

The Edict Banning Christianity and the Shimabara Rebellion

In 1587, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the effective ruler of Japan, promulgated edicts to expel the Christian fathers and limit the propagation of Christianity. At the same time, he took direct control of Nagasaki, which Ōmura Sumitada had ceded to the Jesuits in 1580. In 1597, Hideyoshi ordered the crucifixion of 26 Catholics, including six foreign missionaries, at Nishizaka in Nagasaki. Those killed are now known as the Twenty-Six Martyrs of Japan. Despite all this, Hideyoshi's eagerness to keep trading with the Europeans, meant that his ban on Christianity was never implemented very thoroughly, and the Europeans' missionary work continued.

After Hideyoshi's death in 1598, the number of Japanese Catholics started to increase. His successor, Tokugawa Ieyasu, the founder of the Edo-based Tokugawa shogunate, also started out by tolerating Christianity in a bid to keep trade going. It is reckoned that at its peak there were more than 300,000 Catholics in Japan.

When establishing the shogunate's feudal system, however, Ieyasu came out with his own edict banning Christianity in 1614. The missionaries were driven out of Japan to Macao and Manila, churches were destroyed, and a wave of repression led many Japanese Catholics to renounce their faith. But even after the missionaries had left the country, there remained people who secretly kept the faith.

This was the backdrop for the 1637 Shimabara Rebellion, when the people of Shimabara and Amakusa, driven by famine and the tyrannical behavior of their local lord, revolted. Hara Castle was the final battleground, where more than 20,000 rebels stood against a shogunate force of some 120,000 men. Eventually, the shogun's forces exterminated the rebels and demolished Hara Castle. Excavations at the site have unearthed many medals and crosses that belonged to the Christians in the rebel force. The shogunal authorities saw the uprising as a Christian rebellion, and ratcheted up the level of repression. Christianity in Japan was about to enter a dark era.