

The Nihonmatsu Shonentai

Southwest of Nihonmatsu Castle's *honmaru* (main compound) stands a bronze relief depicting a group of young boys under the command of an older man preparing to battle an approaching enemy. This relief was created in 1968 by local sculptor Hashimoto Kosho as a memorial to the Shonentai, or "Boys' Brigade," many of whom died attempting to defend Nihonmatsu Castle when it came under attack in 1868 during the Boshin War.

The Boshin War was a civil war between an alliance led by powerful domains in western Japan and the Tokugawa shogunate. It began with the Battle of Toba-Fushimi in Kyoto, and the western alliance quickly swept east. As an ally of the shogunate, Nihonmatsu knew it would soon need to fight.

During the war, the shogunate began accepting military recruits as young

as 15 to alleviate its troop shortage. However, Nihonmatsu domain had a longstanding custom of adding two years to the age of samurai recruits to their army. The continued application of this rule meant that, in practice, children as young as 13 signed up to defend Nihonmatsu. Due to the way ages were calculated in Japan at the time, some recruits had not yet reached their 12th birthday.

The newly formed brigade of boys between the ages of 13 and 17 was placed under the command of Kimura Jutarō, a 22-year-old expert in cannonry who had studied in Edo. The bronze relief stands on the site of the shooting range where he trained his young troops.

On the 29th day of the 7th month, 1868, the western alliance attacked Nihonmatsu. The invading army had 7,000 troops, with modern weapons and training. Nihonmatsu was defended by just 1,000 soldiers, including the 62 members of the Shonentai. Many of the boys were forced to fight without armor, and reports describe pairs of boys drawing each other's

swords, as the blades were too long for each to draw his own.

The battle was over before noon. Nihonmatsu Castle was torched, and 14 members of the Shonentai were killed, along with hundreds of other defenders. Their leader Kimura did not survive the battle.

This episode was so traumatic for Nihonmatsu as a community that the Shonentai were rarely discussed publicly for decades afterwards. This silence was finally broken in 1918 at an event commemorating the 50th anniversary of the war, when a former Shonentai recruit named Mizuno Yoshiyuki distributed a self-published pamphlet about his experience. This encouraged other survivors and family members to come forward, providing testimony and documents that enabled historians to piece together the story after the fact. A multimedia exhibit in the Nihonmatsu Johokan information center and history museum presents the results of this research.

In 1996, the scene depicted in Hashimoto Kosho's relief was recreated in a group of bronze statues erected outside Minowa Gate. The statues were sculpted by Kosho's son, Hashimoto Kentaro, and are notable for the addition of a mother retailoring an adult's kimono for her son to wear into battle.