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The First Opium War

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RESEARCH
REPORT



Forum: Historical Committee (Histo.)

Issue: The First Opium War

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Introduction

The immediate issue is China's official confiscation of opium supplies in Canton to halt the banned opium trade, with offenders facing the death penalty. The merchants' demands are supported by the British government, which insisted on the ideals of free trade and equal diplomatic recognition among nations.

The demand for Chinese luxury products caused a trade imbalance between China and Britain in the 18th century. The Canton System, which restricted inbound foreign trade to the southern port city of Canton, allowed European silver to flow into China. To balance the scales, the British East India Company began growing opium in Bengal and permitted private British merchants to sell opium to Chinese smugglers for illegal sale in China. The influx of narcotics reversed China's trade surplus, depleted the economy of silver, and increased the number of opium addicts within the country, all of which concerned Chinese officials greatly.

After rejecting plans to legalize and tax opium, the Daoguang Emperor dispatched Viceroy Lin Zexu to go to Canton and put an end to the opium traffic. Lin addressed an open letter to Queen Victoria, pleading with her to end the opium trade on moral grounds. Lin, therefore, resorted to brute force in the territory of western merchants. He landed in Guangzhou at the end of January and immediately set about putting together a coastline defense. Opium dealers in the United Kingdom were ordered to hand over 2.37 million pounds of tobacco in March. Lin ordered the opium to be destroyed in public on Humen Beach on June 3 to demonstrate the government's ambition to ban smoking.

Definition of Key Terms

Opium: An addictive substance made from the opium poppy, abused unlawfully as a narcotic and medically as an analgesic on rare occasions.

The Government of Indian Acts: Decisions taken by the British Government to administrate China such as assigning governors to various regions.

Mandarin: Chinese bureaucrats appointed by the Chinese government.

Madak: A recreational drug combined of tobacco and opium and widely used at the time in China.

Mercantilism: An economic policy that aims to increase an economy's exports while reducing its imports. To achieve this purpose, it encourages imperialism, colonialism, taxes, and subsidies on commercial products.

Extraterritoriality: It is a privilege that enables individuals, groups, organizations or physical spaces to be exempted from local law. For instance, embassies, military installations or some historically important locations. Tomb of Suleyman Shah, United Nations Offices in Hague or Incirlik Air Base may be some examples you may be familiar with. Historically, extraterritoriality was one of the privileges of those on the losing side of decisive wars.

Canton Trade System: China's policy of concentrating all trade on the southern port of Canton, allowing Qing China to regulate trade with the West within its own territory. The protectionist policy began in 1757 as a response to political and commercial danger caused by foreign countries.

General Overview

The Opium Trade

In the 18th century, China and The British Empire had an imbalance in their trade. The British bought large quantities of tea from China but in return, they didn't have any product to sell. This had a toll on their economy. With the Dutch export shipments to China, opium was introduced and started to gain popularity. A new way of consuming was also implemented which was to smoke it out of a tobacco pipe. The first banning of opium was put in order in 1729 by Yung Cheng the Qing Emperor at the time. He prohibited its domestic sale except for medical purposes. In 1793, the British East India Company created a monopoly and had exclusive possession and also control over the opium trade. Over the years, opium started to slowly increase its demand. At the end of the 18th century, it became a very important trade for the British. The effects it brought with it were very poor for the Chinese. Addiction rates spiked and it also created social problems as well as economic ones. At the start, imported opium was only 200 chests annually and between the years 1820 and 1830, it became 10.000 per year. In 1833, due to the Government of Indian Acts, more dealers were free to bring opium into the country. In the spring of 1839, somewhere around 1.400 tons of opium were confiscated and destroyed by the Chinese government in order to put a stop. As a result, on March 18, 1839, The British sent warships to the coast of China, which started the war.

The Start of the War

The war lasted for 3 years from 1839 to 1842. The tension between the countries increased when a drunken British sailor killed a Chinese villager. The British government, which didn't want its subjects to be tried in the Chinese legal system, refused to refer the defendants to the Chinese courts. The Dynasty

was weak because at the time there was another conflict, the Sino-Sikh War, which left China without a major base of operations. General Hugh Gough commanded the British land forces in China. Plans were made by Lord Palmerston to launch attacks on Chinese ports and rivers. The British started to get ready for the upcoming war by drawing their forces from overseas. Volunteers from Bengali were recruited, and orders were put in order for British South Africa and Australia to send ships to Singapore.

In June the first part of the forces arrived. Later that year the British government destroyed Pearl River in Hong Kong. They went up from Pearl River to Canton and after attacks and negotiations, they started to occupy the city in May 1841. As the war carried on Qishan a Manchu official was selected by the Imperial Court to be the Viceroy of Liangguang (Governor-General). In January 1841 the British again won the Battle of Chuenpi and destroyed 11 Chinese fleets and captured the Humen Fronts. This made the Qing navy retreat upriver. Qishan, knowing the value of Pearl River as his attempt to prevent the war to go further, negotiated a peace treaty. Negotiations started happening where Qishan represented the Qing and Elliot represented the British Crown. However, the war didn't stop because both sides continued to engage. A successful middle ground was found by Qishan and Elliot but their governments refused to sign the convention.

Elliot was fired and he was replaced by Henry Pottinger, who was less keen on the idea of finding a common ground and wanted to expand British rights in China. Despite numerous counterattacks by the inferior Qing forces, British campaigns over the next year were successful. More specifically in the Yangtze River campaign because many Chinese ports were blocked and under British rule, General Gough wanted to ruin the Qing Empires' economy so he sought to capture Zheijiang located where the Caoyun system is, which cut the distribution of grain throughout the Empire. The Qing collected an army of fifty thousand Manchu Banner-men to defend the Province and strengthen the river; however, naval activity in the north led the Qing to send their men to Beijing in fear of attack. They, later on, when to Nanking and assaulted the city despite no permission granted from the emperor Qing officials negotiated with the British

The Outcome

On August 29, 1842, the Chinese were defeated and were forced to sign the treaty of Nanking. Hong Kong was ceded to the British, China had to open 5 port cities (Canton, Amoy, Foochow, Ningpo, and Shanghai), pay somewhere around 20 million dollars, abolish the domestic monopoly of Cohong, and had to cohere to the schedule of the customs duties. In the Treaty of the Bogue, the Qing recognized Great Britain as an equal to China and granted its British subjects extraterritorial privileges in treaty ports. In 1844, the United States and France made similar agreements with China, the Treaty of Wanghia and the Treaty of Whampoa, respectively.



Major Parties Involved and Their Views

The Qing Dynasty

Established in 1644, the Qing Dynasty is ruled by the Daoguang Emperor in the year 1839. While past emperors have tried to solve the opium addiction issue by banning the substance trade, this proved to be insufficient. Thus, the problem grew, and the English continued to sell the opiate. Since a significant portion of the Dynasty's army does not have proper military training and is addicted to opium, The Qing Dynasty's current military forces are limited. The Dynasty has also been struck economically by the influx of opium from the west: the growing demand for opium is surpassing the income generated by means of silver trade and impairing the Dynasty's regular foreign trade. It is thus in the Qing Emperors' best interests to ban opium production, use, and import altogether.

The British Empire

A major global superpower in the 19th century, the British Empire has always been on the lookout for potential venues of income from other regions of the world, with China being one of them in the early 1800s. After initiating unofficial British-Chinese maritime trade relations in 1635 by sending British merchants to significant Chinese ports, including Canton, the Empire subsequently began official trade with the Dynasty through the British East India Company. Relations with the Qing Dynasty were particularly valued during this time, as products like Chinese tea and silk were in great demand by Europeans, in exchange for which the Qing Dynasty would be provided by silver. However, this process was precluded when the Canton System was enacted. In response, the British Empire began to produce opium in Bengal and gradually established a monopoly over opium sales to China, which led to a lucrative business venture for the Empire but major societal adversity for the Dynasty.

The British East India Company

The British East India Company was founded in 1600 with the objective of carrying out British trade in the Indian Ocean region. As one of the biggest colonizing powers in the world at the time, the East India Company (EIC) managed to control the majority of the Indian subcontinent and lead international trade in a great variety of commodities. One of these commodities was opium, which saw a downturn in its financial yield upon the Chinese ban on opium imports. In order to circumvent this, the EIC started to produce and set the purchase price of its company-licensed opium in Bengal — a region that it had mostly monopolized and gained financial control over. These chests of opium were then trafficked to China by drug smugglers, thus allowing for the EIC, and the British Empire simultaneously, to keep on profiting off of opium exports even in the face of numerous opium-related laws being passed in the Qing Dynasty.

Timeline of Events

1635	<i>British-Chinese maritime trade is initiated in Chinese coastal ports</i>
1729	<i>Madak restrictions are enacted for the first time in China by Yongzheng Emperor, prohibiting the sale and smoking of opium</i>
1757	<i>The Canton Trade System is established</i>
1773	<i>Britain begins to sell Indian opium by means of the East India Company</i>
1780	<i>The Qing Dynasty issues an edict against opium use</i>
1796	<i>Opium importation and cultivation is banned by Jiaqing Emperor</i>
1799	<i>The governor of Canton orders the halt of opium trade</i>
1820	<i>The amount of illegal opium import into China surpasses 10,000 chests per year</i>
September 4, 1839	<i>The Qing Dynasty, spearheaded by Lin Zexu, destroys 20,000 chests of opium stored in Canton warehouses by British merchants, officially starting the war</i>
January 14, 1840	<i>Daoguang Emperor requests all foreign merchants in China to stop material assistance towards the British</i>
June 1840	<i>British expeditionary forces arrive at Hong Kong</i>
May 1841	<i>The British Royal Navy bombards Canton and occupies the city</i>
August 29, 1842	<i>The Treaty of Nanking is signed by the Qing Dynasty, ending the First Opium War</i>

Treaties and Events - Relevant Historical Documents

- ***Letter of Henry John Temple, 3rd Viscount “Palmerston”:***

After the British cabinet’s decision to start war preparations, Palmerston sent a diplomatic note to the Qing government, saying that the Chinese had been outrageous towards the British, and they needed to compensate for what they had done.

- ***American Letters:***

You may find some useful information below regarding China’s trade policy:

<https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2002/winter/gedalecia-1.html>

- ***Convention of Chuenpi:***

The Convention of Chuenpi was a provisional agreement between British Plenipotentiary Charles Elliot and Chinese Imperial Commissioner Qishan. The terms were published on January 20, 1841, but both governments rejected them and dismissed Elliot and Qishan, respectively, from their positions. Secretary of State Lord Palmerston stated that Elliot had acquired too little, while the Daoguang Emperor believed Qishan had conceded too much. Palmerston appointed Major General Henry Pottinger to replace Elliot, while the Emperor appointed Yang Fang to replace Qishan, along with Yishan as General-in-Chief of the Repressing Rebellion and Longwen as Deputy Regional Commander. Although the convention was not ratified, many of the provisions were later incorporated into the Treaty of Nanking (1842).

- ***The Treaty of Nanking***

After China's military defeat, with British warships poised to attack Nanking, British and Chinese officials negotiated aboard HMS Cornwallis, moored in the city. On August 29, British representative Sir Henry Pottinger and Qing representatives Qiying, Yilibu, and Niu Jian signed the treaty, which consisted of thirteen articles. The treaty was ratified by the Daoguang Emperor on October 27 and Queen Victoria on December 28. The ratification was exchanged in Hong Kong on June 26, 1843.

<https://www.dipublico.org/100514/the-treaty-of-nanking-1842/>

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

A few attempts were made in order to stop the war but all unfortunately failed. Among these were the Qing Dynasty’s frequent attempts at circumventing the British opium trade through legal decisions — edicts against opium use, limitations on the substance’s importation, and eventually the banning of opium altogether. However, as can be seen by the later emergence of the First Opium War, the Dynasty’s nationwide bans on opium consumption and trade fell short of expectations. The East India Company

remained active in the region despite these legal barriers, showing that Chinese efforts to systematically eradicate opium import were, indeed, quite fruitless.

Several unsuccessful strides made by the British Empire, too, contributed to the long-lasting nature of the war. The Convention of Chuenpi was one such attempt at resolving this issue. Drafted jointly by British Plenipotentiary (diplomat with the power to act on behalf of a foreign government) Charles Elliot and Chinese Imperial Commissioner Qishan, the goal of this tentative convention was to reach a bilateral agreement on the issue at hand. Some provisions of the Convention of Chuenpi were Hong Kong's cessation to Britain, the re-opening of trade in Canton, and an indemnity payment to the British Empire. Yet, the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Lord Henry John Palmerston, was dissatisfied with the unexpectedly low volume of concessions being demanded from the Qing Dynasty, and as a result, he refused to agree to the convention, even though it could have been a step towards peace in the Cantonese region. A similar stance was held by the Qing government, who claimed that Qishan was unjustified in his decision to sign this agreement on behalf of the Daoguang Emperor. Thus, a convention that could have potentially ended the war and resolved tensions early on in the course of the war ended up being a missed opportunity due to the two sides' inability to reach a balanced compromise and successfully represent their respective government's views. It is therefore of great importance that any treatise-based, diplomatic attempts to be made in this committee take into account the demands and needs of both the Qing Dynasty and the British Empire.

Possible Solutions

Given the circumstances, suggestions regarding how you are going to proceed with the war would be much more beneficial. Both sides must gather soldiers and strengthen their armies. However, given the spirit of Historical Committees, who are not limited by military actions, finding creative ways to put your enemy at a disadvantage is highly encouraged. You should follow the newsletters, crises, and how the war plans play out to understand the situation at hand. They will give you information regarding what the other side is plotting or has done so far, which you should bear in mind while planning on ways to attack them. Treachery is also common, so if you need additional information, you can try to obtain it from the other side using different tactics. You can also consider enhancing your army and weaponry, but you should do this in a relatively realistic manner, given the time frame.

Useful Links

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fgQahGsYokU&list=PLjLK2cYtt-VDNdg5R-Vwxe_P702gm208c

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qHmuuc7m1AA&list=PLjLK2cYtt-VDNdg5R-Vwxe_P702gm208c&index=2

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAjUqwauf-A&list=PLjLK2cYtt-VDNdg5R-Vwxe_P702gm208c&index=3

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s9WRmsHFUg0&list=PLjLK2cYtt-VDNdg5R-Vwxe_P702gm208c&index=4

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