

The Tokugawa Shogunate

The Tokugawa Shogunate was a feudal dynasty that was founded in 1603 by Tokugawa Ieyasu, a *daimyo*, or military lord. The period of Tokugawa rule is commonly referred to as the Edo period, because Edo (modern Tokyo) was the Tokugawa capital city. After Ieyasu's forces won a decisive victory at the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600, he was unopposed as the strongest *daimyo* in Japan, and became the shogun three years later. His victory concluded more than a century of warfare between the *daimyo*. The *shoguns* (which, roughly translated, means *hereditary military dictators*) of the Tokugawa family ruled until 1868, when they were overthrown in the Meiji Restoration. Their rule was characterized by peace, but also by the development of rigid class distinctions and isolation from outsiders.

The Tokugawa Shogunate continued the rigid class rules established by Toyotomi Hideyoshi, a powerful *daimyo* of the late sixteenth century who unified most of Japan. According to Toyotomi's system, the *daimyo* were the highest class, followed by the caste of *samurai*, or warriors. *Daimyo* and *samurai* comprised about one percent of the Japanese population; nearly everyone else was in the lower classes. The vast majority of Japanese were peasants, but over the Edo period cities grew more populous, which meant that an increasing proportion of the population – at least ten percent – was in the artisanal and merchant classes. Entertainers, prostitutes, and those whose professions involved dealing with death – a taboo subject – comprised a sort of underclass. The position of women dwindled under the restrictive regime, and officially women lost the right to own property and to initiate divorce. In practice, however, such distinctions mattered mostly to the *samurai*, if at all. In most non-noble families, women played a large and important role in economic life, while women in the merchant class could run businesses and have wealth.

For centuries, many observers of early modern Europe have thought that because both the Tokugawa Shogunate and the European absolute monarchies were political systems in which power was centralized at the top, there was a fundamental similarity between Japanese and European societies. This simple observation, however, obscures the fact that fundamental differences also existed between European absolute monarchies and the Tokugawa Shogunate. While the Shogunate did concentrate power at the top, the *daimyo* still had some autonomy and sometimes their own armies, unlike, for instance, the nobility of absolutist France. Moreover, while European absolute monarchs encouraged the growth of the commercial class to offset the power of the nobility and the church, the Japanese commercial class did not develop until late in the Tokugawa Shogunate, and then not as an offset to *daimyo* or *samurai* power.

The first encounter between Europeans and Japanese occurred likely by accident, when Portuguese traders in a Chinese junk made landfall on the island of Tanegashima, in southern Japan, in 1543. Since the Portuguese introduced firearms to Japan while Japan was in the midst of a long-running civil war, they and other European traders were initially welcomed. The Christian missionaries who arrived shortly afterwards, however, were not as welcome among all factions. Eventually the missionaries, especially the Jesuits, were accused of being subversive and expelled.

This was part of a broader isolationist policy: Japanese were forbidden, on penalty of death, from leaving the island, and the only country with which Japan maintained diplomatic relations during the Tokugawa Shogunate was Korea. Japan conducted little trade with outsiders: only with the Chinese and the Dutch, and only in the port of Nagasaki. This policy lasted until the 1850s, when Commodore Matthew Perry of the U.S. Navy forced the Japanese to open their ports to American trade; in a triumphant stunt, Perry cowed the Japanese by leading his fleet towards Edo and pointing its guns at the Japanese mainland. The Perry Expedition shocked Japan and helped to topple the Tokugawas, whose control was already weakening due to social changes. The Meiji Restoration followed, in which a group of powerful daimyo overthrew the last Tokugawa shogun in 1867 and restored the emperor to his previous prominence in 1868.

