

History-Making Gun Battles: The Shimabara Rebellion

The Shimabara Rebellion (1637–1638) in southern Kyushu was an uprising of some 37,000 peasants and masterless samurai against the forces of the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1868). The rebels were angry about high taxes and religious persecution; many of them were Christians whose families had converted under the Shimabara domain's previous lord, who was Catholic. After some initial skirmishes, the rebels took refuge in a castle, forcing a months-long siege.

Both sides were well equipped with firearms. The Tokugawa forces were backed by Dutch merchant marines, who provided a gunship and cannons to the besieging army. The rebels were armed with muskets likely obtained from the Portuguese, who were rivals of the Dutch.

After the rebels ran out of food and gunpowder, the shogunate's troops succeeded in storming the castle. Tens of thousands of rebels were either killed in the fighting or executed afterward.

In the wake of the revolt, the shogunate tightened its policy of national seclusion, strengthened an existing ban on Christianity, and imposed new restrictions on the manufacture and possession of firearms. Just a few years later, the shogunate closed the country to Westerners almost completely.