

## **Backlash: From Initial Acceptance to Total Ban**

The surging population of Christians, particularly in Kyushu, gave life to suspicions among the rulers that the religion was a possible spearhead for colonialization, and by the end of the century, Christianity was no longer welcome. Christians, even regional lords, were persecuted and executed for not renouncing their faith. In 1614, the Tokugawa shogunate effectively banned the religion, demanding believers renounce their faith, and forcing the religion underground.

Between 1627 and 1630, some thirty-three believers in Unzen were tortured in the boiling hell waters in attempts to get them to renounce their faith. A cross monument on a hill overlooking the location where the torture is thought to have taken place memorializes their sacrifice. The oppression of Nagasaki and Shimabara Peninsula Christians is the inspiration behind *Silence*, the novel by renowned author Endo Shusaku (1923–1996), later made into a film by Martin Scorsese.

## **The last stand of a popular uprising**

One of the last gasps of Christianity as a popular religion was the Shimabara Rebellion, an uprising of Catholic peasants, tradesmen, fishermen, and itinerant warriors that began on December 17, 1637. The former lord of the region was a Christian, so the Shimabara Peninsula had remained a religious stronghold. Partly an expression of anger at higher taxes, partly a reaction to persecution of Catholics, more than 20,000 rebels overran much of the area before holing up in Hara Castle on the southern coast of the peninsula. After a long siege by 120,000 soldiers of the Shogunate forces (including the master swordsman, Miyamoto Musashi), the rebels were routed on April 15, 1638. In the end, an estimated 20,000 rebels and their sympathizers, including the 16-year old leader Amakusa Shiro, were executed. The result of the rebellion was a stricter enforcement of the Christian ban and a more severe policy of national seclusion that was to last for more than two centuries.

## **Unzen Visitor Center**

The Unzen Visitor Center, located in the town of Unzen Onsen, is stocked with information about the area and its many attractions. This is where to go if you are interested in the science behind volcanic activity, the flora and fauna of the area, the history of Unzen, or if you need information on anything from hot-spring baths to hiking paths, campsites, or even just getting around the many “hells.” There are events, video displays, a diorama of the Shimabara Peninsula, a photo gallery, and free wi-fi and electrical outlets, as well as a rest area. Pamphlets and brochures in a number of

languages are available free of charge. The annex across the road features a fascinating display of old travel brochures and photos of the foreign community dating from the late nineteenth century.