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Abstract

During the late Sengoku Period Japan witnessed the fall of the Honganji, a sect of Pure Land Buddhism. The Honganji was a significant military, political, and economic power and commanded armies of commoners known as Ikko Ikki. The Honganji fell because it challenged the traditional social order of Japan, lacked unity, and stood against warlord Oda Nobunaga during his bid for hegemony. The fall of the Honganji resulted in consequential policies and impacted Japanese society going into the Tokugawa period.

Keywords

Tokugawa, Japan, Honganji, Ikko Ikki, revolts

Disciplines

Asian History | Buddhist Studies | History | Japanese Studies

Comments

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The Fall of the Ikko Ikki:
The Demise of the Honganji
in the Late Sengoku Period

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In 1580 Kenryo, the eleventh Patriarch of the Honganji, agreed to a peace treaty with Oda Nobunaga, effectively ending the Honganji as an independent political entity and eliminating any future Ikko Ikki. While many historians have focused on the conquests of Nobunaga and his wars with the more well-known daimyo like Takeda Shingen, few have investigated the fall of arguably one of Nobunaga's most powerful enemies, the Ikko Ikki. The term “Honganji” refers to both to the central temple of the Pure Land Buddhist sect and to the religious organization as a whole. The term “Ikko Ikki” refers specifically to the confederations of warriors who were followers of Pure Land Buddhism and acted as the armies of the Honganji. The belief at the center of Pure Land Buddhism was that anyone who was faithful and pious could gain access to Amida’s “Pure Land” and that all adherents were equal under the eyes of the Buddha.¹

There is a limited amount of historical scholarship on the Honganji available in English. Most of the sources focus on one aspect of the Honganji, either the religious aspect or the political aspect, though a few sources touch on both.² Some authors and historians have downplayed the significance of the Honganji and its military and political power, arguing that they were not a real threat to Nobunaga.³ Other historians have claimed that the Ikko Ikki and the Honganji represented a semi-secular and self-ruling form government of that was at odds

¹ James C. Dobbins, *Jođo Shinshu : Shin Buddhism in Medieval Japan* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 140.

² Carol Richmond Tsang, *War and Faith: Ikkō Ikki in Late Muromachi Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007).

³ Jeroen P. Lamers, *Japonius Tyrannus The Japanese Warlord Oda Nobunaga Reconsidered* (Leiden: Hotei Publishing, 2000).

with the traditional government.⁴ All have argued that the Ikko Ikki were more than simple rebellions and that they were the product of complex religious and social factors that enabled the mass mobilization of followers into effective fighting forces. However, the issue that divides historians the most is whether or not the Ikko Ikki were a serious threat to Oda Nobunaga.

This paper sides with the majority opinion that the Ikko Ikki were not only a threat, but were one of the most persistent obstacles Nobunaga faced during his campaigns to unify Japan. While Oda Nobunaga claimed that, in terms of military value, the Ikko Ikki were, “of no account,”⁵ this paper argues that his actions speak otherwise. Many of the sources used for this utilize contemporary letters and documents in order to defend their arguments. However, few sources thoroughly investigate the causes and reasons behind the downfall of one of the major players of the late Sengoku period. Using the available scholarship, this paper aims to give a comprehensive account of the Honganji and how it went from the height of its power to its defeat in a just a few years.

The Honganji of the late Sengoku period was defeated and dismantled for three main reasons: they were a threat to the traditional social order of Japan, they lacked the unity required to survive, and they opposed and threatened Oda Nobunaga’s hegemony of Japan. However, before the question of how the Honganji fell can be answered, we must first determine what the Honganji was and who participated in the Ikko Ikki. The first section of this essay will delve into the Honganji as a political organization and look into how it became the power it was before its

⁴ Kiri Paramore, “Premodern Secularism,” *Japan Review*, no. 30 (2017): 21-37, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44259459>.

⁵ Lamers, *Japonius Tyrannus*, 104.

war with Nobunaga. This section will also investigate how the Honganji ruled its holdings, who the Honganji recruited, and why Pure Land Buddhism was appealing to the lower classes.

The second section of this essay is concerned with the apparent lack of unity shown by the Honganji and how that led to its downfall and the eventual failure of the Ikko Ikki. The paper will explore the role and powers of the Patriarch of the Honganji, Kenryo, and the limited success he achieved. The lack of leadership of the Ikko Ikki themselves will be studied using the case study of the Mikawa Ikki. Finally, this section will scrutinize the alliances and anti-Nobunaga leagues that the Honganji joined, and why they were not successful.

The third section of this essay argues that the Ikko Ikki were a threat to Oda Nobunaga and provided a serious challenge for him to overcome. This becomes evident when looking at the numerous military defeats that the Ikko Ikki dealt to Nobunaga and his generals. Nobunaga spent over ten years fighting various Ikko Ikki and the Honganji, which cost valuable resources and time. This section also asserts that the Honganji was not just a military threat, but an economic one too, and that Nobunaga took special steps to limit their ability to draw revenue during his conquest and after.

Taken together, these sections illustrate how and why the powerful Honganji of the Sengoku period was destroyed. It also becomes apparent that despite the fact that the Honganji was defeated and demilitarized in the Sengoku period, their existence had dramatic effects on the future of Japan and influenced Tokugawa policy and government.

The Honganji: A Challenge to Order

Pure Land Buddhism had been around for a long time before the Ikko Ikki, but it was not until the reign of the Patriarch Rennyō, one of Kenyō's predecessors, that the Honganji grew into a major power in Japan. Throughout the early Muromachi period Rennyō helped spread Pure Land Buddhism to farmers and craftsmen⁶, though he distanced himself from early Ikko Ikki. During a complicated succession crisis caused by the Onin War, several Ikko Ikki managed to wrest control of the province of Kaga from its lord in 1488 and greatly expanded the power and influence of the Honganji and Pure Land Buddhism sect.⁷ The conquest of Kaga essentially raised the Honganji to the level of shugo, or provincial lord, and by 1521 the Ashikaga bakufu began to send documents to the Honganji headquarters outside of Kyoto, essentially recognizing them as rulers of the province.⁸

By the beginning of Kenyō's reign in 1543, the Honganji sect was recognized and respected as a major power and equal by the daimyo and imperial court.⁹ Pure Land Buddhism was the largest sect of Buddhism at the time and had countless followers and branches. Historian Carol Tsang asserts, "The main temple ruled the entire province of Kaga, and members had strong influence in Echizen, Noto, Etchu, southern Omi, Kii, and Owari."¹⁰ The Honganji exerted its influence through its temples which were focused around the populous and politically important region around Kyoto, in south-central Honshu. These temples attracted many followers, including commoners, low-level samurai, and retainers. With a massive base of

⁶ Kenji Matsuo, *A History of Japanese Buddhism*, (Leiden: BRILL, 2007), 200, ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁷ Matsuo, *A History of Japanese Buddhism*, 201.

⁸ David L. Davis, "Ikki in Late Medieval Japan," In *Medieval Japan Essays in Institutional History*, ed. John W. Hall and Jeffery P. Mass (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), 242.

⁹ Carol Richmond Tsang, *War and Faith: Ikkō Ikki in Late Muromachi Japan*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007), 200.

¹⁰ Tsang, *War and Faith*, 223.

followers, sizable territory, and significant political clout, the Honganji was a major political player in the late Sengoku era and wielded impressive authority and influence.¹¹

The Honganji was in a unique position in Japan at the time, as it influenced a vast amount of people all over Japan, without necessarily holding a domain of their own, apart from Kaga. Even though they held Kaga, the Honganji sect remained centered around the main Honganji temple in Osaka. Historian Kiri Paramore refers to the Ikko Ikki as a “real alternate political order,”¹² inferring that the Honganji’s rule was an opposing governmental style compared to the Bakufu and daimyo governments. While Honganji sect temples had sprung up throughout many domains, Tsang argues, “the temples and their *jinaichō* [temple towns] were self-administering and self-policing.”¹³ Because these temples were exempt from daimyo taxes and were self-governing, they owed no loyalty to the local lords and only the Honganji had authority over them.

This arrangement resulted in animosity between daimyo and the temples within their domains because many lords, like Tokugawa Ieyasu, wanted more control over their lands and retainers. In particular, Ieyasu wanted to control the lucrative, but autonomous, temple towns and force temples to pay him taxes. In Ieyasu’s case, his men supposedly violated the rights of one of the four Honganji sect temple towns in Mikawa, sparking an uprising in 1563 by all four temples to assert their rights.¹⁴ While uprisings were nothing new, this one was somewhat unique as not only did Pure Land Buddhist commoners revolt, but several of Ieyasu’s own retainers who were affiliated with the Honganji switched sides too. Suddenly, bonds of familial loyalty were trumped

¹¹ Dobbins, *Jōdō Shinshu*, 154.

¹² Paramore, “Premodern Secularism,” 26.

¹³ Tsang, *War and Faith*, 208.

¹⁴ Tsang, *War and Faith*, 210.

by religious loyalty, proving that the Honganji seriously challenged the social order of Japan. Though the Mikawa Ikki was defeated, and their temples burned by Ieyasu, it serves as an example of how the Honganji operated outside of the authority of the daimyo and how that caused friction and sometimes war.

While the Ikko Ikki are often characterized as being made up of peasants, Pure Land Buddhism appealed to a diverse group of people in Sengoku Japan. Tsang asserts that “Honganji leagues consisted primarily of merchants, artisans, and village leaders,”¹⁵ while Dobbins notes that the bulk were, “peasants but gradually low-level samurai also attached themselves to the movement.”¹⁶ Oda Nobunaga’s contemporary biographer characterized the members of the Honganji as “Renegades and outlaws... [who] did not take the tenants of their faith to heart and disregarded the religious practice of the Honganji.”¹⁷ Unsurprisingly, Nobunaga’s biographer and former retainer viewed Ikko Ikki as criminals without religion in an attempt to demonize them without directly criticizing Pure Land Buddhism, which was extremely popular. Landed peasants, low-level samurai, jizamurai, merchants, and artisans were all attracted to the main message of Pure Land Buddhism: that anyone can reach the “pure lands” after death if they practice simple faith and devotion.¹⁸ Though the Ikko Ikki were made up of Pure Land Buddhists, they were not warrior monks, but rather a community of people with shared values and religion.¹⁹ This is an important distinction to make, because Honganji sectarians were

¹⁵ Tsang, *War and Faith*, 5.

¹⁶ Dobbins, *Jōdō Shinshū*, 140.

¹⁷ Gyūichi Ōta, *The Chronicle of Lord Nobunaga*, trans. Jurgis Elisonas and Jeroen Lamers (Leiden: BRILL, 2011), 209-210, ProQuest Ebook Central.

¹⁸ David L. Davis, “Ikki in Late Medieval Japan,” 239.

¹⁹ Stephen Turnbull, *Japanese Fortified Temples and Monasteries AD 710-1602* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2005), 4.

ordinary people who had professions outside of religion, while warrior monks were monks trained to be soldiers. Pure Land Buddhism and the Honganji sect were relatively egalitarian, attracting members from the lower rungs of society with the promise of salvation after death, an attractive offer considering the endemic violence and war at the time. These beliefs also served to create a huge following of devout worshippers who were willing to answer the call when war came.

Lack of Unity and the Challenges of Commanding the Honganji

Despite the Patriarch of the Honganji theoretically having command of all the followers of the sect, it was very difficult for Kenryo to have direct influence on Ikko Ikki and to coordinate sect-wide rebellions. In 1570, after Kenryo chose to side against Oda Nobunaga he sent this call to arms to several regions around Japan:

About Nobunaga's arrival in the capital: he is causing us trouble. Ever since the year before last he has given us many problems. This is horrible treatment. Even if we respond to him, it would be useless, as there would certainly be an order to destroy us. On top of that our strength does not suffice. Nonetheless, at this time, in order that our founder's line does not die out, we must fulfill our duty without consideration for our own lives. This would be most gratifying. In short, I ask for your help. Anyone who does not respond will not be a sect member.²⁰

This letter reveals how the role of Patriarch functioned and how Kenryo's was able to wield his power. Kenryo had to justify his call for arms by implying that Nobunaga has slighted the Honganji, exposing the fact that Kenryo did not have enough authority to order people to arms directly. Instead, he had to ask them for help, though he did threaten expulsion and thus,

²⁰ Kenryo, "Letter to Followers in Omi Province," in *War and Faith: Ikkō Ikki in Late Muromachi Japan*, by Carol Richmond Tsang (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007), 223.

damnation for anyone who refused to rise up against Nobunaga. It is interesting to note that Kenryo admitted that he thought the Honganji was not strong enough to defeat Nobunaga alone, yet he still appealed to his followers' honor to convince them to rise up anyway. In fact, Kenryo seems to imply that dying protecting the Honganji would guarantee admittance into the Pure Lands. Kenryo was offering both a carrot and a stick by suggesting salvation while also threatening excommunication. While Kenryo succeeded in inciting several revolts against Nobunaga, it is clear that it was difficult for Kenryo to concentrate forces, as each Ikko Ikki would be mostly confined to their own region and temples.

During uprisings, local temples created their own Ikko Ikki and waged war, sometimes without any assistance or contact with the Patriarch. One example of this is the previously mentioned Mikawa Ikki which, “ran its course without involvement from the Patriarch or even from the *ichimon* priest who was nominally in charge of Honshuji [one of the temples involved].”

²¹ The Mikawa Ikki did receive some reinforcements from branch temples in neighboring provinces,²² but these would ultimately prove fruitless as the Mikawa Ikki was defeated. There were no signs of decisive leadership or coordination of the Honganji on the macro scale and even forces within the local Ikko Ikki, “lacked a central command, and... had limited communications among themselves.”²³ Once again the Ikko Ikki give off the impression of a dangerous but uncoordinated foe who lacked the discipline and leadership necessary to harness their true potential.

²¹ Tsang, *War and Faith*, 222.

²² Tsang, *War and Faith*, 222.

²³ Tsang, *War and Faith*, 215.

While it may appear surprising that Kennyo did not extend aid to this Ikki, there are a few potential explanations. In 1563 Tokugawa Ieyasu had made peace with and began to form an alliance with the powerful Oda Nobunaga. This event may have discouraged Kennyo from committing the entire Honganji in support of the Mikawa Ikki, since he did not want a small scale, local conflict to prematurely cause war between the Honganji and Nobunaga. In fact, only five years later in 1568, Kennyo repeatedly sent gifts and congratulatory letters to Nobunaga when he overthrew the Ashikaga Shogunate in an attempt to curry his favor, though these attempts fell through.²⁴ Kennyo obviously sought to avoid direct conflict with Nobunaga unless the power or position of the Honganji was threatened.

Something both the Mikawa Ikki and the war against Nobunaga highlighted was the Honganji's reliance upon their allies. In both conflicts, the Ikko Ikki were supplemented by daimyo and retainer forces, which helped the Honganji even the playing field against Nobunaga's experienced and superior armies. Notably, the first official conflict between the Honganji proper and Nobunaga came in the year 1570 when Kennyo came to the Miyoshi clan's rescue and drove off Nobunaga's troops. However, the Ikko Ikki did not attack alone, instead combining their might with the Asakura and Azai clans.²⁵ Without the help of these more organized and professional samurai forces, it is doubtful that the Honganji itself would have been able to push Nobunaga back. Similarly, during the Mikawa Ikki, several of Ieyasu's retainers who were Honganji sectarians joined the Ikko Ikki and provided the backbone of the Ikko Ikki's military strength. Ieyasu focused on his former retainers first, "picking off the most powerful warriors,

²⁴ Tsang, *War and Faith*, 223.

²⁵ Lamers, *Japonius Tyrannus*, 74.

such as Kira Yoshiaki, who might have been able to provide leadership.”²⁶ However, once these treacherous samurai were either killed or reincorporated into Ieyasu’s retainer corps, the Mikawa Ikko Ikki was swiftly defeated. The Honganji and Kennyo knew they were sure to lose if they stood alone, but by combining their forces with other daimyo, they stood a chance against Nobunaga, and lasted ten years in the war against him.

While the Patriarch served as the leader of the Honganji, in reality he had little control over the individual Ikki. While Kennyo could call upon the entire Honganji to revolt against Nobunaga, broad coordination of the Honganji was difficult. During the ten years of war, each local Ikko Ikki was defeated piecemeal by Nobunaga and his allies, turning what had appeared to be a large and powerful force into several smaller and weaker armies.

Confronting the Hegemon: Conflict with Oda Nobunaga

The Ikko Ikki made powerful allies by proving that they could be a valuable ally themselves. Tsang writes, “No single military organization had the wherewithal to resist Nobunaga for long without the support of others, and the Honganji sectarians had repeatedly demonstrated their fighting abilities.”²⁷ While the Ikko Ikki did not win every battle they fought, they won enough of them to be considered a force to be reckoned with, which is even more impressive when most of the sectarians fighting in the Ikko Ikki were not of the samurai warrior class. Several examples of impressive Ikko Ikki victories exist, though the defense of Nagashima was a particularly important one. For four years the Honganji’s forces inside the fortresses of Nagashima held out against repeated attacks from Nobunaga’s top generals, including future

²⁶ Lamers, *Japonius Tyrannus*, 215.

²⁷ Tsang, *War and Faith*, 231.

ruler of Japan Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Nobunaga's biography gives a glimpse into one of the battles that occurred:

At this point, the [Ikko] confederates of Nagashima moved into the mountains and occupied a blocking position where the large river on the right and the mountain on the left formed a natural barrier. The path below the cliff was passable at best in single file. The confederates posted their archers and arquebusiers up front. All at once, they attacked. Shibata Shuri, commanding the rear guard seized up the situation and took on the onslaught. A fierce battle ensued, and Shibata withdrew, having been lightly wounded. In the second encounter, Ujiie Bokuzen engaged the enemy in battle. Bokuzen was killed, and many of his vassals died with him.²⁸

This battle illustrates that the Ikko Ikki troops were experienced and clever soldiers, as they ambushed the enemy force in a choke point. It is also worth noting that the confederates utilized guns to great effect and were able to defeat two detachments of Nobunaga's samurai while inflicting heavy casualties. Though Nobunaga's forces eventually captured Nagashima in 1574, it took the combined might of his navy and army to cut off the fortresses and force them to capitulate.²⁹

Despite some historians arguing that the Ikko Ikki were not a serious threat or enemy to Oda Nobunaga, it is clear that the Ikko Ikki were among Nobunaga's most challenging foes. Historian Neil McMullin writes, "Nobunaga's conflict with the Honganji and its monto [warrior band] confederations spread over a ten-year period from 1570-1580, and it was the longest and most difficult of all his struggles."³⁰ The amount of money, soldiers, and time that Nobunaga put into pacifying the Ikko Ikki was immense and could have been used elsewhere if the Honganji was not a threat or chose not to oppose him. However, the Honganji put up a stout resistance and,

²⁸ Gyūichi Ōta, *The Chronicle of Lord Nobunaga*, 163.

²⁹ Tsang, *War and Faith*, 226.

³⁰ Neil McMullin, *Buddhism and the State in Sixteenth-Century Japan* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), 101, JSTOR.

“Justified the war simply as one of survival.”³¹ After Nobunaga’s brutal destruction of temple complex at Mt. Hiei in 1571, his message was clear: either surrender and serve him or be destroyed. While the warrior monks at Mt. Hiei were not affiliated with the Honganji, their ruination signaled that Nobunaga would not respect the rights and protections that had been historically afforded to religious temples and organizations.

In addition to being a military threat, the Honganji also possessed considerable economic resources, with some claiming that the Honganji controlled most of Japan’s economy.³² The sinews of war are money and, understandably, Oda Nobunaga was threatened by the Honganji’s economy because it was used to fund and supply Ikko Ikki against him. As Nobunaga conquered lands, he, “confiscated the landholdings of those who opposed him, including the lands owned by the daimyo... and the lands owned by temples that had sided with his enemies.”³³ By taking control of the Honganji’s temples and temple towns Nobunaga not only deprived the Honganji of revenue, but also bolstered his own. However, Nobunaga also confirmed the lands of temples, as long as they surrendered to him and swore loyalty.³⁴ Nobunaga did not want to fight endless wars against the Ikko Ikki and was likely trying to encourage loyalty and avoid uprisings by granting temples clemency. If Nobunaga wanted to have complete control over Japan, he could not afford to let the Honganji continue to control a significant amount of the economy or risk further conflicts and Ikko Ikki.

Conclusion

³¹ Tsang, *War and Faith*, 228.

³² Tsang, *War and Faith*, 223.

³³ McMullin, *Buddhism and the State*, 164.

³⁴ McMullin, *Buddhism and the State*, 163.

After surrendering to Nobunaga in 1580 and promising to disperse his forces, Kenryo was allowed to continue being the head of the Honganji, albeit with significantly reduced powers. However, Kenryo's son and newly minted Patriarch, Kyonyo, initially refused to surrender and evacuate Osaka. This was quickly resolved with additional threats from Nobunaga and Kyonyo was pardoned, abandoning Osaka which was destroyed by the dispersing sectarians.³⁵ Kyonyo's resistance caused Kenryo to disown him and led to the separation of the Honganji into eastern and western branches, a rift that still exists today. Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu all fought against the Honganji during the Sengoku period and recognized that they needed to prevent such an organization from making a return and once again threatening their power. In order to do this, they created policies and laws like Hideyoshi's sword hunt and decreased social mobility to eliminate the class of low-ranking warriors who made up the armies of the Ikko Ikki. Hideyoshi's sword hunt specifically states that:

The farmers of the various provinces are strictly forbidden to possess long swords, short swords, bows, spears, muskets, or any other form of weapon. If there are persons who maintain unnecessary implements, cause hardship in the collecting of annual taxes, and [thus] foment uprisings, or commit wrong acts toward the retainers, they shall, needless to say, be brought to judgment.³⁶

Hideyoshi issued this edict only eight years after the capitulation of the Honganji and it is clear from his targeting of armed farmers that he feared uprisings fought by the same class of people who had rebelled earlier in the form of the Ikko Ikki.

³⁵ Lamers, *Japonius Tyrannus*, 169.

³⁶ Toyotomi Hideyoshi, "Sword Hunt (1588)," In *Voices of Early Modern Japan :Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life During the Age of the Shoguns*, by Contantine Vaporis (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 71.

The Tokugawa Bakufu also heavily restricted the power of Buddhist sects and brought them into government service through the use of the Registration of Religious Affiliation. Everyone in Japan was required to register with a temple to prove that they were not a Christian, which allowed temples to expand their followers, but also required them to report to the Shogun who made sure they were not becoming too powerful.³⁷ The Registration of Religious Affiliation forced temples and the Honganji into depending on the Shogunate for legitimacy and the right to exist. Never again would religious organizations be allowed to maintain military forces or act independently from the Shogunate.

The Honganji fell because it challenged the traditional social order of Japan by accumulating vast political powers, acting independently of the daimyo, and appealing to the lower ranks of society. The Honganji also lacked unity, with a dearth of effective leaders on both the national and regional levels, resulting in poor cooperation between Ikko Ikki. The Honganji's reliance on daimyo and samurai alliances to provide troops and leaders is also apparent. Finally, the Honganji's political and economic position and mere existence was a threat to Oda Nobunaga, who accordingly took actions to curb its power. Nobunaga was so threatened by the Honganji's military and economic power that he spent over a decade, as well as considerable resources, to dismantle it. Though the phenomenon of the Ikko Ikki ended in 1580, they had a profound effect on shaping the policies and opinions towards religion during the Tokugawa period.

³⁷ Duncan Ryuken Williams, *The Other Side Of Zen: A Social History of Soto Zen Buddhism in Tokugawa Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 7.

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