D. Campbell, letter, 29/9/1900, R. Hart, *op. cit.*: 1239.

83. W. L. Langer, *op. cit.*: 695.

84. Wilhelm II, marginal comment on Radolin to Foreign Ministry, telegram, 30/8/1900, in Johannes Lepsius et al., *Die Grosse Politik der Europäischen Kabinette 1871-1914* (Berlin, 1922-1927), 16: 109.

85. De Bezaure to Delcassé, despatch, 10/6/1900, in France, Ministère des affaires étrangères, *Documents diplomatiques français (1871-1914)*, 16: 269.

memorandum with his thoughts about the Boxer rebellion. Martens was one of the leading authorities on international law and had published a standard textbook about the subject. From time to time he also wrote about pressing diplomatic issues of the day. These pieces were often published abroad, and many considered them to be authoritative statements of the Russian Foreign Ministry.⁸⁶

Martens duly submitted a note, "Europe and China," which formed the basis of Lamsdorf's circular of August 12. While it said nothing particularly new, the document provided the clearest insight into official tsarist thinking about the recent events. As its author explained, the siege of the legations was only a minor aspect of the problem. The real issue was the endless, "brazen exploitation of the Chinese by the Europeans." For decades now "the European-American peoples" had been destroying the Middle Kingdom with its opium and missionary activity. Small wonder then that mandarins and Chinese patriots had played leading roles in the "people's war." "Russia's relationship with China has been entirely different," Martens stressed. "To [the Europeans] China is a colony, which must be exploited in all respects. To Russia, China is a great neighboring state, which has every right to an independent existence."⁸⁷

Tsarist thinking about the Boxer rising, as shown in Martens' memorandum, was condemned abroad as pure propaganda. Yet to dismiss it as such would be too simplistic. Russians were entirely correct when they pointed out that they had exported neither opium nor missionaries to China. Subconsciously, conservative officials could easily sympathize with the plight of another autocracy being polluted by Western ideas and goods. Perhaps there was little sympathy in Peking anymore for an alliance with the Romanov tsar. However, in St. Petersburg, the idea of a special relationship remained very much alive.

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86. For a recent biography, see Vladimir Vasilevich Pustogarov, "...*S pal'movoi vetvii mira...*" *F.F. Martens - iurist, diplomat, publitsist* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1993).

87. F. F. Martens to V. N. Lamsdorf, memorandum, 8/1900, in *Krasnyi arkhiv*, 20 (1927): 177-185.