

British policy in Asia

The main aim of British policy in Asia was to expand British trade and commerce.

Most of the major Far-Eastern trading centres were either persuaded or forced to accept foreign goods.

This was known as the «open door» policy.

The «open door» policy

Britain was interested in China because of its huge potential as a market for British goods.

In spite of the «open door» policy, Anglo-Chinese trade never made up more than 1 per cent of total British overseas trade at any time between 1815 and 1914.

But it was the prospects for future growth that caused such interest.

European powers grew slowly in China due to the isolationist policies pursued by the Chinese government.

The Manchu dynasty followed a policy of attempting to isolate its empire from western influences.

Before 1842 China signed no diplomatic or trade agreements with any European power.

China could resist the penetration of the west because her economy was self-sufficient in foods and raw materials and her army was considered the strongest in Asia.

But the Manchu dynasty spent very little on its naval defences. This offered the chance to force China to open its ports to foreign trade.

The Royal Navy blockaded Chinese ports in order to force China to accept foreign goods.

This policy was used to support the East India Company. The export of the opium had become vital to the East India Company.

In 1800 China banned the sale of opium.

The East India Company responded by selling the drug to Indian who smuggled it illegally into China.

The desire to trade and the reluctance of China to allow British to do so led to a naval war.

In 1839 the Chinese government destroyed all foreign stocks of opium.

The East India Company called the British government for help.

Ships were sent. This resulted in a naval battle: 2 British ships and 4 Chinese war junks were sunk.

The incident was used to transform the dispute into a war.

From 1839 to 1842 all the major ports were blockaded. This was called the Opium War.

In 1842 China signed the Treaty of Nanchin. China was compelled to cede the island of Hong Kong, to pay a 13 million pounds indemnity, to open 5 ports to British and to reduce the import duty on British goods.

But the vast majority of China still remained free of foreign trade.

Between 1856 and 1858 a second «trade war» was fought. As a consequence 5 more ports were opened.

The growing realisation that China was in a weak condition encouraged other European powers to come.

France, Germany, USA, Japan and Russia were interested in expansion.

This wave of «new imperialism» in Asia led to the European powers partitioning China.

In 1900 China was closed to partition. Germany, France, Britain and Russia had already drawn up plans to ensure a peaceful division.

With partition imminent, many Chinese nationalists rose up and attacked Europeans wherever they were to be found.

Finally European powers managed to restore order.

China was saved from partition only because the European powers feared the ambitions of each other more than they wanted to rule China.

Questions

- Why was China vulnerable to external aggressors during the nineteenth century?
- What was the «open door» policy?
- What were the causes and consequences of the Opium War?
- Why China was saved from partition?