

The Seclusion of Japan



6 ▼ Tokugawa Iemitsu, CLOSED COUNTRY EDICT OF 1635

For close to a century Japan was a European success story in Asia. Portuguese traders and missionaries began visiting Japan regularly in the 1540s, and the Spanish, Dutch, and English soon followed. The Japanese were fascinated by European goods such as eyeglasses and clocks and were quick to appreciate the military potential of European firearms and artillery. Some even adopted European dress. Daimyo on the island of Kyushu in southwestern Japan competed for European trade by tolerating the presence of Catholic missionaries and in a few cases converting to Christianity themselves. Oda Nobunaga, the military leader who unified approximately half of Japan in the 1570s and 1580s, encouraged Catholic missionary activity to weaken his rivals, the powerful and wealthy Buddhist monasteries. His tolerance of missionary activity led to numerous conversions in the district of Kyoto, Japan's capital city. By the early seventeenth century approximately 500,000 Japanese had become Christians.

By then, however, anti-European sentiment was growing. Nobunaga's successor, Hideyoshi, became suspicious of Europeans after the Spaniards conquered the Philippines, and he began to question the loyalty of daimyo who had become Christians. In 1597 he ordered the crucifixion of nine Catholic missionaries and seventeen Japanese converts. The early Tokugawa shoguns, in their single-minded pursuit of stability and order, also feared the subversive potential of Christianity. They sought to obliterate it, while at the same time limiting commercial contacts with China, Southeast Asia, and Europe.

Japan's isolation policy was fully implemented by Tokugawa Iemitsu, Ieyasu's grandson and shogun from 1623 to 1651. His edicts largely closed Japan to all foreigners and prevented his subjects from leaving Japan. The following document, the most famous of Iemitsu's exclusion edicts, is directed to the two commissioners of Nagasaki, a port city in southern Japan and an early center of Christianity.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. What steps are to be taken to suppress Christianity?
2. How are commercial dealings with foreigners to be handled before they are ended altogether?
3. In what ways did the edict affect the shogun's Japanese subjects?
4. Does trade or Christianity seem to have been the greater threat to Japan?