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## **THE AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN SHARE IN THE 'BOXER REBELLION' IN BEIJING IN 1900**

*ABSTRACT: By the end of the 19th century, the Western powers and Japan had forced China's dynasty to accept wide foreign control over the country's economic affairs. In 1900, a Chinese secret organization called the Society of the Righteous and Harmonious Fists led an uprising in northern China against the spread of Western and Japanese influence there. The Western powers and Japan organized a multinational force to crush the rebellion. On August 14, after fighting its way through northern China, an international force of approximately 20,000 troops from eight nations (Austria-Hungary, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States) arrived to take Beijing and rescue the foreigners and Chinese Christians.*

*KEY WORDS: Austro-Hungary, boxer rebellion, Chinese Empire, Austro-Hungarian naval policy, SMS 'Zenta'.*

The foreign policy of Austria-Hungary in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century displayed a very pronounced focus on the European continent despite the upsurge in European colonialism at that time. Still even a non-colonial power like Austria-Hungary could occasionally be involved in military activities beyond its accustomed territorial horizons as the events on Crete in 1897 and in Beijing in 1900 demonstrate. Those later occurrences in the year 1900 shall now be explored from the beginning

of the siege of the Beijing legations to their relief by a multinational force with an emphasis on the Austro-Hungarian perspective. The Austro-Hungarian policy towards Eastern Asia was, not so much determined by a colonial programme but by its general foreign policy and its identity as a great power. Therefore, the Habsburg Monarchy was one of the last European powers that made an appearance in Eastern Asia. The first diplomatic treaties with the Chinese Empire were concluded in 1869, the first legation was established in 1896 only. Considerations to follow suit with other powers and to claim a colonial possession or at least a dependency (*Schutzgebiet*) were disapproved by the first Austro-Hungarian representative to China, Baron Moritz Czikann von Wahlborn, because this would have required an increased diplomatic and military presence and hence a substantial financial commitment as well. Czikann's opinion was supported by the fact that the opening of Chinese harbours that had been enforced by other powers benefited the Austro-Hungarian trade as well and as such had already realized the main aim a potential colonial policy could have for Austria-Hungary. Therefore, Austria-Hungary was not only surprised by the outbreak of an anti-European turmoil in 1900 but also had to rely on improvisations.<sup>1</sup>

The backdrop of these upheavals and the later fighting with foreign forces is to be seen in the emergence and spreading of a religiously motivated movement that the Europeans simplistically labelled as the 'Boxers'. What the exact origins of this movement were is to this day contested. However, it is safe to ascertain that it took shape during the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and that it emerged out of several local groupings and secret societies. They, on their part, were created under the impression of lost wars against foreign intruders – both the Opium Wars (1839-1842, 1856-1860) and the first Sino-Japanese war (1894/1895) as well as the increasing imperialist influence in general. Apart from this, further factors contributed to the spreading of the Boxer movement, among them the internal conflict between reformists and conservatives at the Imperial court under the empress dowager Cixi (Tz'u Hsi). The ever increasing number of Christian missionaries who enjoyed a privileged position under the protection of the foreign powers and intervened in local administration, gave the movement a strong anti-Christian outlook.<sup>2</sup> The organizational structure of the movement

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<sup>1</sup> Gerd Kaminski and Else Unterrieder, *Wäre ich Chinese, so wäre ich Boxer. Das Leben an der k.u.k. Gesandtschaft in Peking in Tagebüchern, Briefen und Dokumenten* (Vienna: Europaverlag 1989), 48.

<sup>2</sup> Richard O'Connor, *Der Boxeraufstand. Chinas blutige Tragödie* (München: Heyne Verlag 1980), 12 f.

corresponded to the diversity of the motives of its followers and might therefore be described as loose and disparate. Local groupings gathered around single leaders, performed folkloric and mythic rituals and had a strong appeal to marginalized segments of the rural population – not at least due to their reputation as possessing the attribute of being invulnerable to modern western weapons. In terms of religion there was a mix of Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian beliefs that was attractive for many. This was even more so because of the numerous bad harvests and plagues experienced in the course of the 1890s and due to the huge number of unemployed people. For all this the foreign presence in China was blamed. Getting rid of the foreigners as well as of Chinese converted to Christianity and the return to the traditional way of life was expected to be the remedy for all identified grievances. Consequentially, the followers of the movement called themselves 'Yihetuan' (Association for Justice and Harmony) respectively 'Yihequan' (Fists of Harmony and Justice). The term 'Boxer' is based on the fact that the first followers practiced traditional martial arts whose exercises appeared similar to those of Western boxers in the eyes of foreign observers. The red color served as a distinctive mark, and amulets with reputed protective powers against modern weaponry were very common.

The first riots staged by members of the Boxer movement can already be discerned for the year 1899 and were directed against foreigners, who were classified as '1<sup>st</sup> class devils', as well as converted Chinese – '2<sup>nd</sup> class devils'.<sup>3</sup> In the same year a British missionary in the province of Shantung became the first prominent victim. During the winter of 1899/1900 the unrest spread to the province of Zhili. In this context the attitude of the Chinese Government appears interesting as the empress dowager Cixi was eager to divert the anger of the discontent masses against the foreigners on the one hand and to uphold her international legal responsibilities regarding the safety of foreign legations and settlements on the other. Here the foreign diplomats residing in the international quarters and dealing with the 'Zongli Yamen' (office in charge of affairs of all nations) assumed a pivotal role. In this regard there was no common position in the Zongli Yamen as there were liberal as well as conservative officeholders, making the politics of the Chinese government during the critical months in June to August 1900 an ambivalent and divergent one. However, it was - without any doubt - Cixi herself who determined governmental politics and its ambivalence. This became manifest in January when attacks of Boxers

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<sup>3</sup> Günter Schusta, *Österreich-Ungarn und der Boxeraufstand*, Phil. Diss., St. Pölten 1967, 10 f.

on foreign missionaries were condemned while the movement itself was not banned. On the contrary, it was stated that they were in principle law-abiding. As they were not effectively hindered by the authorities, the Boxers increased their activities and intensified their attacks especially against Christian Chinese. Meanwhile the reports about excesses were monitored closely in the foreign legations in Beijing, not least because they had spread from the countryside to the cities and thereby approached the capital. Although at the end of May the situation remained calm in Beijing itself, the train line between this city and Tientsin (Tianjin) was interrupted from 28 to 30 May 1900, which made it obvious for the diplomatic corps how much it was in danger to be cut off from the essential connection to the sea.

Whereas the Chinese government made assertions for the protection of the rail line and hesitantly – in line with the stance of Cixi – dispatched troops, it was not able to prevent the destruction of railway facilities, residences of foreign railway employees and essential telegraph stations. Beyond that many troops deserted to the Boxers instead of fighting them.<sup>4</sup> This prompted the international envoys to ask the Zongli Yamen to agree to the deployment of detachments of foreign troops, formed of crews and marines of warships that anchored near Taku (Dagu) Road. The Chinese government granted this but also set a limit of 20 to 30 soldiers per nation. After the envoys in Beijing had agreed on this common step in a conference on 28 May, the Austro-Hungarian chargé d' affaires Dr. Arthur von Rosthorn – substituting the envoy proper Baron Czikkann who was on leave – asked the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Vienna to take appropriate measures to secure the Austro-Hungarian military participation. This time-consuming *modus operandi* was necessary since it was not yet possible for the diplomatic representatives on site in Eastern Asia to directly give orders to the Austro-Hungarian forces there. While other powers – Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Russia and Italy – due to their colonial interests and the USA due to their involvement on the Philippines – had more substantial numbers of warships and troops at their disposal, there was only one Austro-Hungarian warship in this region at that time. This was the small but modern cruiser 'Zenta' that after having been commissioned in May 1899 had been dispatched to Eastern Asia under the command of Captain Eduard Thomann von Montalmar. Already in March 1900, it had arrived in the Yellow Sea but since the Austro-

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<sup>4</sup> Claudia Ham, M. Christian Ortner (Ed.), *Mit S.M.S. Zenta in China.* "Mich hatte auch diesmal der Tod nicht gewollt...". Aus dem Tagebuch eines k.u.k. Matrosen während des Boxeraufstandes (Vienna: Mittler, 2000), 43.

Hungarian legation at Beijing thought that the situation would not require the use of military means it continued its travel to Japan in the mid of May and was to be found at Sasebo at the end of that month.<sup>5</sup>

It was there that on 30 May the ship's command received a dispatch of the Austro-Hungarian legation in Tokyo that asked for the immediate return to China in order to disembark a detachment for a common operation initiated by the legations at Beijing. This communication, however, could only have the status of a letter of indication since the required order of the k.u.k. naval command had not yet arrived. This notwithstanding, all necessary measures referring to provisions, coaling and initializing of the machines were immediately taken. After the awaited order of the naval command had arrived in the night, 'Zenta' left Sasebo on the morning of 31 May and approached Taku almost with maximum speed since the order of the naval command left no doubt of the urgency of the matter. Already while the ship was still underway the detachment intended for disembarkment was formed and the armament and provisions selected in view of remaining self-sufficient for the longest time possible. Therefore, the standard amount of ammunition of 250 rounds allotted to each soldier was doubled and it was ordered that a mitrailleuse with as much as 4,000 rounds and provisions for eight days be taken along. On the morning of 2 June, 'Zenta' arrived near Taku Road situated at the outlet of the Pei-ho River (Hai He) where it found itself among an already quite substantial assemblage of warships.<sup>6</sup>

While the disembarkment was retarded a little bit by bad weather, the Austro-Hungarian detachment under the command of Lieutenant Joseph Kollar with the assigned Midshipmen Richard von Boyneburg and Thomas Mayer set out to get to Beijing by train. Since the Austro-Hungarian chargé d'affaires Rosthorn wished to speak to the captain of 'Zenta' in person, Thomann decided to accompany the Austro-Hungarian detachment which was also joined by another lieutenant – Theodor Ritter von Winterhalder. However, in order not to surpass the maximum number of military personnel permitted by the Chinese, both were dressed with civilian clothes. This meant that the small Austro-Hungarian detachment had a disproportionate number of five officers, whereby Thomann and Winterhalder should have returned to the ship already on 5 June, which was then, however, prevented by the course of

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<sup>5</sup> Wladimir Aichelburg, *Register der k.(u.)k. Kriegsschiffe. Von Abbonanza bis Zrinyi* (Vienna/Graz: NWV, Neuer Wiss. Verlag, 2002), 539.

<sup>6</sup> Theodor von Winterhalder, *Kämpfe in China. Eine Darstellung der Wirren und der Beteiligungen von Österreich-Ungarns Seemacht an ihrer Niederwerfung in den Jahren 1900-1901* (Wien und Budapest: A. Hartleben's Verlag 1902), 31-33.

events in Beijing.<sup>7</sup> The small detachment boarded the train at Tongkue together with the German contingent and arrived via Tientsin at Machiapu – a train station situated outside Beijing – on 3 June. On the last kilometres to Machiapu traces of Boxer activities such as burnt engine sheds, water towers, and waggons had already come in view. Already on the evening of 3 June, a first meeting of Thomann and Rosthorn took place and on the next day another one followed suite. The detachment of sailors was meanwhile deployed to guard the Austro-Hungarian legation and eight further sailors under the command of a midshipman were on the request of the Belgian envoy put at his disposal to provide his personal protection. Meanwhile the train line to Tientsin was again interrupted in the night from 3 to 4 June. The telegraph line continued to operate until 10 June. Thus, not only the return of the two officers of 'Zenta' was prevented but also the legations in Beijing were isolated. Consecutive actions of Austro-Hungarian forces were taken in cooperation with other international troops and on three more or less geographically separated sites: as part of the defence of the legations in Beijing and of the first relief expedition ('Seymour-expedition') including the fighting in and around Tientsin and the capture of the Taku Forts at the coast. Therefore, and in order to make it better understandable, these events are henceforth dealt with separately.

### **Events on Taku Road and the first relief attempt (‘Seymour Expedition’)**

The interruption of the train line to Beijing demanded an appropriate response of the international squadron anchoring near Taku Road. For Austria-Hungary, Dr. von Rosthorn and Captain von Thomann had already assessed the situation in the city of Beijing as dangerous and therefore had demanded via the still working telegraph connection to dispatch another group of sailors from the 'Zenta' on 4 June already. Expecting concerted international action, it was mandated to put this soldiers at the disposal of the highest-ranking officer of the squadron of international powers. Therefore, the Austro-Hungarians were the first ones to be available for such an undertaking since the other nations forces had still to ask their governments for the authorization of such an action. SMS 'Zenta' provided 73 sailors under the command of a lieutenant and two midshipmen who were deployed to Tientsin together

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<sup>7</sup> Österreichisches Staatsarchiv/Kriegsarchiv/Marinesektion/OK, 1900, X-14/5 Nr. 2443

with troops of the other powers arriving there on 7 June. During the following days this first group was reinforced by still more troops. Meanwhile a 'war council' including all admirals and independent commanders of the ships on site and being presided by the British Vice Admiral Sir Edward Seymour, deliberated on how to further proceed in view of the threat to the legations in Beijing. It was decided to still refrain from using military force and rather call on the Chinese government to reinforce its measures against the Boxers. Meanwhile, further troops should be disembarked and dispatched to Tientsin to be prepared for all eventualities. Further decisions taken by the commanders of the squadron at Taku were influenced by additional reports that were partly contradictory and partly overly dramatizing and soon could not be verified anymore due to the breakdown of the telegraph line. Vice Admiral Seymour arrived at Tientsin on the night of 9 to 10 June and on grounds of yet another dramatic report from Beijing decided to undertake an advance to provide the legation guards in Beijing with reinforcements. The force that had to fulfil this task consisted of 1,871 soldiers, among them 26 Austro-Hungarians, and had to advance to Beijing as fast as possible by train. The decision to use the train for this operation was based on unverified intelligence that the destruction of railways by the Boxers was only superficial and that they could be repaired quickly. Later, this should turn out to be fatal. The marching order rested upon four trains carrying almost 1,900 men. The Austro-Hungarian troops under the command of Midshipman Prohaska boarded the first train. On 10 June, the 'Seymour-Expedition' was set in motion and already after some kilometres the first groups of Boxers were spotted and the soldiers in the train were put on full alert. Already at this point, it became clear that the multinational force disposed of very unequal levels of ammunition, weaponry and provisions.<sup>8</sup> Also the command during combat was prone to disunity as all actions had to be coordinated between distinct national contingents. These deficiencies however still posed no real problem up to Yangtsun Station.

On 11 June, Lofa was reached and it was decided, since the lines of supply from Tientsin had to be secured, to leave behind a small British detachment in the city. Here it was that the first encounters with groups of Boxers occurred, which, however, did not pose a real threat. But the situation started to deteriorate as soon as the force arrived at Langfang Station on 12 June. Here the damage afflicted to the train line turned to

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<sup>8</sup> Theodor von Winterhalder, *Kämpfe in China. Eine Darstellung der Wirren und der Beteiligungen von Österreich-Ungarns Seemacht an ihrer Niederwerfung in den Jahren 1900-1901* (Wien und Budapest: A. Hartleben's Verlag 1902), 110.

be lasting as the removed railways had disappeared and the water towers had been destroyed. This was detrimental to the operation of the locomotives.<sup>9</sup> The city itself had been entirely devastated. Here again a detachment should stay behind, this time provided by the German cruiser Gefion. The distance to Beijing from Langfang was no more than 45 km. A foray of the vanguard to Anting, where the station should have been secured, failed since the railway line could not be used and the Boxers made them aware of their presence. From 14 June onwards, they carried out open attacks against Lofa and Langfang. Reports that the train stations behind Lofa had again been destroyed, prompted Vice Admiral Seymour to stop any further advance and command the withdrawal. On 16 June, however, it became clear that it would be no longer possible to return by train. Therefore, the force was mandated to return to Tientsin on foot, although this constituted a substantial challenge with regard to the artillery it carried along. On 19 June at latest, it was obvious for all officers that the lines of retreat were blocked. Furthermore, regular Chinese military had begun to side with the Boxers, their modern armament causing an ever growing number of casualties.

After thorough deliberations it was decided to continue the retreat alongside the Pei-ho River. In the following days, while being permanently under attack by the Boxers and Chinese military, it turned out how poorly the operation had been prepared. The force was running out of ammunition and provisions and the transport of the wounded on improvised carriages and junks that also had to carry the guns, turned out to be quite precarious. In addition to that, on 21 June the force came across the arsenal of Hsiku that blocked the direct line of retreat. After a circumvention was judged to be difficult, they decided to attack it. While the fort was taken in a frontal charge, a strong Chinese column was approaching and preparations for the defence of the fort had to be made. The ensuing fighting caused the first fatal casualty among Austro-Hungarian soldiers. The sailor Josef Destewas killed. Only 5 km from Tientsin, the expedition ran in danger to be completely encircled and annihilated in the last moment. Therefore, it was very useful that in Hsiku modern European guns – being still in their original shipping packing – were found. They could now be deployed instead of the guns lost in action so far. From 23 to 25 June a proper artillery duel ensued with these guns newly acquired by the multinational force and Chinese

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<sup>9</sup> Claudia Ham, M. Christian Ortner (Ed.), *Mit S.M.S. Zenta in China. "Mich hatte auch diesmal der Tod nicht gewollt..." Aus dem Tagebuch eines k.u.k. Matrosen während des Boxeraufstandes* (Vienna: Mittler, 2000), 61.



artillery. Yet the force was only saved when the international troops stationed in Tientsin and reinforced by then, joined the fighting. On 26 June the 'Seymour Expedition' was able to return into the city of Tientsin. The result of the advance was a catastrophic one. Not only that the original aim, the relief of the legations in Beijing, had not been attained but the casualties were quite severe. The force had lost 62 dead and 228 wounded. Although it is safe to assume that the Chinese casualties were more substantial, the harm done to the prestige of the Western military was significant. Therefore, the hastily and badly prepared initiative of Vice Admiral Seymour faced well-justified criticism.

### **The capture of the Taku Forts**

The intervention of regular Chinese forces that made itself felt for the Seymour expedition originated in events that in the meantime had occurred on Taku Road. After detachments had been sent to Tientsin and Beijing, the number of foreign vessels continued to increase steadily. In July, 54 ships had assembled on site. In a series of deliberations the most senior commanders of this naval force discussed several scenarios in order to be able to react promptly if needed. Also in this context it appeared that the intelligence gathered to assess the situation properly was patchy, arrived late and was actually too unreliable to serve as a basis for military actions. News from Beijing reached Taku only via messengers and with several days of delay. Reports from the 'Seymour Expedition' from 10 June onwards were very patchy as well and were not very encouraging anyway. On 15 June it was revealed in a military conference that a strong Chinese force with 40 guns was on its way to Taku in order to reinforce the garrison there.<sup>10</sup>

News from Tientsin and the difficult situation of the 'Seymour Expedition' strengthened the impression of pending military escalation. From the intelligence available it was concluded that the Chinese were striving to prevent any further disembarkment of foreign forces. In this context, the Taku Forts posed a considerable strongpoint. These fortifications could at any time be reinforced by the nearby forts of Peitang, Lutai or Shanhaikuan where 15 to 20,000 troops were assumed to be deployed. Hence, it seemed necessary to neutralize the Taku Forts.

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<sup>10</sup> Claudia Ham, M. Christian Ortner (Ed.), *Mit S.M.S. Zenta in China. "Mich hatte auch diesmal der Tod nicht gewollt..."*. Aus dem Tagebuch eines k.u.k. Matrosen während des Boxeraufstandes (Vienna: Mittler, 2000), 112.

The German Vice Admiral Felix von Bendemann, therefore, proposed on 16 June to call on the viceroy of the province of Zhili and the military commanders on site to hand over the fortifications until the early morning of 17 June.<sup>11</sup>

After the representatives of the other powers had consented to that proposal, a resolution was written and forwarded to the Chinese authorities. In case of rejection the use of military force was threatened. Only those detachments that had already disembarked as well as gunboats present on the Pei-ho River could be employed for this purpose, since the huge warships were unable to get close to the coast due to their draught. The eight gunboats available were commanded by the Russian Captain Dobrovolsky, while the ground troops were under the command of the German Captain Pohl. The small Austro-Hungarian detachment of 21 soldiers under Midshipman Stenner was subordinated to the latter. The ultimatum should end at 2 am of 17 June. Yet the Chinese opened fire already at 1 am and thereby made clear that they had no intention whatsoever to hand over the fortresses.

The attack column of Pohl was ordered to take the Northwest Fort, while the allied gunboats on the Pei-ho River had to entertain a continued support fire with their guns. The other forts were also targeted, and gradually all Chinese guns, including some modern quick-fire pieces, were silenced. At about 4 am the assault began and the columns of infantry advanced in three lines and in skirmishing formations. They encountered heavy infantry fire by the Chinese but approached the walls quickly and were subsequently able to take them in a charge. After that, the operations were directed against the Northern Fort that offered almost no resistance. Then the Pei-ho River was crossed in order to be able to conquer the South Fort as well. This, however, had already been shot to pieces by the gunboats of the international force which had prompted the retreat of the garrison there. Now the Austro-Hungarian detachment occupied the Southern part of this fort and raised its flag. The brunt of the fighting had to be borne by the gunboats and it was them who suffered the highest casualties. The boats also suffered much damage. In sum, the international force lost nine officers and 132 soldiers. The Austro-

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<sup>11</sup> Theodor von Winterhalder, *Kämpfe in China. Eine Darstellung der Wirren und der Beteiligungen von Österreich-Ungarns Seemacht an ihrer Niederwerfung in den Jahren 1900-1901* (Wien und Budapest: A. Hartleben's Verlag 1902), 64-66.

Hungarian detachment had gone through its 'baptism of fire' without casualties.<sup>12</sup>

The success of the international squadron at Taku had significant political consequences, because as a result of the fighting and the capture of the forts war had de facto begun. The remaining international troops at Tientsin as well as in Beijing and the participants of the 'Seymour Expedition', who from 17/18 June onwards also faced regular Chinese military, had to bear the consequences.

### **Fighting in Tientsin**

After the departure of the 'Seymour Expedition' on 10 June the allied forces in Tientsin were reinforced to a strength of 2,000 until 15 June. Tientsin was not only of importance because of its strategic position at the train line to Beijing and its access to the Pei-ho River and the 'Emperors channel' but also because of a huge international settlement in the southern part of the city. From 16 June onwards, Tientsin was invested/encircled and the first attacks of Boxers occurred. Under the command of Lieutenant Indrak the Austro-Hungarian soldiers there participated in the defence of the British sector of the town. The city walls were manned and defended for the duration of 17 days. The first assaults were staged only by poorly armed Boxers and could therefore be repelled without difficulty. From 19 June onwards, however, Chinese regular forces joined fighting with their modern artillery. The situation was more than strained, which prompted considerations to evacuate Tientsin, since the Chinese were superior in numbers and the defenders suffered from a lack of ammunition. After 22 June, the reinforcements that had been dispatched to Tientsin after the capture of the Taku Forts made themselves felt. They gradually approached Tientsin and were finally able to lift the siege of the city.<sup>13</sup>

As a result, the numbers of the defenders rose to 4,500. This made it possible to dispatch reinforcements for the hard pressed 'Seymour Expedition' on its retreat to Tientsin resulting – as already mentioned above – in the return of the expedition force to the town on 26 June. Yet there were still vast parts of the town under Chinese control. The capture of the citadel and the city centre lasted until 14 July. Although

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<sup>12</sup> Österreichisches Staatsarchiv/Kriegsarchiv/Marinesektion/OK, 1900, X-14/5 Nr. 1685

<sup>13</sup> Theodor von Winterhalder, Kämpfe in China. Eine Darstellung der Wirren und der Beteiligungen von Österreich-Ungarns Seemacht an ihrer Niederwerfung in den Jahren 1900-1901 (Wien und Budapest: A. Hartleben's Verlag 1902), 153.

the allies already had 10.000 soldiers at their disposal in Tientsin, among them also ground forces, their operations were accompanied by numerous frictions. The individual contingents attacked sometimes single-handedly and without coordination. What is more opinions were divided on the question of the use of artillery against private Chinese residences. Finally, there were also animosities due to different national views how to conduct operations the best way. When the multinational troops had regained the control over the whole city after 26 days, the total number of casualties was 1,220, among them many dead. Most of them were Japanese, Russians, French and British. The Austro-Hungarian troops were relatively spared and had lost only five soldiers. In the second half of July and the first week of August, Tientsin was steadily reinforced and became the starting point for another attempt to relief the legations in Beijing.<sup>14</sup>

### **The fighting in Beijing**

Already on 8 June reports on Boxer riots reached the international legations in Beijing; initial activities had already been noted in the city itself. Most of these attacks were directed against Christian Chinese, who were physically abused or murdered and their houses burnt. In addition, it became known that train traffic was interrupted. Therefore, the envoys met in joint conferences, which were presided by the doyen of the diplomatic corps, the British envoy Sir Claude Maxwell Macdonald, to agree on a common way of action. Despite this, MacDonald would subsequently often tend to unilateral action due to reasons of personal and national prestige. Among other things he communicated with Vice Admiral Seymour several times without informing the other envoys. The departure of the 'Seymour Expedition' became known in Beijing on 10 June, afterwards the telegraph line was interrupted. From this moment onwards, it was no longer possible to coordinate the activities in Beijing with those in Tientsin and Taku. Thus the reinforcements expected from the 'Seymour Expedition' at the train station of Machiapu (Majiapu) on 11 June were awaited in vain. This and the murder of the Japanese embassy secretary Sugiyama Akira on the same day – probably by regular Chinese military – made it clear that an attack on the legations in Beijing was to be expected and the defence would have to be carried out

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<sup>14</sup> Theodor von Winterhalder, *Kämpfe in China. Eine Darstellung der Wirren und der Beteiligungen von Österreich-Ungarns Seemacht an ihrer Niederwerfung in den Jahren 1900-1901* (Wien und Budapest: A. Hartleben's Verlag 1902), 133-171.

only with forces already on site.<sup>15</sup>To that end, the legation quarter was divided into multiple sectors. Responsibility for the western part was conveyed to the Russians and US-Americans while the eastern part had to be defended by the Italians, French and German. In the northwestern sector British forces were stationed and in the northeast French troops with Austro-Hungarian soldiers being assigned to them were deployed. The wall in the south was protected by a joint force of US-Americans, German and Russians. Opposite the British Embassy the Su Wang Fu Building was defended by the Japanese. The Belgian Embassy being in an exposed position to the north was secured by an Austro-Hungarian patrol, which, however, had to retreat to the Austro-Hungarian Embassy in case of a serious attack.

The situation was strained but for the time being under control. On 19 June, however, the Zongli Yamen demanded from the legations to leave Beijing on the following day because of the attack of the multinational coalition on the Taku Forts. In a hastily arranged conference the envoys decided to accept this demand, notwithstanding the dissenting opinion of the Austro-Hungarian chargé d'affaires Rosthorn. Doubts regarding a safe departure from the city were supported by the killing of the German ambassador, Baron Clemens August von Ketteler on the morning of 20 June. Yet for now the international diplomatic corps did not change its plans. This resulted in the evacuation of the Austro-Hungarian legation and the transfer of the whole Austro-Hungarian staff to the French Embassy from where the departure was supposed to be effectuated. In the meantime, some of the diplomats had changed their minds and had decided to remain in the city without informing the Austro-Hungarians. As a result, the Austro-Hungarians also tried to return to their legation but were prevented from doing so by Chinese military and Boxers, who had already taken control of the premises and denied any access by force. Therefore, the Austro-Hungarians turned to the French legation and contributed to its defence in a decisive way.<sup>16</sup>

The British Embassy being situated more to the west functioned as a kind of 'réduit', which also offered refuge to the majority of women and children of the international community of Beijing. All in all, the defenders had to man a 3,750 m long line, for which 482 men were available, a number that already included the volunteers from among the

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<sup>15</sup> Theodor von Winterhalder, *Kämpfe in China. Eine Darstellung der Wirren und der Beteiligungen von Österreich-Ungarns Seemacht an ihrer Niederwerfung in den Jahren 1900-1901* (Wien und Budapest: A. Hartleben's Verlag 1902), 190-192.

<sup>16</sup> Österreichisches Staatsarchiv/Kriegsarchiv/Marinesektion/OK, 1900, X-14/5 Nr. 2443.

foreign civilians. As to heavy weapons, three mitrailleuses as well as one 37mm canon were at hand. In view of the amount of ammunition the Austro-Hungarians and US-Americans were best equipped since they had an average of 500 rounds per rifle at their disposal, while the Russians were equipped with only 60 rounds per rifle. Later on, it should turn out very advantageous that the Chinese army had acquired modern Mannlicher and Mauser rifles in the past. That meant that captured ammunition could be used. In order to make common defence possible, the highest-ranking officer, the Austro-Hungarian Captain Eduard Thomann, was elected to assume command of all forces, after the French had proposed him for this position.<sup>17</sup> Only one day later he was replaced in this function by MacDonald on grounds of a renewed vote in a meeting, in which no representatives from Austria-Hungary or Germany participated. The ostensible reason was the retreat order that Thomann had given based on wrong reports and which the British judged to be a panic action. However, it seems more probable that the actual reason was that the British felt that they were not adequately represented in the military command structures of the multinational force and, out of considerations of prestige, demanded the replacement of Thomann. Thomann acquiesced in order not to endanger the unity of command.<sup>18</sup>

As of 22 June fighting intensified. The Chinese army also had heavy arms but failed to launch coordinated attacks on individual sectors. This allowed for the utilization of the interior lines and to reinforce threatened spots in time. This notwithstanding, casualties on part of the defenders were severe – also among the Austro-Hungarians. On 25 June, the sailor Josef Dettan was killed, on 26 June Marcus Badurina-Peric, and on 29 June Alfred Tavagna.<sup>19</sup> Gradually, the Chinese succeeded in gaining control of the walls in the south and to deal breaches to the French legation. Finally, the US-Americans were able to retake parts of the city wall in the south. However, the casualties had already reached high levels. Up to 2 July, 38 of the defenders had already been killed and 55 more had been severely wounded.

Thomann was in command of the defence of the French Embassy, and in view of the already fragile state of the walls had to establish a second line of defence inside the premises. While he inspected the

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<sup>17</sup> Peter Jung (Ed.), *Österreichische Militärgeschichte. Sonderband 2000-1. Sturm über China. Österreich-Ungarns Einsatz im Boxeraufstand* (Wien: Heide Stöhr, 2000), 25.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Jung (Ed.), *Österreichische Militärgeschichte. Sonderband 2000-1. Sturm über China. Österreich-Ungarns Einsatz im Boxeraufstand* (Wien: Heide Stöhr, 2000), 30.

<sup>19</sup> Theodor von Winterhalder, *Kämpfe in China. Eine Darstellung der Wirren und der Beteiligungen von Österreich-Ungarns Seemacht an ihrer Niederwerfung in den Jahren 1900-1901* (Wien und Budapest: A. Hartleben s Verlag 1902), 581.

prospective new positions he was hit by splinters of a Chinese artillery grenade and got killed. On part of the Austro-Hungarians he was the last one to be killed in the defence of the legations quarter in Beijing. On 16 July, only one third of the original area was still under the control of the defenders. But on 17 July, the Zongly Yamen offered an armistice and the first messages from Tientsin arrived. However, the available reports were contradictory and not fit to bring about a clear understanding of the situation. The Chinese resumed their attacks on the legation quarter, although they now concentrated on the use of mines. On 1 August, MacDonald ordered to establish a last line of defence; the French Embassy had to be abandoned if necessary. On behalf of the Chinese government there were contradictory signals, since on the one hand the evacuation of the diplomats to Tientsin was suggested and on the other hand the attacks continued.

The attacks with artillery and rifle fire decreased steadily and redeployments of units hitherto involved in the siege were noted. On 12 August, the force was once more confronted with the ambivalence of the position of the Chinese government. While MacDonald was invited to participate in direct negotiations, the Chinese also attempted for a last time to overrun the defenders. This last charge was fended off and the sound of guns to/from the south announced to the besieged the approach of the relief army.

Meanwhile, further reinforcements arrived at Tientsin after it had been retaken, while big Chinese forces, reported to be on the move to Tientsin, set to regain control of this city and the Taku Forts. In a joint conference at Tientsin on 3 August it was decided to advance rapidly to Peitsang (Beicang), situated between Tientsin and Beijing, to neutralize the plans of the enemy. On 4/5 August two main columns under the command of the highest-ranking officer present, the Russian General Linevich, departed with a total strength of 14,400 infantries, 1,000 cavalries, 52 guns and six Maxim machineguns. The Japanese, Russians, US-Americans and British provided the largest troop numbers while from Austria-Hungary only the 55 soldiers stationed at Tientsin participated. On 5 August, the relief army scored a victory at Peitsang, mainly thanks to the Japanese, and after that Yangcun was taken. On 7 June, a day of recovery was scheduled but on the day after the advance continued. The major providers of troops constituted the main component of the force while the soldiers of the smaller powers were withheld as a reserve.

On 12 August, the walls of Beijing were reached and the southern and southwestern gates were forced open. After yet another day of recovery the proper assault on the city started. Despite all agreements,

the allies proceeded in an uncoordinated manner. Each nation tried to be the first to arrive at the legation quarter. In the end, the British under General Alfred Gaselee were the first,<sup>20</sup> followed by the US-Americans under the command of General Adna Chaffee, and by the Russians, and the Japanese. The French arrived on 15 August, the Austro-Hungarians on 18 August.<sup>21</sup> The Imperial city was already taken on 15 August. In the course of the last fighting numerous senseless sacrifices had been made since considerations of national prestige ranked higher than tactical reason. Each of the main powers was eager to exploit the relief of the international quarters and the military victory in the public for its own purposes.<sup>22</sup>

Many excesses were committed against Chinese soldiers, Boxers and also Chinese Civilians. The city saw massive looting, until the Japanese established a provisional police service on 20 August. On this day, an Austro-Hungarian reinforcement of 120 men arrived. This detachment was taken from the armoured cruiser 'Kaiserin und Königin Maria Theresia' that had arrived at Taku on 7 August.<sup>23</sup> On 25 August, a joint parade of all eight powers participating in the relief of Beijing was staged and was to mark the official end of the military operations. Yet even here the rivalries between the great powers became obvious once more, since the position of the various troops within the parade was the subject of much dispute.

## Epilogue

Although the Austro-Hungarian contribution to the relief of the legation quarters in Beijing was small if compared to the other powers and also the number of casualties – seven fatalities directly resulting from the fighting – was relatively low, the 'Chinese adventure' had substantial consequences for the Austro-Hungarian naval policy. For once the Austro-Hungarian naval command dispatched additional cruisers to Eastern Asia the 'Kaiserin und Königin Maria Theresia', 'Kaiserin Elisabeth' und 'Aspern', which, however, arrived too late at

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<sup>20</sup> Theodor von Winterhalder, *Kämpfe in China. Eine Darstellung der Wirren und der Beteiligungen von Österreich-Ungarns Seemacht an ihrer Niederwerfung in den Jahren 1900-1901* (Wien und Budapest: A. Hartleben's Verlag 1902), 389.

<sup>21</sup> Hans Hugo Sokol, *Des Kaisers Seemacht 1848-1914. Die k.k. österreichische Kriegsmarine* (Wien: Amalthea Signum, 2002), 160.

<sup>22</sup> Österreichisches Staatsarchiv/Kriegsarchiv/Marinesektion/OK, 1900, X-14/5 Nr. 2803

<sup>23</sup> Wladimir Aichelburg, *Register der k.(u.)k. Kriegsschiffe. Von Abbondanza bis Zrinyi* (Vienna/Graz: NWV, Neuer Wiss. Verlag, 2002), 25.



Taku to participate in the fighting in Beijing. Yet they constituted a new Austro-Hungarian naval squadron under the command of Counter Admiral Rudolf Graf Montecuccoli and their crews supplied detachments for the punitive and pacifying expeditions launched against remaining Boxers in the interior of the country. This was supposed to demonstrate the Austro-Hungarian claim to great power status. Longer lasting were the consequences regarding the Austro-Hungarian policy of naval armament and shipbuilding. New ships were to enable the fleet – that had hitherto been mainly tasked with the defence of the empire's own coastline – to participate in similar interventions in the future to a larger extent. This was the beginning of the transition to an operational fleet, which, however, could not be fully realized until the outbreak of war.

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## **УЧЕШЋЕ АУСТРОУГАРСКЕ У БОКСЕРСКОМ УСТАНКУ У ПЕКИНГУ 1900. ГОДИНЕ**

### **(Резиме)**

Спољна политика Аустроугарске у другој половини 19. века показивала је врло изражен фокус на европском континенту упркос успону европског колонијализма у то време. Аустроугарску политику према источној Азији није одређивао толико колонијални програм, колико општа спољна политика и идентитет Аустроугарске као велике силе. Аустроугарска није била изненађена само избијањем антиевропског превирања 1900. године, већ се морала ослонити и на импровизације. Док су друге силе (Немачка, Велика Британија, Француска, Русија и Италија) због својих колонијалних интереса и САД због њиховог учешћа на Филипинима, имале на располагању значајнији број ратних бродова и трупа, у то време у овој регији био је само један аустроугарски ратни брод. Била је то мала, али модерна крстарица „Сента”. Иако је допринос Аустроугарске био мали у поређењу с другим силама, а такође и број жртава (седам смртних случајева директно проистеклих из борби) био релативно низак, „кинеска авантура” је имала значајне последице за аустроугарску поморску политику. Дугорочне последице биле су последице по аустроугарско планирање морнаричког наоружања и бродоградње. Нови бродови требало је да омогуће флоти (која је до тада била углавном задужена за одбрану обале царства) да у већем обиму учествује у сличним интервенцијама. Био је то почетак преласка на оперативну флоту.

**КЉУЧНЕ РЕЧИ:** Аустроугарска, Боксерски устанак, Кинеска империја, аустроугарска поморска политика, лака крстарица „Сента”