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Abstract

The Shimabara Rebellion has been studied throughout history by historians of East Asia. Originally conceived by both Japanese and Western scholars as a religious revolt against the anti-Christian Tokugawa government, later scholars contended that the Rebellion was a demonstration by the mistreated and impoverished and only tacitly related to Christian influences. This paper sets out to build on that narrative and to show the connection between the Christian resistance to the Tokugawa government and the movement of impoverished and desperate peasants, pushed to the brink of existence. Furthermore, this paper hopes to explore the goals of the Rebellion and establish the Shimabara Rebellion within the context of other rebellions during the Tokugawa era.

Keywords

Shimabara Rebellion, Japanese Christians, Persecution of Christians

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By
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The Shimabara Rebellion from 1637 to 1638 remains one of the most historically divisive events in Japanese early modern history. The Rebellion threw the Shimabara and Amakusa provinces on the far south of Japanese islands into outright revolt against their lords, and, later, against the army of the shogunate itself. The cause of the Rebellion remains a popular historiographical debate into the modern day. Some contend that the sizeable, if still minority, population of Japanese Christians in these distant provinces revolted in order to overthrow a government whose public policy included the persecution, torture, and execution of Christians. Others argue that economic oppression forced the peasants into revolt against irresponsible daimyo, or local lords, with the Christian element being overplayed in historical records. Neither of these interpretations fully captures the nature of the Shimabara Rebellion. Tokugawa Japan, even after the Rebellion, maintained a long tradition of peasant resistance to the domination by the daimyo through

petitions, inactivity, and even outright violence. Economic hardship and political persecution undoubtedly pressured peasants into rebellion against their lords in Shimabara and Amakusa. However, Christian influences in these regions tied together the revolt of farmers, unemployed soldiers, and other classes. The Shimabara Rebellion was not a peasants' revolt against unjust taxation or a Christian uprising. The Rebellion was the last measure of a desperate people, pushed together by a common economic suffering and held together by a common culture marked, but not consumed, by Japanese Christianity. After the Rebellion, the Tokugawa shogunate's persecution of Christianity was a concentrated effort to cut or replace these cultural and religious ties in order to end the threat of any future powerful and unified revolts. The shogunate's reaction reveals how they recognized the multiple causes of the Rebellion and used the experience to prevent future insurrections.

In order to properly understand how the Shimabara arose, historians must be aware not just of the economic and religious environment, but also of the common practices of the peasant class. Although the Tokugawa era was characterized by administrative and government domination, the chonin, or middle to lower classes, still maintained some ability to resist unilateral domination by their daimyo. Peasants eventually submitted to social immobility and high taxes from their lords; however, they were still able to influence local policy. Often, in instances of bad

farming or famine, peasants requested exemption or lowering of the tax rate.¹⁸⁵ While the daimyo had no legal obligation to act on these peasant demands, their acceptance hinted at a local relationship more flexible than the national tax-collecting policy. Despite the heavy cost demands of the upkeep of estate, personal castle, and lavish lifestyle, daimyo were more willing to negotiate with peasants than to risk a costly revolt. Often these appeals were conducted through village headmen and the wealthy farming families who sought to retain a greater amount of surplus crop.¹⁸⁶ However, increased tax burdens most heavily affected the poorer farming families, who could be driven to starvation in years of bad harvest. As a result, some of these poor farmers threatened to abandon their land, leaving the domain's agricultural base without its primary labor force. In the pursuit for concessions, the headsman used typical honorifics and appeals to their "benevolent lordship," laced with dissatisfaction over the lord's administration. In extreme cases, peasant classes chanced open revolt when their daimyo ignored petitions and refused any concessions. Only twenty years after the bloody Shimabara Rebellion, peasants under the Kurume administration in southern Japan violently revolted when their lord refused to lower "unheard of taxes" and every

¹⁸⁵ Donald Burton, "Peasant Movements in Early Tokugawa Japan," *Peasant Studies*, 8, no. 3 (Summer 1979), accessed February 20, 2015, 62. *Historical Abstracts*.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

demand by the peasants.¹⁸⁷

As a result, typically the daimyo and the shogunate opted to appease the peasant population instead of having to crush outright rebellion.¹⁸⁸ Daimyo that lost control over their peasant population were often replaced and dishonored by their administrative failure. Through this policy of mutual responsibility, the chief concerns of the daimyo shifted from collecting as much as possible from the peasant population to maintaining peace and order in their domain. Although the exploitation of peasants through poll taxes, agricultural taxes, and more continued, daimyo made concessions and tax breaks to avoid the humiliation of a revolt. The complicity of the law was better assured when the peasants respected their lord and believed they would receive fair treatment. For example, even after the brutally repressed Shimabara Rebellion, peasants hid their rice from tax collectors in Bizan.¹⁸⁹ Efficient tax collection was easier and better guaranteed through appeasement, not force. Tokugawa era daimyo exploited the peasantry, but the peasantry retained an agency to defy absolute domination.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.,67.

¹⁸⁸ Daimyo and the shogunate maintained a feudal relationship not unlike that of kings and lords in Europe. The shogunate was the ultimate military and political authority. The shogun and his advisors directed military operations on a grand scale and controlled national legislature. The daimyo received their lands by the authority of the shogun and, as such, were subservient to his demands and interests. They were expected to maintain order in their territory, collect taxes for the shogunate, and provide grand demonstrations of loyalty to the shogun through parades to the capitol of Edo.

¹⁸⁹ Burton, "Peasant Movements," 67.

Many historians have discussed the Shimabara Rebellion in detail, primarily focusing on the causes of the revolt. Older research tended to place the blame on the harsh anti-Christian policies enacted by the daimyo. Neil Fujita and Joseph Sebes both attributed the rebellion as an outburst of persecuted Japanese Christians, joined by hidden Christians who had been “forced to apostatize” through torture and intimidation.¹⁹⁰ Japanese Christians were a significant minority in southern Japan. Originally, daimyo had forced their peasantry to convert to Christianity in order to attract European ships and the goods they carried, particularly guns. Although the demand for guns significantly lessened once the Tokugawa shogunate stiffened its control over the nation, many of the peasants remained committed to their newfound religion. Reports of the Rebellion, from European and Japanese sources, detailed the rebels’ use of Christian symbols and banners. However, Fujita and Sebes’ theory relied on a much larger population of Japanese Christians than actually existed in Kyushu. More realistically, modern historians relied on the tradition and accounts of peasant rebellions to explain the Rebellion.¹⁹¹ Using research by historians such as Donald Burton and Geoffrey Parker, more recent narratives explained the

¹⁹⁰ Joshua Sebes, “Christian Influences on the Shimabara Rebellion 1637-1638,” *Archivum historicum Societatis Iesu*, no. 48 (1978), 142. *Historical Abstracts*.

¹⁹¹ Fujita and Sebes are both authors and religious historians. Although their research is valuable, their interpretation is skewed with an examination of the Shimabara Rebellion through a Christian lens.

Shimabara Rebellion as a peasants' revolt against political injustice and unbearable taxation. Geoffrey Gunn explicitly described this version of events as "refreshingly modern."¹⁹² However, to simply disregard the well-documented Christian element of the Rebellion does not fully explore the origins of the Shimabara Rebellion, nor explain the harsh reprisals against Christianity following the Rebellion.¹⁹³ Recently, more historians have rejected both the Christian uprising and peasant revolt narratives, entertaining the idea that both elements substantially influenced the Rebellion. Ohashi Yukihiro, a younger and newer historian, even explored how the opposing narratives of the Shimabara Rebellion were developed by historians after concluding that multiple elements of social hierarchy and cohesion, religious persecution, and economic despotism made the Rebellion possible. Ultimately, historians have increasingly accepted that there is no singular cause, and have begun to explore how the memory of the Shimabara Rebellion was created to simplify the historical narrative and foist the blame for civil unrest on the small minority of Japanese Christians.

In Shimabara and Amakusa, economic pressures were so dire as to require these methods of resistance. Many peasants complained of heavy taxes and of difficulty living. Wealthier

¹⁹² Geoffrey Gunn, "The Duarte Correa manuscript and the Shimabara Rebellion," *Crossroads*, no. 6 (1998), 12. Found in Crossroads Website.

¹⁹³ Burton, Parker, and Gunn are historians and professors focused on East Asia and Japan. Their interpretation reflects the secularization of history and an attempt to fit the Shimabara Rebellion into a larger pattern of peasant rebellions.

farmers could not retain as much surplus and poor farmers risked starvation under the new Shimabara lord.¹⁹⁴ The previous lord, who had also burdened the population with persecution of Christianity and heavy taxes, had died suddenly, leaving his inexperienced son to continue his unpopular policies. Peasants in Amakusa suffered similarly and this heavy economic oppression irked many of the farmers, both wealthy and poor.¹⁹⁵ Duarte Correa, a Portuguese sea captain-turned-Jesuit, recorded that the peasants of Amakusa were forced to pay the annual tribute in wheat, rice, and barley as well as two additional imposts. Furthermore, Correa asserted that the peasantry was expected to serve the daimyo in every way possible, such as supplying firewood to their lord's soldiers.¹⁹⁶ While Correa's testimony is steeped in bias, as a secret Catholic missionary, these claims leveled against the lords of Shimabara and Amakusa are supported by their inexperience and youth.¹⁹⁷ Additionally, extravagant spending by the daimyo was typically expected, from the expenses

¹⁹⁴ Ohashi Yukihiro, trans. Martin Ramos, "The Revolt of Shimabara-Amakusa," *Bulletin of Portuguese-Japanese Studies*, no. 20 (2010), 74. *Historical Abstracts*.

¹⁹⁵ Gunn, "Duarte Correa," 7.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁹⁷ Correa, as a Portuguese Jesuit, looked to avoid placing the blame of the rebellion on Christianity itself. Rather, he blamed the faulty administration of the daimyo in order to clear Christianity of most responsibility of the Rebellion. Ultimately, his efforts fell short as the Tokugawa bakufu cited the Rebellion as a major Christian uprising and banned Christianity from Japan. Correa was later imprisoned for his Portuguese ethnicity and Christian faith in Nagasaki, tortured, and burned to death.

of *sankin kotai* to the costs of maintain their castle, dress, and other status symbols.¹⁹⁸ Being inexperienced daimyo, these two lords may have been overwhelmed by their administrative and social duties and resorted to raising taxes to procure the appropriate funds. However, through the eyes of the peasants, these daimyo openly exploited their peasant class in order to enhance their own personal wealth. Most accounts claim that the Shimabara lord used most of the collected taxes in order to fund the building of his new Shimabara castle at the expense of the farming class. Furthermore, the lords punctuated these economic injustices with acts of political terror and torture. Peasants unable to supply taxes were beaten, drowned, and killed on the administration's orders.¹⁹⁹ These economic and political abuses created a highly volatile sentiment among the commoner classes, especially the farmers.

These economic and political injustices were compounded by the religious persecution enacted by both the state and local governments. Since Toyotomi Hideoyoshi's reign, the government had, at least on paper, opposed the expansion and continued presence of Christianity in Japan. In 1587, Hideyoshi declared that any lord who wanted to become a "follower of the padres (priests)" of their own volition could do so and also convert their fief, only

¹⁹⁸ *Sankin kotai* is the law of necessary expeditions to and prolonged stays at the shogunate's castle in Edo. The daimyo were expected to make this trip at least annually and maintain an impressive home worthy of their title. The intention of *sankin kotai* was to keep daimyo from building too much personal wealth and to bring them close under the watchful eye of the shogunate.

¹⁹⁹ Ohashi, "Revolt of Shimabara-Amakusa," 74.

prohibiting some of the wealthier and more influential fief owners from doing so.²⁰⁰ However, in the same year, Hideyoshi also expelled the missionaries from Japan and denounced his vassals who had convinced the peasants of their fief to convert as well.²⁰¹ Christianity had first arrived in southern Japan in the mid 1500's, brought in force by Portuguese missionaries and later by Christian Dutch and British merchant companies. As evidenced in *Samurai William*, these Southern lords employed a number of methods to attract European trading company ships.²⁰² Acting independently of the daimyo, some lords converted to Christianity to attract the European merchants to their cities, or at least provided Christian missionaries with access to the countryside and peasant population. Some peasants converted upon their lord's conversion to Christianity while others were convinced by the preaching of the Christian priests. Japanese Christians never became a majority in southern Japan, but did account for a sizeable minority of the population.

Although Christianity was still, to some extent, prevalent in

²⁰⁰ Toyotomi Hideyoshi, "Limitation on the Propagation of Christianity, 1587," in *Japan: A Documentary History: The Dawn of History to the Late Tokugawa Period*, ed. David Lu (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1997), 196.

²⁰¹ Toyotomi Hideyoshi, "Expulsion of the Missionaries, 1587," in *Japan: A Documentary History: The Dawn of History to the Late Tokugawa Period*, ed. David Lu (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1997), 197.

²⁰² Giles Milton, *Samurai William* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2002), 182. In the case of the British East India Company, King Foyne of Hirado demonstrated his hospitality in the form of food and prostitutes provided for the crew of the Clove. King Foyne won over the British East India Company and Hirado became the location the English factory.

Kyushu in the early 1600's under the first Tokugawa shogun, Tokugawa Ieyasu, the succeeding shoguns harshly condemned the foreign religion.²⁰³ During the early Tokugawa shogunate, Christianity experienced a “dramatic decline,” likely due to the shogunate's increasing alienation and restriction of European influences during the Edo period.²⁰⁴ Christianity was only truly valued for the trade, specifically guns, it brought in from European merchants; with the pacification of Japan under Tokugawa Ieyasu, there was a decreased demand for guns and a significant decreased value on trade with the European Christians. Christian faith was considered a crime. This policy was not entirely unique to Christianity, as unpopular Buddhist sects and families of disloyal retainers received similar treatment. Regardless, hundreds of Christians were executed in Kyoto in 1619 and in Nagasaki in 1622.²⁰⁵ Records of Christians being imprisoned, decapitated, and burned alive characterized the shogunate's attitude towards Japanese Christians.²⁰⁶ Even more graphic executions included crucifixion, water torture, mutilation, and “suspending the prisoner head down over a pit of excrement.” Many of the Japanese Christians recanted to avoid punishment while others were driven

²⁰³ Ohashi, “Revolt of Shimabara-Amakusa,” 73.

²⁰⁴ Peter Nosco, “Early Modernity and the State's Policies toward Christianity in 16th and 17th Century Japan,” *Bulletin of Portuguese Japanese Studies*, no. 7 (2003), 12. *Historical Abstracts*.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁰⁶ Fujita, “Persecution by Tokugawa Bakufu,” in *Japan's Encounter with Christianity: the Catholic mission in pre-modern Japan* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1991), 175-177.

into underground groups.²⁰⁷ The Tokugawa bakufu's desire for control, stability, and order compelled it to attempt to quash Christianity.²⁰⁸ The Era of the Warring States, characterized by near constant civil war across Japan by competing warlords, was over and there was no longer any need for trade with the Europeans. To emphasize the point, two years before the Shimabara Rebellion, the Tokugawa shogunate issued an edict barring the Catholic priests from Japan, demanding that its citizenry report any found padres, and promised to put to death any Japanese returning from overseas.²⁰⁹ Christianity had overstayed its welcome in Tokugawa Japan, as the bakufu sought to consolidate its control over its population's personal and religious lives. Zen Buddhism was becoming a national religion used to encourage loyalty and subservience among the peasantry and to reinforce Tokugawa authority instead of opposing it.²¹⁰ In the eyes of the shogunate, Christianity had outlived its usefulness and had become a cause of disorder in the religious conflict it provoked.

At the local level, the Shimabara and Amakusa lords

²⁰⁷ Tetsuya Ohama, "Christianity in the Edo Period," in *A History of Japanese Religion*, ed. Kazuo Kasahara, trans. Paul McCarthy and Gaynor Sekimori (Tokyo, Japan: Kosei Publishing Company, 2001), 437.

²⁰⁸ The bakufu was the military and political government administrated by the Tokugawa shogun.

²⁰⁹ Tokugawa Shogunate, "Excerpts from The Edict of 1653 Ordering the Closing of Japan: Addressed to the Joint Bugyo of Nagasaki," in *Japan: A Documentary History: The Dawn of History to the Late Tokugawa Period*, ed. David Lu (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1997), 221.

²¹⁰ Nosco, "Early Modernity," 12-13.

engaged in the persecution of Christians in the same manner as the shogunate. This process was very common in domains formerly controlled by Christian daimyo.²¹¹ In a later letter to shogunate forces, one rebel claimed that their only wish was to practice Christianity without repression.²¹² Although this demand was not universal for the Shimabara rebels, a significant percentage of Japanese Christians lived in constant fear of being arrested and executed for their religion. The Shimabara and Amakusa repressions of Christianity worsened an already toxic relationship between the daimyo and their peasants.

This common suffering of the Shimabara and Amakusa peasants, both Christians and non-Christians, was pushed to a breaking point by 1637 CE. The peasants of Shimabara revolted, attacking the lord's tax officials and men. The peasants, merchants, craftsmen, and unemployed soldiers of Amakusa followed, as joined the rebellion out of choice or force. These rebels converged on Hara Castle to reform and organize, appointing the 16-year old Amakusa Shiro as their "leader."²¹³

²¹¹ While many Southern lords had converted their fiefs to Christianity to garner European trade, many were replaced or forced out by the Tokugawa bakufu. The later non-Christian daimyo, eager to prove their loyalty to the Tokugawa shogunate, became unpopular in these regions because of their persecution of Christianity.

²¹² Ohashi, "Revolt of Shimabara-Amakusa," 74.

²¹³ In reality, it is much more likely that Shiro was more of a figurehead while the rebel ronin decided on tactics and war plans. Shiro's youth and the initial success of the rebellion imply that more experienced warriors planned the military aspect of the rebellion.

Hara Castle was besieged by Tokugawa forces but their initial attempts to crush the rebels failed. After almost four months, the Tokugawa forces starved the rebels of food, resources, and ammunition. Hara Castle fell and the Tokugawa forces exterminated almost all of the participating rebels. After the massacre, the shogunate issued edicts expelling and banning all Europeans, except for the Dutch at Nagasaki, and reinforcing the outlaw of Christianity in Japan. After the Rebellion, Christianity was affixed with a permanent stigma of violence, disorder, and disrespect for proper authority. The Tokugawa shogunate issued propaganda portraying Christianity as impure and inappropriate while also promising rewards to those who reported Christian practitioners.²¹⁴ Japanese Christians were forced underground to hide their religion and the Tokugawa shogunate eliminated Japanese Christianity as what they perceived as a threat.

Although historians like Fujita or Gunn argue whether economic or religious oppression was more significant in pushing the Tokugawa peasantry to revolt, the Rebellion was much more complicated. The communities of Shimabara and Amakusa were tightly knit, tied together by a common culture. Christianity had its largest base for support in southern Japan, and Japanese

²¹⁴ Tokugawa Shogunate, “Excerpts from The Five-Household Group Laws from Shimo Sakurai Village (1640),” in *Voices of Early Modern Japan: Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life during the Age of the Shoguns*, ed. Constantine Vaporis (Oxford, England: Greenwood, 2012), 84.

Christians made up a significant percentage of the population. Although public acts of torture and execution were intended to horrify and scare the populace into submission, at the time, local daimyo could only safely employ it in moderation. By overusing these methods, the daimyo pushed the population past the breaking point, to where they were convinced that they were more safe revolting than continuing under the daimyo's rule. Japanese Christians and non-Christian peasants were tied together by the communal need to survive. In times of famine or bad harvests, the village headmen, regardless of their religion, campaigned for lower tax rates, tax breaks, and exemptions. Regardless of their differences in religion, wealth, or social status, the peasantry pulled together in times of extreme despotism with the intention of forcing improvement in their standard of living. In their struggle to survive, the agricultural base had created a community that relied on each other to demand concessions from the state authority.

Additionally, although only Christians were being persecuted for religious reasons, every member of the commoner class was being exploited economically and oppressed politically. In an effort to both help fund the reconstruction of Edo's walls and to build his own Shimabara Castle, Shigemasa Matsukura, the new lord, imposed heavy taxes and developed strict penalties for the farmers who failed to provide. Many of these taxes seem almost ridiculous to modern thinking, such as taxes for the death of a

family member. Families unable to pay their taxes were starved, beaten, tortured, or killed. The mothers and daughters of these families were sold into brothels. Concessions were not forthcoming.²¹⁵ The economic and political oppression unified the peasantry into a culture of suffering, one in which mutual dependence was essential.

Economic grievances played a significant role in the start of the Rebellion. The unbearable taxes and system of punishments pushed the peasantry to desperate measures. As the lifestyle became more and more untenable, the peasants turned to their own and implemented the only option left available to resist: open rebellion. At its very least, revolt attracted the attention, and displeasure, of the shogunate. In some ways, the peasant revolt can be interpreted as a Pyrrhic victory, mutually assured destruction for both the rebels and the daimyo. In previous cases, daimyo were dishonored and removed from office as punishment for failing to maintain peace in their domain. Political and economic despotism forced peasants to drastic actions. The close bonds between the community, strengthened by a common culture and common “suffering,” assured that the rebels organized, mobilized, and, largely remained loyal to each other.

The Shimabara Rebellion was an incredibly costly challenge to Tokugawa authority. The rebels raided armories,

²¹⁵ Fujita, “Persecution,” 184.

killed Tokugawa soldiers, and forced a lengthy siege. More importantly, the Rebellion embarrassed the bakufu; although the peasantry was incited against their daimyo, these commoners-in-arms managed to occupy a castle, repulse, and kill trained military.²¹⁶ In short, the Shimabara Rebellion was not a mistake the shogunate could allow to happen again. To prevent another uprising of the similar nature, the Tokugawa shogunate devoted itself to the expulsion and elimination of Christianity in the domains. By foisting the blame on the Japanese Christians, the shogunate could divide the communities in southern Japan where Christians were still a significant minority.

The Tokugawa shogunate employed a more developed and systematic persecution of Christians. Propaganda was specifically designed to demonize the European Christian missionaries. In one chapbook, the Christian “padre” is described more like a goblin than human, with the intention of taking over Japan.²¹⁷ These depictions were intended to scare Japanese away from interaction with Christianity and to create a connotation between Christianity and evil. However, this propaganda piece also did much more. The Buddhist monk ultimately prevents the spread of the priest’s “screeching,” juxtaposing the wild and uncivilized image of the

²¹⁶ Sebes, “Christian Influences on the Shimabara Rebellion,” 143.

²¹⁷ Unknown Authors, excerpts from *Kirishitan Monogatari (1639)*, in *Voices of Early Modern Japan: Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life during the Age of the Shoguns*, ed. Constantine Vaporis (Oxford, England: Greenwood, 2012), 202.

Christian padre with the calm wisdom and loyalty of the Buddhist monk. By denigrating Christianity, this excerpt elevates Zen Buddhism which was quickly becoming the Tokugawa's influence on religion. *Kirishitan* also legitimized the reprisals of the shogunate against Christianity; in this text, the shogun has the moral right to destroy their temples and punish those that remain Christian.²¹⁸ The shogunate certainly exercised this right more frequently and publicly after the rebellion. While the previous executions had been sporadic and scattered, the shogunate enforced stricter laws ordering the population to report Japanese Christians. One set of Household Laws from 1640 includes numerous charges to investigate and report any Christian activities. All villagers were also required to report to the "pertinent temple," as Zen Buddhist temples took over the responsibility of ensuring the Tokugawa shogunate's control over its citizens' religions. Tokugawa officials assumed these laws would be followed, because if Christians were discovered by these officials, the entire village would be punished.²¹⁹ One edict ordered by the Tokugawa senior counselors in 1639 captures the spirit of this policy:

With regard to those who believe in
Christianity, you are aware that there
is a proscription, and thus knowing,
you are not permitted to allow padres

²¹⁸ Unknown Authors, "Kirishitan Monogatari," 203.

²¹⁹ Tokugawa Shogunate, "Excerpts from The Five-Household Group Laws", 84.

and those who believe in their teachings to come aboard your ships. If there is any violation, all of you who are aboard will be considered culpable. If there is anyone who hides the fact that he is a Christian and boards your ship, you may report it to us. A substantial reward will be given to you for this information.²²⁰

This memorandum was addressed to Chinese and Dutch ships. The bakufu clarified that foreigners could be Christian as long as they did not propagate. However, this edict demonstrates the bakufu's main tool in rooting out Christianity was not officials or even Buddhist temples but the civilian population itself. The threat of punishment for failing to report Christians compelled the non-Christian population to take an active role in searching out Christians within their own village or town. The promise of reward made compliance even more appealing.

The concept that everyone would suffer for the religious beliefs of one individual drove a wedge between Japanese Christians and non-Christians. These Group Laws, and the promised reprisals for disobeying them, severed the cultural ties and communal spirit that had united the Shimabara and Amakusa peasants regardless of religion. With these laws, commoners had to fear their neighbor, not support them. Edicts like these helped

²²⁰ Tokugawa Shogunate, "Exclusion of the Portuguese (1939)," in *Voices of Early Modern Japan: Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life during the Age of the Shoguns*, ed. Constantine Vaporis (Oxford, England: Greenwood, 2012), 97.

the Tokugawa government root out Christianity—and prevent the disorder it could create—but also cut any ties of trust or fellowship that could unite peasant families in a revolt.

However, the Tokugawa shogunate also understood the role corrupt and incompetent daimyo played in inciting the Shimabara Rebellion. Both Matsukura and Katataka were instructed to end their lives in penance for failing to keep the peace. Future daimyo were more incentivized to treat their peasants well, rather than risk the humiliation of a revolt.²²¹ In this way, the shogunate discouraged corruption and injustice, based on its risks of agitating the populace and creating the necessary dissatisfaction for a revolt. Although Group Laws kept villages divided and fearful of one another, too much economic and political despotism would still drive the peasantry together. As one abbot Kodo told the lord of Kurume, cornered rats will even “bite the cat when driven to extremity.”²²² Kodo’s statement, whether an invention of memory or true, shows that the Tokugawa understand why peasants revolt and seek to crush the causes for their discontent in addition to their means to stage rebellions. Corrupt and incompetent daimyo threatened the stability of Tokugawa Japan as much as Christianity. In order to avoid revolt and the resultant humiliation, daimyo were pressured to practice fair taxation and law.

Later daimyo would employ a number of methods for

²²¹ Fujita, “Persecution,” 186.

²²² Burton, “Peasant Movements, 67.

quelling peasant dissent. Some lords made concessions in order to appease the peasantry. Dete Masamune in Sendai cleverly managed to both gain the peasantry's support for his rule by reducing the tax rate while also gaining more control over the surplus agricultural production and maximum revenue by broadening the tax base.²²³ In Dete's case, he avoided pushing the peasant population to desperation and his concessions in the tax rate kept the populace peaceful. Simultaneously, he also increased his control and revenue from the agricultural farmland. Other lords employed speakers like Hosoi Heishu to pacify their peasant populations. In 1783, Hosoi was hired by the daimyo of Owari to mollify the peasantry, angered by poor living conditions worsened by a bout of famine.²²⁴ Hosoi's allegorical sermon on the filial promise of a young wife to her parents-in-law was intended to remind the peasantry of their own duties to their lords and prevent any plots of dissent or rebellion against the Owari daimyo.²²⁵ The sermon was widely popular and drew huge crowds. In this manner, the daimyo were able to broadcast their messages of loyalty and moral behavior to a wide peasant population. Dete's manipulation of the tax base and Hosoi's sermons illustrate how

²²³ Burton, "Peasant Movements," 61.

²²⁴ Constantine Vaporis, ed., *Voices of Early Modern Japan: Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life during the Age of the Shoguns*, (Oxford, England: Greenwood, 2012), 195.

²²⁵ Hosoi Heishu, "Excerpts from Sermon Given by Hosoi Heishu," in *Voices of Early Modern Japan: Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life during the Age of the Shoguns*, ed. Constantine Vaporis (Oxford, England: Greenwood, 2012), 198.

daimyo after the Shimabara Rebellion worked to pacify their peasant populations while also gaining more control over them.

The Tokugawa shogunate strived for control over its population. Especially in early years, with the tumultuous Warring States years still fresh in the national memory, the shogunate believed political domination and unflinching order as the only path to peace. Arguably, the violent methods they employed to subdue the peasantry and their daimyo prevented the outbreak of an even more destructive and violent war between states. Driving a wedge between the Christians and the rest of Japan, they took away the ability for Christianity to become a rallying cry for peasant revolt. Communities would remain divided by “fear of thy neighbor,” and could not organize easily or harmoniously. Furthermore, the rise of the Zen Buddhist temples as the religious arm of the Tokugawa gave them tighter control over the personal spiritual lives of its subjects.²²⁶ Soto Zen temples monitored parishioners in order to prohibit other religions independent of Tokugawa control, especially Christianity and the Nichiren Fuju Fuse.²²⁷ These temples, much like the constant codes of conduct, would advocate for appropriate behavior, knowing one’s place in the social hierarchy, and submission to the daimyo and shogunate. By demonstrating the penalty for failure, daimyo were pressured to

²²⁶ Duncan Ryuken Williams, *The Other Side of Zen: A Social History of Soto Zen Buddhism in Tokugawa Japan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 23.

²²⁷ Williams, *The Other Side of Zen*, 20.

minimize corruption and punishment in their domain, or to at least formulate methods for placating or subduing the local population. Bearable taxation and living conditions deterred many peasants from resorting to open rebellion. The Tokugawa goal was to take away both the cause and means of peasant rebellion, in order to maintain peace in the realm.

Ohashi explored how memory and historical analysis influenced the evolving narrative of the Shimabara Rebellion. In early-modern Japan, Christian heresy and disruptive European influences were emphasized and the despotism of the Shimabara and Amakusa lords was placed in the background.²²⁸ This narrative justified, at least in their own eyes, Tokugawa shogunate's harsh persecution of Japanese Christians and their expulsion of the Europeans. As a result, the Christian uprising narrative dominated the early Japanese historical accounts and, subsequently, the early European historians who used their work. However, in later research, more historians recognized how the Rebellion also demonstrated a struggle between peasants and lords, on the grounds of political terrorism and economic oppression. Ohashi contended that later historians focused more on social and economic histories, though perhaps too narrowly.²²⁹ Though they had uncovered another driving cause for the Rebellion, they only reordered the causes to place unbearable taxation and punishment

²²⁸ Ohashi, "Revolt of Shimabara," 78.

²²⁹ Ohashi, "Revolt of Shimabara," 80.

as the primary cause and Christianity as a secondary. In order to accurately understand the Shimabara Rebellion, Ohashi asserted historians must stop resorting to an “either-or” binary debate.²³⁰ Instead of contesting which cause had more influence, historians should attempt to uncover the relationships between Christian persecution and economic oppression and how they compounded to explode into the Rebellion.

The Shimabara Rebellion occurred within a tradition of socially cohesive groups of peasants resisting domination by their lord. Influenced by resentment over religious persecution, outrage over harsh punishments from the daimyo, and unbearable taxation, the Rebellion was a desperate act by a peasantry left with few other options to survive. Due to the strong communal ties between the Kyushu peasantry, which included a substantial Japanese Christian population, the Rebellion survived for four months and drove the lords of Shimabara and Amakusa to humiliation and seppuku. The Tokugawa shogunate’s response shows how these influences were all vital to the Rebellion’s success, by trying to remove all these factors, including Christianity, the local cultural alliances, and the provocative corruption of incompetent daimyo. Instead of trying to simplify the Shimabara Rebellion into a single-storied narrative, historians must allow the Rebellion to exist as a complicated historical event.

²³⁰ Ibid., 80.

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