

Document 7.5: Excerpts from a letter written by missionary Nellie N. Russel to relatives in Chicago, describing the Boxer Uprising, 1900

Nellie N. Russel had worked as a missionary in China for eleven years. At the time of the Boxer Rebellion she was in Beijing.

British Legation, Beijing, China, Aug. 8. —My Dear Ones: Now that our troops are on their way to us, I am going to begin a letter to you, trusting that when they come we can once more be put in communication with the outside world. For several weeks now our world has been a very small one. Bounded by the walls of this legation, with the exception of the three messengers who have managed to get through the Chinese lines to Tianjin and back, we know nothing of the outer world. I hardly know where to commence, for I do not know whether the letters sent the second week in June, after we had all gathered at the Methodist mission, ever reached you or not. Since June 14 we have not been able to get off a line. I have written you of the terrible persecution in the country and cities near Beijing last winter, but no one ever dreamed that things could ever reach such a condition in Beijing.

We have here within our barricades nearly 2,000 Christians, Protestant and Catholic. Three miles from here at the North Catholic cathedral there are 2,000 more who are also in siege. They have some French and Italian soldiers to help them, and are well fortified. We do not know whether they have held out or not. We can get no word, and there has been fierce cannonading in that direction. With the exception of these few, we know absolutely nothing about the rest of the Christians. We have every reason to fear the worst, as we have gotten hold of edicts issued during the past two months that give us little hope that any can have escaped.

Words fail me to attempt a description of the horrors of that night our homes were burned, and the awful experiences of the few Christians who managed to get to us during the next three days. On Friday, June 8, we foreigners left our places and all got together at the Methodist Episcopal mission, which is about a mile from here. We had twenty

American marines to protect us. All the missionaries were armed, and we were able to get arms for a lot of our younger Chinese men. June 13, Wednesday evening, at about 7 o'clock, some one rushed in and said that the outer chapel was all in flames. This was set by the Boxers, and from there they went to all the foreign places, except the legations. It was an awful night, as we saw the flames lighting up the city in all directions. The next day our people commenced to barricade the place where we were. Trenches were dug, spikes driven into the ground, and barbed wire put all around the church. We expected to make a stand in the church, and great care was taken to make it bullet-proof; windows were filled up, etc. We took stores into the church and brought in a lot of food for our Chinese. We had letters from Captain McCalla, and looked for him to come to our relief at least by the end of June.

Our soldiers came up, with only their winter clothes, so we went to work and made, during the twelve days we were there, twenty coats and twenty pairs of pants for our guard. The night of June 14 was horrible beyond description. For about two hours thousands of voices could be heard in the southern city yelling at the top of their voices: "Kill, kill, kill!" The rest of the words we could not hear clearly, but we knew well what it was. If that insane mass had had a leader and [had] come in upon us that night, not a foreigner would have escaped. The city gate was locked between us and them, but the key was in the hands of the Chinese. After that night, while we were there, Captain Hall took his men and demanded the key, locking and unlocking the gates night and morning. June 19, about 10 o'clock, a letter came from Major Conger saying that the minister and all foreigners had been ordered out of the city at twenty-four hours' notice. At once we all said it was a scheme of the Chinese to massacre us all, and we prayed then and there that the ministers might not fall into the trap. Some of the men went to the legation and talked the matter over. The ministers had pointed out that we could not go, the railroad was not working, and where could we get carts for so many people? We missionaries said we could not and would not leave our Christians to fall into the hands of the enemy. Only God knows how heavy our hearts were that night. How little we knew how He would save us, or what the price was to be.

The next morning all the ministers were to go to the foreign office for a last interview. The German minister, Baron von Ketteler, with his first secretary, went a little earlier than the others. The next word was that he was shot on the way there, and the first secretary wounded. The first we at the Methodist Episcopal mission knew of this tragedy was when the secretary was brought in wounded, and an order came to us from Captain Hall giving us twenty minutes in which to get ready to go to the legation. We could take only what we could carry in our hands. Can you see us, that bright June morning—seventy-one men, women, and children (foreigners), followed by 700 Chinese Christians, guarded by our marines (twenty-one in all), the first secretary of the German legation on a long chair carried by a troop of German marines—walking that mile, with our arms full of our earthly belongings? We went first to the American legation and then came over here. This was about 1 o'clock in the afternoon. Across the street from this place is a very large place, owned by Prince Su. This some gentlemen succeeded in getting, and there we located our Christians.

That afternoon about 4 o'clock the first attack on us here was made, and the bullets fell like rain for a few moments. Just before we came here, very early one morning, Mr. Ament went in around the back way to our place and the sight made him sick. The houses, two churches, printing office, school buildings, all were in ruins. Most of the brick walls had been carried away, and not enough wood was left in the place to make a toothpick, he said.... We heard from the Chinese officials of the taking of the forts at Tianjin, but we did not believe it, for it did not seem possible such a thing would be done with the ministers shut in the enemy's country—and that a heathen one—with no possible way out. The day after we came in here the custom-houses were fired and the Austrian legation was abandoned. The Boxers, flourishing knives, approached the legation, and the machine guns were turned on them, killing and wounding sixty. This only drove them away for the time. They started fires all about us. The next few days we had to fight fire. We ladies formed in line and passed back the pails and other receptacles for water. Such an olio of articles for fighting fire and for one's life—pitchers, large and small, wash bowls of all sizes, pails, tin cans, flower pots, etc. The Chinese seemed

determined to burn us out, and it was not till all about us was either burnt by them, or by us as a protection, that they gave up that time.

Back of the legation are the halls of the scholars and a building that has all but been worshiped by the Chinese. Full of ancient books and papers, tablets, everything the Chinese scholars hold with veneration, even this they sacrificed, and now it is a mass of ruins. It was a grand old place, and it made our hearts ache to see the flames, even eating up the beautiful old trees. That place was burning all night, and at the same time we counted in front of us, on the south and west sides, six other great fires. What a sight it was and what a night! From June 20 to July 17 we had daily and nightly attacks. Sometimes they lasted for three and four hours, and sometimes only half an hour—sometimes on all sides at once, and then again from only one side. The night attacks came between midnight and 2 a.m. Major Conger said some of them, for furious firing, exceeded anything he had experienced in the [U.S.] civil war.

One night we had a terrible thunder storm, and during it all we had a furious general attack. The soldiers on the wall said ‘it seemed as though all hell had broken loose.’ (Our American soldiers have held the wall back of the American legation.) Now, while I am writing, bullets are falling in our courts and striking against the wall. One just struck about ten feet from the window near where I am sitting. We have got so used to them that we don’t notice them as we are working around, unless they come very fast. When the cannon were turned on us, then, indeed, our hearts grew faint. Besides the hundreds of thousands, of bullets, it has been estimated that 2,800 shot and shell have fallen in our courts. Four hundred fell in one day, and yet not a man was killed by them, though many have been hit by bullets. Between sixty and seventy struck this house we are in. (I am in the ballroom at the British legation, with thirteen other ladies.)...

Our men have been counter-mining for weeks and strengthening all the weak places in our walls. What we fear is the being defeated and driven back into the city. We ladies have made thousands of sandbags. They are made of cloth, silk, satin, velvet, legation curtains—in fact, everything, even to taking garments. Satin and silks of the most

beautiful shades, some beautifully embroidered curtains, table cloths, sheets, pillow cases, etc., etc. These have saved many and many precious lives. The walls about the legation are about fifteen feet high, and these are now doubly strong. The firing is growing so bad I think I will stop now.

Aug. 9. — We had a fearful night. Three sharp attacks, and then incessant firing all the rest of the time. Branches and leaves are all over the ground this forenoon. It is reported that the soldiers who have been firing on us have been sent out to fight the foreign troops, and these are new ones.... The Chinese soldiers on the wall have a great fear of our American Colt's rapid-firing gun. They made an attempt to rush it one night in the early days, but when they saw the deadly work they could not retreat fast enough. In the compound, across the street, where our Christians were first located, they allowed the Chinese to dig holes and enter, and then killed them to a man. They have learned some very serious lessons the past two months. It must be an eye-opener to them, that a few hundred could hold out against their thousands and an entire city. They said at first that in two days we would all be in their hands, and it is now two months. But it has not been the might or power of man, but of God. There have been as wonderful providences and miracles as in the leading of the Jews out of Egypt. Can you think of what it means to feed over 3,000 people a day, and no time to prepare and stock in for such an experience as we are having? There were within our barricades two small foreign stores. These goods have all been confiscated, but they were not many. Within our boundaries were a few Chinese grain shops. Then, in some of the buildings, which have been burned down, food was found. There are four or five good wells of water, and no danger of their being poisoned. We have, by careful living, food enough to last three weeks longer. Of course, it is food very different from what we would have if in our homes.

The only meat has been horse meat, until yesterday, when a cow was killed. The horses belonged to the legation people, and there are enough to last ten days more. I believe they kill two a day. Then we have rice and graham bread. Our butter long ago gave out, except for use once a day.... Now and then we open some cans of fruit or vegetables for one

meal. As a rule, people have kept up fairly well as to health. Five little children have died, and two or three more are quite ill....

There are sixteen nations represented in this siege—America, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, England, France, Finland, German, Italy, Japan, Norway, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Portugal, and China. There are 414 foreigners.

August 10. — This morning at 3 o'clock we had a furious attack (rifle attack). The cannon have all been sent out of the city to meet the foreign army. Bullets struck the skylight in the hall and the glass came crashing down with a terrible noise. Our machine guns were turned on, but I have not heard whether many of the enemy were killed. In fact, we could not know, as they fight from sheltered places....

Sunday Night, Aug. 12. — I have been sick in bed the last two days, and so have not written on my letter. This is the third sick spell I have had within two weeks. We heard on Friday that our troops were half-way to us. Had had two battles and expected to reach us either Aug. 13 or 14. Now, while I am writing, we are in the midst of a furious attack. It is the fifth or sixth one we have had to-day. Our men estimate that they have killed 100 Boxers and many soldiers. To-day our men on the wall report hearing heavy cannonading to the south-east. That is where the Chinese expected to meet our troops to-day, and we expect there is a big battle on there. Our men also say they have seen thousands of soldiers leaving the city to-day, and the cavalry going out on the run. Our men fired on them, but it was a range of 1,100 yards, and they do not know much damage they did....

It is impossible to enumerate the mercies of these awful weeks. Our hearts are full of thanksgiving. Twice the officials have sent word that the Christians must be given up, but they have received a fitting answer. What will be done with them and us when the troops come is a question we cannot answer....

The night of July 13, beginning about 6:30 o'clock, we had for three hours a most terrific attack. Nothing in battle, as far as sound, could equal it. Three mines were exploded in the French legation, blowing up houses, killing and injuring foreigners as well as some of the enemy. A part of a shell came into the hospital and struck one of the beds, but did not injure the sick man. Several spent ones struck our porch. We rushed around in the most horrible din, making new beds, feeling around in the dark after things because the windows had been filled with sand bags. Flames burst out at the French legation, also at the German and French hotels. The shot and shell of the Chinese cannon were not good and did not fit their guns well, or we should long ago have been reduced. Our poor wounded men were so brave — helpless, and yet strong in spirit — during those awful hours of attack....

August 13 — Last night I gave up writing, the firing made me so nervous, and then we dared not to have a light, it got so bad. The night was simply beyond words. All day there was firing, and several attacks. About 7 o'clock in the evening it was bad and simply grew worse till 3 o'clock this morning; then we had a let-up of an hour or so, and then they started in again. Thousands of bullets struck all about us. One came into our room through the window, but did not hit any one. One struck just over the window and brought down some tiles, and several struck on the roof. All our west barricades were badly injured, and it will take all day to repair them. Our three machine guns and cannon were all working. It is simply wonderful that tens of thousands of bullets could be fired and only one man killed. The French captain was instantly killed....

Our American flag, also the Russian flag, has been raised on the wall to-day. I do hope our troops will come in to-day. It does not seem as if we could endure another night like last night....

August 14 — Last night was the most horrible of all....

Source: Qtd. in Miller, J. Martin. *China, the Yellow Peril: At War With the World*. Chicago: Monarch Book Co., 1900. 421–431.