

# The Kobe Incident An Investigation of the Incident and Its Place in Meiji History

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**THE KOBE INCIDENT**  
— AN INVESTIGATION OF THE INCIDENT AND  
ITS PLACE IN MEIJI HISTORY —

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“Your country speaks of opening up to foreigners in a friendly way, but to judge from the actions of the Bizen men yesterday, Japan is still full of exclusionists.”

Sir Harry Parkes speaking to Ito Shunsuke (January 12, 1868)<sup>1</sup>

**Chapter One - What Actually Happened ?**

Sannomiya Shrine is in the centre of Kobe City, a few metres North East from where the Daimaru Department Store stands. In the shrine grounds stands a plaque which is written in English and Japanese. The English version reads as follows:

**“Outline of Kobe Incident**

On 11 th January 1868, immediately after the opening of the port of Kobe to foreign trade, it so happened that a procession of a vanguard of troops attached to the feudal lord of Bizen, Okayama was passing in front of Sannomiya Shrine when several crew members of foreign warships lying at anchor off Kobe cut across the procession. Exasperated at this disrespect of the Japanese manners and customs, Masanobu Zenzaburou Taki of the vanguard wounded one of the foreign sailors, bringing about an exchange of fire between the warships and the Japanese troops, as the result of which Kobe was temporarily occupied by foreign forces.

On 15 th January, Michitomi Higashikuze hurriedly came down to Kobe at

the Emperor's special command, and entered into negotiations with the foreign authorities, informing them of the fact that as the result of the Meiji Restoration, Japan had been restored to rule by the Emperor's personal administration. Eventually, Zenzaburo Taki, assuming full responsibility for the incident, committed harakiri or killed himself by slashing his abdomen in the presence of foreign representatives. Thus the incident was ended."

The above is nothing but the bare bones of what happened. The Japanese explanation in a pamphlet provided by the shrine is a little more detailed. It states that the Kobe Incident (elsewhere known as the Bizen Affair) is worthy of special mention in the history of Japanese diplomacy.

"The Imperial Court ordered the lord of Bizen to Nishinomiya to control a pro - Tokugawa faction based in Amagasaki. The lord of Bizen set off from Okayama on New Year's Day with about 2,000 soldiers. One company of about 500 commanded by the chief retainer Hiki Tatewaki was passing in front of Sannomiya Shrine at about one p. m. on the 11th when some foreigners suddenly attempted to cross through the procession. This enraged the Bizen men who wounded one of the foreigners. There ensued an exchange of rifle fire with troops from American, British, French, Italian, Dutch and Prussian warships anchored at Kobe. Fearing that the incident would get out of control, the Bizen troops took their earliest opportunity to withdraw. It seemed that Kobe would be completely occupied by foreign powers, and that a national crisis was at hand. The townspeople of Kobe were gripped with fear which caused them to forsake their homes and run to the mountains for safety.

On the 15th Imperial envoy Higashikuze Michitomi ... met with the representatives of six countries in the Custom House. The declaration he carried from the Emperor bore the seal of state. This was the first time in the history of Japanese diplomacy and in the history of the nation that the seal of state was affixed to a diplomatic paper. It adorned the first page in the history of Japanese diplomacy. It should further be borne in mind that this happened in Kobe at the Customs House.

During the negotiations the foreign representatives demanded that the person responsible for opening fire be condemned to death and executed in their presence. At that time the Japanese envoy felt he was in no position to refuse. The Emperor was also troubled by this demand, but at last the Bizen officer Taki Zenzaburo Masanobu obeyed the order and committed harakiri at Eifukuji temple in Hyogo, thus ending the incident.

The self-sacrifice of Masanobu meant that Japan did not become a colony, nor did Kobe become a second Shanghai or Hong Kong. During the transition from the Bakufu to the Meiji Era there were indeed many difficult diplomatic problems, but the importance of this incident must not be underestimated."<sup>2</sup>

Such, then, is one Japanese view of the incident. The noble sacrifice of the individual is achieved for the common good. However, the most recent Japanese book on the Kobe Incident (Kensho: Kobe Jiken / The Kobe Incident: an Investigation, by Nemoto Katsuo) published in 1990 points out many conflicting accounts of the incident. Nemoto begins by taking the Japanese version on the plaque in the shrine grounds to task on two counts: first, because the incident is described as taking place in the first year of Meiji, which strictly did not begin until it was officially proclaimed on September 8th, so that it is more accurate to say that it happened in Keio 4; second, because the Bizen troops are said to have been going to Amagasaki, at that time a castle town under the control of pro-Bakufu troops, when they were actually going to Nishinomiya to police the pro-Bakufu troops in Amagasaki.<sup>3</sup> (As seen above, the shrine pamphlet is accurate on this point.)

Nemoto then examines various accounts of how the incident began. The Hyogo Prefectural History states

"At first two French marines attempted to cross the procession from the shrine side, but were stopped from doing so by the troop commander and an interpreter. Then an American marine called Joseph Collins crossed over from the beach side between the second and third groups. The Bizen troops shouted at him to go back. Hearing this, a British soldier pointed a pistol at the

commander of the third rifle group (Taki Zenzaburo) whose troops readied spears. The Briton then entered a private house and left by the back door. He escaped to the British Consulate, while under fire from Bizen rifle groups."

The Hyogo Prefectural Police History states

"One French marine attempted to cross the Bizen procession from the left but was stopped by the soldiers. A British soldier who saw this threatened the leader of the second rifle group, Taki Zenzaburo, with a pistol. The latter was enraged, and at his command the soldier was wounded with a spear. He was fired on while escaping."

The Kobe City History states that two foreigners attempted to cross the procession from left to right, and one more from right to left. It broadly agrees with the Hyogo Prefectural version. The Nishinomiya City history is too brief to be helpful, while the Okayama Prefectural History, like the Kobe City History, mentions a slight flesh wound caused by the spear.

Nemoto comments that these histories all differ slightly in their versions, and the difference is not merely one of linguistic expression, but substantive. Every account agrees that the incident began with foreign marines attempting to cross the Bizen procession. Thereafter the Hyogo Prefectural History speaks of "two French marines"; the Hyogo Police History of "one French marine"; the Okayama version mentions "a French marine called Carriere and one other foreigner"; the Kobe City History mentions two foreigners, but does not give their nationality or name.

All the accounts agree that the Bizen troops stopped the foreigners from crossing the procession. However, after that the accounts again differ. While the Hyogo Prefectural History mentions Joseph Collins, he is not mentioned by the Hyogo Police History.

Such inconsistencies abound, and are exhaustively covered by Nemoto.<sup>4</sup> He further compares the report in the Diary of the Restoration (Fukkoki) and reports from Hiki Tatewaki and other eye witnesses of the Bizen clan.<sup>5</sup>

Faced with such varying reports of how the incident began, it is tempting to conclude that in fact nothing of any great significance happened at all. The

incident was the proverbial "storm in a teacup" , exploited to the full by the foreign powers to consolidate their position in the new order after the Restoration.

However, there are other versions of the incident seen through foreign eyes. Sir Harry Parkes, then British Minister, noted the following in his despatch of 15 February 1868:

"The only buildings at present standing on the site [ of the settlement ] are the Custom house, bonded warehouse and the British Consulate, all of which are situated near the water side, at the south eastern corner of the site. The town of Kobe flanks the site on the western side, and the main street of that town opens on the settlement ground at the northwest corner and skirts part of the northern side of the town.

On the 4th instant, at about 2. 30 p. m. I happened to be walking near the latter corner of the Settlement, in company with Captain Stanhope, the senior Naval Officer, and Lieutenant Bradshaw, commanding the Legation guard, when Joseph Collins, a British subject, ran up to inform me that he had been struck by a soldier of a Daimyo's train, the head of which we could see coming down the street at a distance of about sixty yards. Collins was still describing to me what had occurred when the train halted, and I saw that several of the spearmen, who were twenty or thirty files from the head of the column, brought their spears to the charge, as if they were attacking someone in the street. Shouts and confusion immediately followed, and I observed the men of the column spread themselves out in skirmishing order on the Settlement ground, and commence to fire upon every foreigner whom they happened to see there including myself and the officers who were there with me.

They fired very quickly as they were armed with breech - loading rifles. As the settlement ground afforded no shelter, the foreigners who were thus attacked could only seek safety by endeavouring to gain the cover of the Custom house and other buildings at the opposite corner of the square, and to do this they had to cross the large open space under the fire of their assailants.

On seeing that the alarm was then given, the Daimyo's men reformed, and

continued their way along northern side of the square, until they left the settlement by the Osaka road. The guards of the English, French and American Legations soon followed in pursuit, but by different tracks ...

They were pursued for some distance, but as they abandoned their baggage and ran, they soon made good their escape in the thick cover which the hills afforded them."<sup>6</sup>

This version has the incident occurring almost a month after the Japanese versions, although this may be explained by the fact that the Japanese versions are dated according to the old lunar (non - Western ) calendar. It also suggests that the Daimyo's men were a good deal more hostile than the Japanese versions indicate. One may further wonder why Parkes mentions no casualties among the foreigners if they were fired on repeatedly and on ground affording no shelter. Indeed, Mitford in "Tales of Old Japan" claims there were two or three men wounded.<sup>7</sup>

There is another version presented by one Frank Cary in a letter to the Editor of the Japan Chronicle dated March 19, 1933 which quotes an earlier letter to the Kobe Herald of November 20, 1900 from an anonymous contributor whose pen - name was 'Pioneer'.<sup>8</sup> Cary's letter was occasioned by the Japan Chronicle's editorial of March 1st, 1933, which was a "restatement of the accepted version of the incidents leading up to the judicial harakiri of Taki Zenzaburo."

Cary explains that the original letter was three columns and a fraction so he provides an abridged version. He would also "much appreciate a clue as to the identity of 'Pioneer' and his credibility. We have all seen how history can be coloured, and if Pioneer really has the right of the matter, some of us owe it to Taki Zenzaburo to burn a stick of incense at his new monument."

Pioneer claims to have been an eye witness of the Incident, and is described by the Kobe Herald as an "old and respected Kobe resident." He writes as follows:

“Immediately prior to the Restoration troops ... were converging towards Kyoto. It was at this period that ... Osaka and Hiogo ( now Kobe ) were opened ... indeed the advent of foreigners in this part of Japan contributed much to the unrest of this time. While troops of Prince Bizen were passing eastwards along the northern boundary street of the Settlement some foreign seafaring men issuing from a grogshop on the native side of the street, nearly opposite the present No. 48, rudely jostled the Bizen soldiers when passing through their ranks. Irritated at conduct which in all civilised countries would be treated as a very grave offence the Bizen men, still continuing their march eastward, fired a few random and harmless shots at their foreign tormentors. It would be well if the matter had ended there. Preconcerted signals were displayed at the consulates to the men - of - war in harbour calling for assistance. Sir Harry Parkes, whom history credits with having done something heroic on that occasion, but who really had no opportunity, heard the firing and ordered the assembly to be sounded at the Consulate, then situated where the present Pier Company's offices now stand. A detachment of British soldiers stationed at the Consulate and three volunteers were soon under arms and off at the double, in quick pursuit ... itching for a fight, the rights and wrongs of which they had not the remotest conception. The Bizen party, finding that they were being overtaken, made a stand at a two - storied farmhouse close to the road nearly in line with Lindau's grove. It afterwards transpired that their movements were impeded by a field - piece carried by coolies and their stand was made with the view of keeping their pursuers in check while secreting the field - piece in the farmhouse. In extended order, standing, the Japanese opened fire at a distance of about four hundred yards: the foreigners ... replied to the fire. The encounter was not bloodless as a writhing mass in the rear of the Japanese testified. An unfortunate countrywoman in the British line of fire had been shot through the leg: subsequently she was attended to. While the firing was in progress a party of American marines put in an appearance and halted a few yards behind the British firing line: they, however, took no part in the engagement ...

After some half - a - dozen rounds per man had been expended, the Bizen



men who had effected the purpose for which they had halted, broke to the north in a disorderly crowd ... The British troops ... followed the Bizen men for some distance through the paddy fields. It was at this juncture that Parkes, at the head of his mounted escort, came thundering eastward along the Osaka road. The party halted at the farmhouse - and brought forth the coolie in charge of the hidden field - piece. This man ... was entrusted with a letter from the British Minister to carry to his Prince. Later on the Officer in command of the Bizen troops was compelled to committe (sic) seppuku - and for what ? - for 'not having sufficient control over his men' recently wrote a foreign Kobe scribe; for performing his duty, say I. I was young and hot-headed in those days and thoughtlessly took part in the Bizen incident. With advancing years ... I can honestly declare that I have for many years regretted that my trigger finger was not badly blistered on that memorable day and my heartfelt sympathy is ever with that unfortunate officer whose undeserved and sad end was brought about by such an inadequate cause. This is all I know of the Bizen incident ...

#### PIONEER "

A. B. Mitford was British attache to Japan from 1866-70 and published his account of the incident in his "Tales of Old Japan" in 1871.<sup>9</sup> He shows none of Pioneer's sympathy for the Japanese officer:

"It was a fine winter's day, and the place was full of bustle, and of the going and coming of men busy with the care of housing themselves and their goods and chattels. All of a sudden, a procession of armed men, belonging to the Bizen clan, was seen to leave the town, and to advance along the high road leading to Osaka; and without apparent reason - it was said afterwards that two Frenchmen had crossed the line of march - there was a halt, a stir, and a word of command given. Then the little clouds of white smoke puffed up, and the sharp "ping" of the rifle bullets came whizzing over the open space, destined for a foreign settlement, as fast as the repeating breech-loaders could be discharged. Happily, the practice was very bad; for had the men of Bizen been good shots, almost all the principal foreign officials in the country,

besides many merchants and private gentlemen, must have been killed: as it was, only two or three men were wounded. If they were bad marksmen, however, they were mighty runners; for they soon found that they had attacked a hornet's nest. In an incredibly short space of time, the guards of the different Legations and the sailors and marines from the ships of war were in hot chase after the enemy, who were scampering away over the hills as fast as their legs could carry them, leaving their baggage ingloriously scattered over the road, as many a cheap lacquered hat and flimsy paper cartridge - box, preserved by our Blue Jackets as trophies, will testify. So good was the stampede, that the enemy's losses amounted only to one aged coolie, who, being too decrepit to run, was taken prisoner, after having had seventeen revolver shots fired at him without effect; and the only injury that our men inflicted was upon a solitary old woman, who was accidentally shot through the leg.

If it had not been for the serious nature of the offence given, which was an attack upon the flags of all the treaty Powers, and for the terrible retribution which was of necessity exacted, the whole affair would have been recollected chiefly for the ludicrous events which it gave rise to. The mounted escort of the British Legation executed a brilliant charge of cavalry down an empty road; a very pretty line of skirmishers along the fields fired away a great deal of ammunition with no result; earthworks were raised, and Kobe was held in military occupation for three days, during which there were alarms, cutting-out expeditions with armed boats, steamers seized, and all kinds of martial effervescence. In fact it was like fox-hunting: it had 'all the excitement of war, with only ten percent of the danger.' "

Pioneer's account agrees with Mitford's in various particulars: the old woman being wounded in the leg, the cavalry charge down the Osaka road and so on. However, while Pioneer writes of "conduct which in all civilised countries would be treated as a very grave offence" (and even cites a similar case in Austria where an Englishman was killed for attempting to dart between two battalions) for Mitford there was a serious offence in the other direction, "an attack upon the flags of all the treaty Powers" by the Bizen clan.

A detailed account of the Incident is to be found in the third edition of "Kobe Jiken no Shinsou Kougai" (Outline of the Truth of the Kobe Incident) (3rd edn.) written by Okuhisa Kouzaburou, published in 1933 at Eifukuji temple. Taki Zenzaburou was in charge of the third group of Bizen soldiers. Foreigners attempted to cross the procession from the mountains to the sea, but were waved back. At the same time foreign marines crossed from the sea to the mountains. They were warned. One of them shouted something as he ran across. At that time other foreigners were watching. One of them carried a pistol. He walked in front of the third (Taki's) group and threatened Taki. Some Bizen clan members said "Kill the foreigner", and a short spear hit the foreigner in the hip. The foreigner was surprised. He ran into a private house and from the back door ran towards the sea. As he retreated he was fired on by the first and second Bizen groups. Many foreigners fired back from the settlement, and the Bizen clan beat a hasty retreat.

A different version is given by Okuhisa Kouzaburou from a foreign viewpoint: when the procession was passing, the ordinary Japanese people bowed, but the foreigners did not. Suddenly one American was hurt.

Two French marines attempted to cross over the street. Then the order was given that they be killed. One escaped, and the other was injured. The Japanese group fired randomly.

After the incident 300 Choshu (Yamaguchi) soldiers came from Uchide-mura (in present day Ashiya) to negotiate, but the foreign powers refused to negotiate with them because they did not have imperial authority.

Hiki Tatewaki, the leader of the Bizen troops, arrived at Uchide on January 12th. From there he went to Kyoto on the same day and showed the written letter from the British minister to the imperial officials. On the 16th he went to Osaka, returning on the 20th to his troops.

Meanwhile Ito Shunsuke (later a Meiji Era prime minister) spoke to Sir Harry Parkes on January 12th. Parkes was "very angry". Ito asked him to

wait three days. He then went to Osaka and reported the incident to a government official.

On the 15th at noon a meeting was held with the representatives of the six foreign powers. Roches, the French minister, was the chief negotiator for the foreign powers. Michitomi Higashikuze represented the emperor. Higashikuze promised that the incident would not be repeated, explaining it as due to the ignorance of country samurai. He further promised that Kobe would be protected by Satsuma and Choshu troops.

The foreigners appreciated Higashikuze's words and agreed to withdraw their ships, which happened eventually on January 26th.

On the 16th the six representatives met together and agreed demands which were communicated to Higashikuze. First, the Japanese government officials must apologise for the incident; next, they must guarantee it would not happen again; finally, the officer responsible must be put to death in the presence of the foreign representatives. (They also discussed financial compensation, but this demand was dropped.)

The government agonised over the third demand, and the head of the Bizen clan (Ikeda Bizen no Kami Shigemasa) also hesitated. Finally on February 2nd the foreign representatives were told that the harakiri ceremony would be carried out within five days of February 3rd.

Hiki Tatewaki was told that the descendants of whoever accepted responsibility and committed harakiri (seppuku) would be honoured. He was told this by Iwakura Tomomi, a high government official.

Finally, Taki, as leader of the 3rd group, was made responsible. He accepted the responsibility "with pleasure". On February 7th he arrived in Kobe from Bizen. There was no change noticed in his facial expression or bearing.

On February 9th Taki arrived at Eifukuji at 6 p. m. He wrote his last will: that his four year old son should study the chivalrous way of Bushi; that his two year old daughter should grow up to be a true lady; and that his wife (28) should protect his mother (73) .

Many people observed the harakiri, including Ito Shunsuke, Mitford and Ernest Satow. At 11. 30 pm the ceremony was complete. Ito Shunsuke stood up and sadly reported to the foreign representatives who then left.

Later Iwakura Tomomi sent a letter to Ikeda, chief of the Bizen clan, expressing sympathy but saying that the national interest had been best served.

It seems most likely that Okuhisa Kenzaburou got the foreign version of the start of the incident from the Japan Chronicle Jubilee Number (1868-1918) p. 4 which includes the following:

“On Tuesday, the 4th February, a party of Bizen soldiers under Ikeda Ise and Taki Zenzaburou landed at Hyogo with the object of marching to Osaka to join the Imperialist forces. Their route lay along the road to the north of the Settlement, the high road to Osaka and Kyoto. Flushed with the triumph of the cause they were espousing and believing it was only a matter of days before the foreigner would no longer be suffered to defile the soil of Japan, they were in a mood when a trifling incident was sufficient to arouse them to a dangerous anger. As they passed with the customary shout of ‘shita ni iro’ (“Down on your knees !”) the Japanese bowed down, but naturally the foreigners who were watching the cavalcade pass refused to do so. This roused the fury of the Bizen men. An American was attacked by one of the samurai, but succeeded in getting away. Two French marines crossed the line of procession, which, as usual, was not a close formation like the march of European soldiers, and the order was given to cut them down. One managed to escape unhurt, and the other received a slight wound. The Bizen men then opened fire right and left on every foreigner they saw, but their marksmanship was very wild, for they succeeded in wounding one man only, an American sailor ...

This foreign version blames the Bizen men, suggesting that they were anti-foreigners. This seems unlikely, as does the following passage:

“Had the warships and military guards not been on the spot, the attack on unarmed foreigners might easily in the temper of the samurai have become

a wholesale massacre, with the possible effect of changing the whole course of Japanese modern history." (p. 8)

Yet one of the most inaccurate of all the accounts must surely be that of the respected British diplomat, Ernest Mason Satow. He claims in his "A Diplomat in Japan" (Ch. 26) that an American marine was *shot dead* by the Bizen men for passing in front of their procession. No other account goes this far.

One is reminded irresistably of Sir Rutherford Alcock's quotation of the "dictum variously attributed to James I and Sir Henry Wotton, ... our diplomatic corps was composed of 'men of quality, sent abroad to lie for the benefit of their country' ".<sup>10</sup>

How else is Satow's statement to be explained, if not as a blatant falsehood ?

The account given by Okuhisa Kouzaburou has the ring of authenticity about it in several respects, although it cannot be accepted in full, particularly as it provides alternative versions of the start of the incident.

Nemoto however supports the idea that a meeting took place between Sir Harry Parkes and Ito Shunsuke, and even quotes the supposed text of the exchange:

Parkes (with an angry look on his face) : "I understand that in your country the Bakufu has been replaced by a new government. Yet no respects have been paid by the new government to any of the foreign powers. This Kobe incident will be a test of your new government's attitude, and we shall draw our own conclusions."<sup>11</sup> (See also the quotation at the beginning of this article.)

Nemoto also states that the next day (January 13th) Ito Shunsuke hurried to Kyoto to speak with Higashikuze Michitomi. He and Higashikuze agreed that the first priority was to inform the foreign powers that as a result of the restoration of imperial rule the government of Japan was to be conducted once again by the imperial court. It was therefore decided in counsel that a declaration to this effect, dated January 10th, would be sent to each foreign power. Nemoto notes what he believes to be deliberate backdating of the declaration, and even

suggests that the declaration was a forgery, made without the Emperor's knowledge. (He does this by reference to a petition to the Emperor dated February 7th from various lords requesting that national policy be changed, i. e. that the emperor take over as head of state.)<sup>12</sup>

Whether or not Nemoto is right on the above point, the government appears to have ordered the Bizen clan to produce the offender by February 7th, and sent officials to Nishinomiya to meet with the clan on the 6th to make sure they would meet the deadline. On the same day the Bizen clan produced a statement naming Taki Zenzaburoû as the person responsible for the incident.

A careful reading of the Bizen statement shows the anger and resentment felt by the Bizen clan toward the government at this time. The government representative Date responded to the clan as follows:

"In this affair your clan has been most unfortunate. The Imperial Court has tried its utmost to have the death sentence commuted, negotiating with all the foreign powers. It is very hard for you to bear but ... <sup>13</sup>

Nemoto quotes in full the letter from Iwakura Tomomi to Ikeda, the chief of the Bizen clan, and it is clear that consolation is intended. However, the resentment of the Bizen clan towards its own government was real and quite understandable in the circumstances, although there was no tangible expression of feelings by the clan.

In this context it is interesting to recall Mitford's report of Taki's harakiri ceremony:

"Since I wrote the above, we have heard that, before his entry into the fatal hall, Taki Zenzaburo called round him all those of his own clan who were present, many of whom had carried out his order to fire, and, addressing them in a short speech, acknowledge the heinousness of his crime and the justice of his sentence and warned them solemnly to avoid any repetition of attacks on foreigners. They were also addressed by the officers of the Mikado, who urged them to bear no ill-will against us on account of the fate of their fellow-clansman. They declared they entertained no such feeling."<sup>14</sup>

It seems more likely that any ill feeling entertained by the Bizen clan was directed at the government, which had apparently let them down so badly.

Nemoto's account of the incident includes an examination of the strained relationship between the British Minister, Sir Harry Parkes, and his French counterpart, Leon Roches.<sup>15</sup> We have already seen how Parkes placed the blame squarely on the Bizen men for incident. It is also true that the new government was afraid of foreign military power, especially after the bombardment of Shimonoseki in 1864. However, Nemoto speculates that Parkes may have felt he had gone too far in blaming the Bizen men unilaterally.

In any case, when Godai Saisuke and Ito Shunsuke (on the instructions of Date Muneshiro) went to plead for Taki's life to the foreign powers on February 9th, Parkes declared his intention to accept the plea. However, Roches criticised Parkes for being too tolerant. When it came to a vote, the French Minister was supported by the Italian, Prussian and American ministers. Parkes and the Dutch Minister were in a minority.

Roches arrived in Japan earlier than Parkes, and so felt himself to be the senior of the two. Parkes, on the other hand, felt he was the senior because he was a *Special* Minister Plenipotentiary and also Consul General.

Roches arrived in Japan in 1864. Shortly after arrival he had assisted the Bakufu with advice on the construction of an iron foundry and shipbuilding yard in Yokosuka. Because of this he was trusted by the Bakufu, which felt the other powers were arrogant and only interested in excessive profiteering. On the other hand Parkes, allying himself with Saigou Takamori of Satsuma, caused trouble for the Bakufu with his frequent demands for the opening of Kobe and Osaka. Together they worked in concert to hasten the collapse of the Bakufu. (Satsuma contrived to have the Bakufu's requests for imperial sanction for its actions refused by the Court). These actions brought Parkes



into confrontation with Roches.

After the British defeat of Satsuma in 1863, Satsuma became Britain's ally. With the help of Glover, the British merchant at Nagasaki, as an intermediary, they supplied the Choshu clan with guns to resist the Bakufu.

Roches was said to be extremely angry when the new government issued its declaration on January 15th. Two days later he left Kobe and went via Osaka to Edo to speak with Yoshinobu, and urge him to restore the Bakufu.

The new government was keen above all not to upset Parkes, because it had incurred considerable debts to the British in the form of loans. The British meanwhile were aware of the government's weakness, and skilfully exploited it to gain the upper hand in the diplomatic game. In this game the Kobe Incident presented a golden opportunity which would not come again.

The meeting referred to above between the six foreign powers ended at 8 p. m. on February 9th, a mere three hours before Taki Zenzaburou's judicial harakiri (seppuku) was carried out.

In examining Taki Zenzaburou's last oral statement, Nemoto states that some reports state (falsely) that he had been assured by Godai Saisuke and Ito Shunsuke that he would not have to commit harakiri, and that he therefore became very afraid at the eleventh hour. Nemoto quotes Ernest Satow's memoirs to dispel this myth, and also Mitford's report. Neither has anything but admiration for Taki's bearing to the last. It seems that he had decided to die "for the Emperor, the country, the Bizen clan and the House of Hiki".

Nemoto further cites Taki's testament, written the day before his death, and his "Song of Parting from the World" as evidence of his resolution. The latter reads: "Kinofu mishi yume wa ima sara hikaete, Kobe no ura ni na wo ya agenamu."

("I renounce now my dreams of yesterday. In the port of Kobe my name

will be honoured.”)

Nemoto only disputes Satow's record in one respect: Satow refers to Taki as a criminal (as does Mitford). Nemoto sees him as a noble man who sacrificed himself.

Taki's final statement reads:

“On the eleventh of last month in Kobe I clashed unreasonably with foreigners in contravention of our country's law, by giving an order to fire after a clash of swords. As I am from a country area [i. e. Bizen] I was not aware of the imperial court's order that foreigners should be treated in a special way. I therefore witness that I will commit seppuku here to atone for my crime.”

From Sasaoka Hachiro's "Taki Zenzaburo Jisei no ki". (Sasaoka Hachiro was with Taki in Nishinomiya after the incident.)

Nemoto compares Taki's statement with the official version in "DaiNihongaikoubunsho" and concludes that latter was falsified by the government for its own convenience. He further notes that a gagging order was sent by the government to Bizen after the harakiri, and that the Bizen clan gave land to Taki's children as a parting gift in Taki's honour.

Mitford was one of seven foreigners who witnessed the ceremonial harakiri by Taki Zenzaburo. Apparently this was the first time foreigners had witnessed this event. It took place at Eifukuji temple in Kobe which was destroyed in World War II. Kanetetsu Delika Foods Company stands on the old site of Eifukuji, but Taki's gravestone has been moved about 100 metres away to Noufukuji temple, which also contains the site of the (recently restored) Great Buddha of Hyogo.

In Mitford's account there is a long and elaborate build-up in which he carefully describes the atmosphere at the temple:

“The ceremony, which was ordered by the Mikado himself, took place at 10.30 at night in the temple of Seifukuji (sic), the headquarters of the Satsuma troops at Hiogo ...

... The courtyard of the temple presented a most picturesque sight; it was

crowded with soldiers standing about in knots round large fires ...

... We were shown into an inner room, where we were to wait until the preparation for the ceremony was completed ...

... After a long interval, which seemed doubly long from the silence which prevailed, Ito Shunsuke, the provisional Governor of Hyogo, came and took down our names, and informed us that seven kenshi, sheriffs or witnesses, would attend on the part of the Japanese. He and another officer represented the Mikado; two captains of Satsuma's infantry, and two of Choshu's, with a representative of the Prince of Bizen, the clan of the condemned man, completed the number, which was probably arranged to tally with that of the foreigners ...

A further delay then ensued, after which we were invited to follow the Japanese witness into the hondo or main hall of the temple, where the ceremony was to be performed. It was an imposing scene. A large hall with a high roof supported by dark pillars of wood ... Tall candles placed at regular intervals gave out a dim mysterious light, just sufficient to let all the proceedings be seen."

Next is described the entrance of Taki Zenzaburou, accompanied by his kaishaku (a brother officer entrusted with the decapitation after the disembowelment performed by the principal using a Japanese short sword).

... "a stalwart man, thirty-two years of age, with a noble air, walked into the hall attired in his dress of ceremony, with the peculiar hempen-cloth wings which are worn on great occasions ... He was accompanied by a kaishaku and three officers, who wore the jumbaori or war surcoat with gold-tissue facings ... In this instance the kaishaku was a pupil of Taki Zenzaburou, and was selected by the friends of the latter from among their own number for his skill in swordsmanship."

With the kaishaku on his left, Taki Zenzaburou bowed before the Japanese and foreign witnesses. He prostrated himself before the high altar twice, and received the wakizashi (ceremonial dirk) wrapped in paper.

His last words were reported as: "I, and I alone, unwarrantably gave the order to fire on the foreigners at Kobe, and again as they tried to escape. For this crime I disembowel myself, and I beg you who are present to do me the honour of witnessing the act."<sup>16</sup>

Thus died Masanobu Zenzaburo Taki of the Bizen clan. His death may be regarded as a tragic waste of human life, although Mitford's opinion is that "Death was undoubtedly deserved, and the form chosen was in Japanese eyes merciful and yet judicial. The crime might have involved a war and cost hundreds of lives; it was wiped out by one death." Whether one accepts that a crime was committed or not (and the evidence is at best sketchy) it is true that the Incident was settled with Taki's passing, and no further blood was shed.

## Chapter Two - THE KOBE INCIDENT IN CONTEXT

Whatever the rights and wrongs and details of the Kobe Incident, it is necessary to place the Incident within its historical context. This requires an overview of the major historical events leading up to the Meiji Restoration and an examination of similar or comparable incidents which occurred before the Kobe Incident.

As Beasley informs us (The Rise of Modern Japan, Tuttle) "Japanese politics until 1858 were essentially feudal. That is to say, struggles for power operated within a structure comprising Bakufu and domains." However, the crisis in the summer of 1858 "prepared the way for a different kind of politics."<sup>1</sup>

During that summer, Ii Naosuke, Lord of Hikone, signed treaties *without imperial sanction* with the American, Dutch, Russian, British and French representatives. He signed the treaties in the name of the Shogun. According to Storry (A History of Modern Japan, Penguin) "These treaties ... contained in the main three conditions. Yedo and certain ports were opened to foreigners. A very low scale of import duties was imposed upon Japan. Nationals of the ... countries with which such treaties were signed were exempt from the jurisdiction of Japanese law."<sup>2</sup>

There was shrill and widespread opposition to these concessions. The

Opposition marshalled itself under the slogan "Sonnou-joui" (Revere the Emperor; Expel the Barbarians). Naosuke dealt very harshly with his opponents, and became the best-hated man in the land. One snowy morning early in 1860, he was assassinated as his palanquin drew near the Shogun's fortress at Yedo.

Foreigners were also the victim of violent attacks in the early years after the ports were opened. Two Russians were killed in Yokohama in 1859 and a Dutch merchant captain in February 1860. The secretary of Townsend Harris (the U. S. consul established in Shimoda in 1856) was murdered in July 1861. The British Legation came under attack on 5th July, 1861, described by Sir Rutherford Alcock in 'The Capital of the Tycoon' as follows:

"... Mr. Oliphant [the Legation Secretary] suddenly appeared covered with blood, which was streaming from a great gash in his arm and a wound in his neck - and the next instant Mr. Morrison, the Consul of Nagasaki appeared also, exclaiming he was wounded, and with blood flowing from a sword cut on his forehead ...<sup>3</sup>

This incident at Tozenji was followed by another smaller one a year later, leading to diplomatic protests and transfer of part of Britain's China squadron to Japanese waters.

Such violence took place against a background of turbulent power struggles between the many Japanese groups with widely divergent aims which dominated the period. The groups included the anti-foreign movement, supported by many in the lower levels of the samurai class. Another group was led by the lords of the Hitotsubashi party, who stood for baronial privilege, but were not anti-foreign.

The Bakufu tried to turn the turbulence to its advantage in its negotiations with foreign powers. Claiming that trade had caused increases in commodity

prices which in turn caused unrest, the Bakufu persuaded the powers to postpone the opening of Edo, Osaka and Hyogo (Kobe) until 1868. On 6 June, 1862 a protocol to this effect was signed in London.

Very soon after in September 1862 another anti-foreign incident, famous to the Japanese as the Namamugi Incident, occurred.

### **The Namamugi Incident**

This Incident, also known as The Richardson Affair, took place in September 1862. A British merchant, Mr. Charles Richardson, went riding in the hills behind Yokohama with three friends, when he met the daimyo of Satsuma and his retinue returning from talks in Edo on the Tokaido. According to the unwritten rules on respect in Japanese society, Richardson should have dismounted.

However, either through arrogance or ignorance, he did not do so. To avenge such a slight, one of the daimyo's samurai retainers took his sword to Richardson and killed him. With this incident, once again a foreigner had crossed the boundaries of Japanese feudal tradition and paid for it with his life.

The British chargé - Alcock was in England - lodged vigorous protests, which caused Edo to call on Satsuma to surrender those who had made the attack. It refused. They had, the domain's officials argued, acted in accordance with feudal custom and did not merit punishment. Indeed, the affair was the Bakufu's fault for signing treaties which paid so little heed to Japanese tradition.

British reactions to the incident were delayed by the long distance from London. In December 1862 the British Foreign Secretary, Earl Russell, drew up instructions, which reached Japan in March 1863, requiring his representative to demand from the Bakufu a formal apology and an indemnity of 100,000 pounds. Satsuma was to be required to execute the offending samurai and pay compensation of 25,000 pounds.

Although the Bakufu handed over the first instalment of its indemnity in

July 1863, there was no word from Satsuma. The British Navy therefore bombarded the Satsuma capital of Kagoshima on 11th August, 1863. Later in the year a settlement of the affair was reached at Yokohama. Satsuma paid compensation (or rather, arranged for the Bakufu to do so on its behalf) while promising to punish the murderers, if and when they were caught.

The contrast between the Namamugi Incident and the Kobe Incident is especially worthy of note. Separated by about five years, they clearly indicate the sea change in Japanese politics that took place at that time.

Richardson paid for his impertinence with his life. His murderers were never punished, although their identity and whereabouts were widely known. On the other hand, there was no loss of foreign life in the Kobe Incident. In spite of this, Zenzaburo Taki's life was taken in punishment for his "wrongdoing" in the affair.

#### **The Bombardment of Shimonoseki**

Apart from the Satsuma clan, the other influential clan in the last years of the Shogunate (Bakufu) was the Choshu clan from Yamaguchi. From late June 1863 they attempted to forcibly carry out the policy of expelling the foreigner in a last ditch effort to preserve Japan's isolation. They succeeded for a time in closing the all-important straits of Shimonoseki to foreign merchant ships by the installation of gun batteries on the shore. However, a joint fleet of 9 British, 4 Dutch, 3 French and one U. S. ships bombarded Shimonoseki on 5th September 1864 and the Choŝhu resistance was crushed.

The bombardments at Kagoshima in 1863 and Shimonoseki in 1864 brought about a change in attitude among most samurai away from reckless attacks on foreigners. In 1864 a new leadership began to emerge among the samurai of middle rank in Satsuma, Choshu and Tosa. Their object was to challenge, not the treaties, but the Bakufu. They set aside the debate on expulsion, recognising Western military strength, and concentrated on the question of

whether the Shogun could survive as the ultimate ruler.

The Hitotsubashi group (mentioned above) was keen to ensure that the Shogun did survive. To this end they chose to negotiate on behalf of the Shogun with the foreigners. In the autumn of 1865, the Bakufu was late in paying the second instalment of the indemnity imposed after Shimonoseki. Harry Parkes, by now Alcock's successor, offered to waive all further payments in return for other concessions: a more favourable tariff agreement; the immediate opening of Hyogo (Kobe); and an acknowledgement by the Emperor that the treaties had his consent. The last of these was secured by Hitotsubashi, making it no longer possible for dissidents to claim that expulsion was the emperor's personal wish.

In January 1867 Hitotsubashi became Shogun as Yoshinobu, succeeding Iemochi. With the French Minister, Roches, he discussed reorganisation of the Bakufu on Western lines. However, by this time Choshu had risen in armed rebellion against the Bakufu, and had driven the Bakufu's armies back on every front.

The defeat of the Bakufu notwithstanding, the Shogun still had a firm hold on the Imperial court. In ~~many~~<sup>May</sup> and June 1867 he blocked an attempt by Satsuma to win pardon for Choshu, which caused the Satsuma and Choshu leaders to consider a coup d'etat. Yet this proved unnecessary when Yoshinobu decided to resign as Shogun on 19 November, 1867. This was a response to a set of proposals drawn up by Tosa leaders (especially Sakamoto Ryoma) who recommended that the Shogun should step down from office to join the ranks of the great lords, being replaced by a council responsible to the emperor.

Satsuma and Choshu were not satisfied with the resignation because they feared that Yoshinobu would be president of the new baronial council. They therefore sent troops to Kyoto (mentioned by Pioneer in his account of the Kobe Incident). On 3rd January, 1868 Satsuma troops took over the Palace



gates and an imperial council was summoned which issued a decree stripping the Shogun of his power and giving responsibility for governing the country back to the emperor.

The coup d'état did not immediately settle all the arguments. Certain supporters of the Shogun continued to urge that he be made a member of the new council, and Aizu troops clashed with 'imperial' troops from Satsuma and Choshu in support of this claim. However, the ex-Shogun fled to Edo and was declared rebel by the court.

The imperial army, made up of 'loyal' domains, progressed to Tokyo meeting little resistance. Finally, Edo was occupied in early April and surrender terms were negotiated. Aizu continued to resist for a further six months, and other Tokugawa adherents fled to Hokkaido. They did not surrender until June 1869.

This period of Japanese history is notable for the triangular interplay of the Imperial court, the Bakufu and the foreign Powers. We see this very clearly in the Kobe Incident, which happened on the very threshold of the change from Shogunate to Imperial rule.

### **Chapter Three - EVENTS AFTER THE KOBE INCIDENT**

It is clear that the Kobe Incident happened at a crucial turning point in the history of Japan, namely the moment when the Bakufu was finally replaced by the Emperor. As Beasley points out, the issue of who should rule, emperor or shogun, was "for centuries the only significant point of constitutional contention in Japan." <sup>1</sup>

The question which therefore needs to be answered is: how important was the Kobe Incident in promoting the transition from Shogunate to Imperial rule? Or, to put it another way, if the Incident had not happened, would the Shogunate

have been able to regain control of the country ?

In a sense it is possible to say that the Incident was of crucial importance: after all, if it had not occurred, the declaration (sengensho) that Japan had been restored to rule by the Emperor's personal administration would not have been written in such haste, so that it could be submitted to the foreign power's representatives on January 15 th.

As has been mentioned above, the declaration was deliberately backdated, and apparently written without the knowledge or permission of the Emperor himself ! One is left with the impression that history was taking its course willy-nilly, and without any one person having much control over it.

At the same time it would be wrong to suggest that the declaration itself was conclusive in establishing imperial rule. It was merely one stage in a complex process, the beginning of which has been discussed in the previous chapter. Yet since it was the first *diplomatic* paper proclaiming imperial rule, as far as the foreign powers were concerned it was vital in determining their position and behaviour with regard to the new regime.

Under international law, a state does not exist unless it is recognised by other states. In this sense the declaration was of great importance for the existence of the new government.

About three weeks after the declaration was presented to the foreign powers (on February 7 th) a petition was sent to the Emperor by the lords of Ichizen, Tosa, Satsuma, Aki and Hosokawa. (It has already been referred to in Chapter 1) . The document, which was approved by the Emperor, recommended that Japan abandon the attitude of 'the frog looking at the world from the bottom of a well' , and resolve instead to learn from foreigners 'adopting their best points and making good our own deficiencies.' This progressive statement may be considered prophetic in view of subsequent events until the present day.

The period's most famous state document was the Charter Oath, issued on 6 April, 1868 in the Emperor's name. It promised that policy would be decided only after wide consultation, taking account of the interests of all Japanese, 'high and low' ; that 'base customs of former times' would be abandoned; and that in the pursuit of national strength 'knowledge shall be sought throughout the world.' Beasley comments: "Implicit in this was a hint of reconciliation with the defeated Tokugawa and the trained officials in their service, whose help was certainly going to be needed if the country's administration were to function smoothly."<sup>2</sup>

In August 1869, the institutions of government were put into a form which lasted with little alteration until the introduction of a Western-style cabinet in 1885. The new structure was run by Sanjo Sanetomi and Iwakura Tomomi. They were Court nobles, having close ties with Choshu and Satsuma respectively. Sanjo had the higher personal rank, Iwakura the greater political capacity and influence over the emperor.

The next generation of the Meiji leadership included Ito Hirobumi (formerly Ito Shunsuke) who had played a central part in the resolution of the Kobe Incident. He was a moderniser with better than average knowledge of the West, who later became prime minister, elder statesman, and baron. With Iwakura's help, Ito became the government's leading figure after 1880.

On 5 March 1869, the four leading domains of Choshu, Satsuma, Tosa and Hizen submitted a joint memorial putting their lands and people at the Emperor's disposal. In July the memorial was approved and all other daimyo were ordered to follow the example set. However, there was an element of compromise: the lords were appointed governors of the lands they had surrendered.

Finally, on August 29, 1871 the Emperor summoned to his palace those feudal lords who were present in the city and told them that the domains were to

be abolished. They would be replaced by prefectures, administered directly from the capital (on the Chinese model). Another decree a month later ordered domain armies to disband, except for those which were already part of the imperial forces. The dismantling of the feudal structure was thus brought to a successful end.

## NOTES

### Chapter One

- 1 Retranslated into English from p. 26, *Kensho Kobe Jiken* by Nemoto Katsuo pubd. 1990 Osaka Sougei Shuppan.
- 2 Translated from the shrine pamphlet. *Sannomiya Shrine*, Chuo-ku, Kobe
- 3 *Kensho Kobe Jiken* p. 9-10
- 4 *Kensho Kobe Jiken* pp. 10-14
- 5 *Kensho Kobe Jiken* pp. 14-23
- 6 Quoted in "Victorians in Japan" by Sir Hugh Cortazzi, pubd. 1987 Athlone, London p. 159-60
- 7 From "Tales of Old Japan" by A. B. Mitford, pubd. 1991, Tuttle, Tokyo p. 176
- 8 From "Meiji Ishin Kobe Jiken" by Ouhisa Kozaburou, pubd. 1941, Taki Masanobu Shoukai, p. 65-6
- 9 *Tales of Old Japan* p. 176-7
- 10 From "The Capital of the Tycoon" by Sir Rutherford Alcock, pubd. 1863, Longman, Vol. 2 p. 247
- 11 *Kensho Kobe Jiken* p. 26
- 12 *Kensho Kobe Jiken* p. 28
- 13 *Kensho Kobe Jiken* p. 35
- 14 *Tales of Old Japan* p. 405-6
- 15 *Kensho Kobe Jiken* p. 37-42
- 16 *Tales of Old Japan* p. 401-4

### Chapter Two

- 1 *The Rise of Modern Japan*, pubd. Tuttle 1990, p. 38
- 2 *A History of Modern Japan*, pubd. Penguin p. 96
- 3 *The Capital of the Tycoon*, pubd. Longman 1863, Vol. 2 p. 156

### Chapter Three

- 1 *The Rise of Modern Japan*, p. 54
- 2 *The Rise of Modern Japan*, p. 56-7

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