

The Second Opium War 1856-1860.

Historians debate whether Britain and France manufactured an excuse for the Second Opium War and whether the rationale used to go to war was justified. However, the events leading into the second war began with the Arrow Incident when, in 1856, Ch'ing officials boarded a Hong Kong registered vessel suspected of smuggling and arrested the Chinese crew. British officials in Canton demanded that the sailors be released but the Ch'ing officials refused this demand. In 1857 the British forces seized an undefended fort near Canton and then attacked Canton from the Pearl River. Surprisingly, the British forces were assisted by American warships, including the *Levant*, in the shelling of Canton from the river. However, the Chinese resistance was sufficiently strong to force the Western navies to retreat from Humen.

The response from the British Parliament was to seek French support for an expeditionary force to be sent to China. At about this time Chinese officials had executed Father August Chapdelaine, a French missionary, in Guangxi and the French used this to justify their joint action with Britain. Admiral Sir Michael Seymour led the joint British-French naval force and Lord Elgin led the British army. Gros led the French army. The joint expeditionary force took Canton by force and held it for four years and after taking Canton sailed north and captured the Taku Forts near Tientsin (Tianjin) in May 1858.

The first salvo of the Second Opium War ended in June 1858 with France, Russia and America joining Britain in the Treaty of Tientsin which opened more Chinese ports to trade and provided that:

1. Britain, France, Russia, and the United States would have the right to establish diplomatic legations in the closed city of Peking
2. Ten more Chinese ports would be opened for foreign trade
3. The right of all foreign vessels including commercial ships to navigate freely on the Yangtze River
4. The right of foreigners to travel throughout China
5. China was to pay an indemnity to Britain and France of 2m taels of silver each
6. China was to pay compensation to British merchants in 2m taels of silver for destruction of their property

Then on May 28 1858, a separate Treaty of Aigun was signed with Russia. This revised the Nerchinsk Treaty of 1689 and moved the Chinese-Russian border to the Amur River enabling Russia to found the coastal city of Vladivostok in 1860.

In 1859 the Chinese refused to allow the establishment of embassies in Peking as promised and so a naval force under Admiral Sir James Hope shelled the Taku Forts (Dagu paotai) guarding the Peiho River (Hai He) 60 kilometres southeast of Tientsin. The fleet was mauled and had to withdraw under the cover of fire from an American naval squadron commanded by Commodore Josiah Tattnall.

In August 1860 the Anglo-French force landed at Pei Tang-Ho with 200 British and 200 French troops and took the Taku Forts. By early October 1860 they reached Peking. Emperor Xianfeng fled to the Summer Palace in Chengde and the British-French troops set both the Summer Palace and the Old Summer Palace ablaze after extensive looting.

After Emperor Xianfeng fled Peking the June 1858 Treaty of Tientsin was finally ratified by Prince Gong on October 18th, 1860 under the Convention of Peking. This brought the Second Opium War to an end.

The Convention of Peking established:

1. China's recognition of the validity of the Treaty of Tientsin
2. Opening Tientsin as a trade port
3. The area of Kowloon south of Boundary Street and Stonecutters Island was ceded to Britain
4. Freedom of religion in China
5. British ships were allowed to carry indentured Chinese to the Americas
6. Indemnity to Britain and France was increased to 8 million taels of silver
7. The Opium Trade was legalised

The United States and Russia gained the same privileges in separate treaties.

In June 1898 the Second Convention of Beijing granted Britain a 99 year lease for the New Territories to the north of Boundary Street on the Kowloon Peninsula. Beginning on 1 July 1898 it ended on 1 July 1997.

Recommended Readings

1. Bonner-Smith, D., and Lumby, E., 'The Second China War: 1856-1860,' New York: State Mutual Book and Periodical Service Ltd., 1987.
2. Garrett, V., 'Heaven is High and the Emperor Far Away: Mandarins and Merchants in Old Canton,' New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
3. Graham, S., 'The China Station: War and Diplomacy 1830-1860,' New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.
4. Janin, H., 'The India-China Opium Trade in the 19th Century,' Jefferson: McFarland and Co., 1999.
5. Wong, J., 'Deadly Dreams: Opium, Imperialism and the Arrow War (1856-1860) in China,' New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.