

Ueno Toshogu Shrine: History

Ueno Toshogu enshrines Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616), founder of the Tokugawa shogunate that ruled Japan from 1603 to 1867, as the Shinto deity Tosho Daigongen (“Great Gongen, Light of the East”). The shrine is one of the more than 100 offshoots of Nikko Toshogu, Ieyasu’s great sanctuary and burial site in Tochigi Prefecture north of Tokyo. The word *gongen* means a Buddha manifested as a Shinto deity, and reminds us of how these two religions, now thought of as separate, were intimately linked in Japan for more than a thousand years.

The close connections between Shinto and Buddhism run throughout most of Ueno Toshogu’s history, from its founding in 1627 to the government-ordered separation of the two traditions in 1868. The shrine was established by Todo Takatora (1556–1630), a samurai general and one of Tokugawa Ieyasu’s closest allies in his successful campaign to unite all of Japan under one banner. It was built on land previously owned by Takatora himself but donated at the request of the shogunate for the purpose of constructing the vast Buddhist temple complex called Kan’eiji. Ueno Toshogu thus came to stand within the Kan’eiji temple grounds, which covered an area larger than all of modern-day Ueno Park.

Takatora’s original shrine building was replaced by the current, far more elaborate structure in 1651. Ieyasu’s grandson, the third shogun Tokugawa Iemitsu (1604–1651), had ordered that Ueno Toshogu be reconstructed to mirror the ostentatious gold-and-lacquer sanctuary at the main Toshogu shrine in Nikko. This was done so that the common people of Edo (present-day Tokyo), who often could not afford the trip to Nikko, would be able to say their prayers to Tosho Daigongen on appropriately impressive premises. Most of the structures and decorative elements at Ueno Toshogu today, including the 250 copper and stone lanterns donated by daimyo (feudal lords) loyal to the Tokugawa, date back to this rebuilding.

Ueno Toshogu survived the political upheaval and war that brought down the Tokugawa shogunate in 1867, but its grounds were significantly reduced by the new government. After the change in regimes, called the Meiji Restoration because Emperor Meiji (1852–1912) was installed as the new sovereign, the new government resolved to separate Shinto and Buddhism. Ueno Toshogu had to follow suit and get rid of all its Buddhist-inspired elements. These included a five-story pagoda on the shrine grounds. The head priest

prevented the destruction of the pagoda by persuading officials that the tower belonged to Kan'eiji, not Ueno Toshogu. The shrine has lived something of a charmed existence ever since, escaping even the bombing during World War II, when a bomb fell right behind the main sanctuary but failed to detonate.