

POINTS OF PEACE: HIDEYOSHI'S SWORD HUNT AND THE HIDDEN VIOLENCE OF THE  
GREAT PEACE

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## ABSTRACT

Megan McClory: Points of Peace: Hideyoshi's Sword Hunt and The Hidden Violence of The Great Peace  
(Under the direction of Morgan Pitelka)

Through a study of the unification policies of Toyotomi Hideyoshi, I highlight a more complete image of commoner politics and power in order to explain the two hundred years of peace that followed the Sengoku Period. I narrow in on the Sword Hunt Edict of 1588, which removed all forms of weapons from the non-samurai groups and solidified the social order. My research addresses the power retained by the non-elite population, who had a long history of protests (*ikki*) and self-government (*jiriki kyusei*) and who made up the bulk of the armed forces during war. By studying the well-documented history of peasant protests in conjunction with the peace policies, I emphasize the contradictory nature and the limitations of this armistice; for most of the country, 'peace' was a relative term and the general populace continued to use violence and other forms of mass protest to demonstrate their influence.

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## INTRODUCTION

Horikawa Kunihiro (1531 – 1614) earned his fame both for his skill as a swordsmith and for the number of students he trained from 1576 until his death in 1614. From a samurai family in the province of Hyūga, Horikawa lost his status amidst the chaos of the Warring States era (1457-1615).<sup>1</sup> He began his journey as an itinerant smith late in his life, in a period of great transition for both samurai and sword makers alike, traveling extensively and taking many apprentices. Even while Horikawa lived as an isolated mountain priest, students sought his tutelage. His skill was so admired that he was given the title ‘god of Shinano’ (*shinano no kami*) around 1590, and even today, examples of his work can be found across the globe. The British Museum describes Horikawa’s style: “[his] blades are frequently of even curve and breadth with the extended point typical of the Momoyama and early Edo periods. The steel texture of Kunihiro's work is often described as ‘gravelly’.”<sup>2</sup> In addition to two short swords (*wakizashi*), the British Museum also boasts several ornate guards (*tsuba*), scabbards (*saya*) as well two full-length *katana* in their collection.

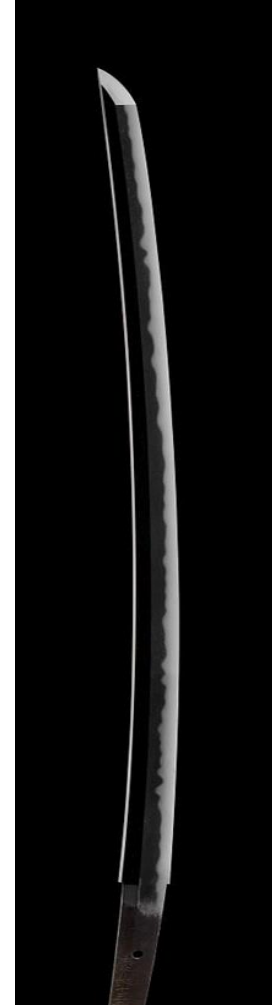


Figure 1 Sword (*katana*).  
Signed Horikawa Kunihiro.  
Momoyama period, 17th  
century. Length 73.5 cm.  
Boston Museum of Fine  
Arts W. A. Compton  
Oriental Arts  
Foundation Collection.

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that the exact dates of the end of the Warring States era are debated amongst scholars, but for the purpose of this essay, I will use the Siege of Osaka and Tokugawa Ieyasu’s ascension to shogun.

<sup>2</sup> “Horikawa Kunihiro 堀川国広 | British Museum.” Accessed April 7, 2022.  
<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/BIOG3375>.

Japanese sword makers often signed their works on the tang, leaving inscriptions known as *nakago*, literally “inside words,” hidden underneath the rough skin of a ray that would make up the long hilt of a katana. The wrappings and guard were designed to be easily removed and replaced, the craftsmanship of the blade itself long outliving the fashions of hilt styles or the thread of the wrappings, making the inside words visible periodically. Sometimes this mark was just a simple name, but Horikawa often dated his works—as seen in figure one, now at Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts with an inscription dating it to approximately 1610. The inscription makes the blade one of Horikawa’s last works, over a forty-year period. There is an assumed break in production with no known swords dated from the years 1592-1599, and it is believed that Horikawa was drafted to travel with Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s ill-fated Imjin War in Korea. Otherwise, however, Horikawa maintained a steady career as a swordsmith, from the end of the civil wars of the Sengoku Period and into the beginning of the Great Peace.

Horikawa’s swords were produced primarily for samurai, though hypothetically, until 1588, peasants could have bought them as well; 1588 marked the year of the Sword Hunt Edict which made it illegal for anyone outside the samurai status group to purchase a sword of this length.<sup>3</sup> While the new law did not seem to interrupt Horikawa’s production, the edict led to undeniable repercussions across Japan, as the first part of what are called the Peace Policies (*heiwarei*) which concretely stratified the social system. Horikawa was able to maintain his fame amongst the warrior status group, but peasants were isolated with limited room for social advancement—in theory. Horikawa himself represents the gaps between concept and reality in early Tokugawa era Japan. Retaining his status as samurai, Horikawa should not have been allowed to continue work as a swordsmith, as samurai were officially prohibited from conducting business and engaging in trade. And yet, remarkably little seems to have changed for Horikawa. Both before and after Hideyoshi’s rise to power, before and after the stratification of

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<sup>3</sup> A rough approximation is anything over a forearm in length, from tip (*kissaki*) to the guard.

society, the disarmament of the peasants, and the start of a period of peace that would last for over two hundred years—Horikawa produced swords.

It cannot be denied that Hideyoshi's Peace Policies created a stable base from which Tokugawa Ieyasu and his successors were able to build and, once a firm dynasty was in place, maintain a relative calm. Throughout the Tokugawa period (1603-1868), there were no major wars, no massive upsets to dismantle the government. Compared to the Warring States period, there was very little macroviolence.<sup>4</sup> That is not to say that all of Japan was at rest, however. People outside the government's immediate line of sight continued to use violence and judicial means to assert their rights: this is the Great Peace. Samurai did not possess a monopoly on violence during this time because status groups bled into one another and commoners might retain swords and other weapons as long as they played the roles they were assigned in the moment. In this paper, I will elaborate on Hideyoshi's Peace Policies, focusing primarily on the sword hunt (*katanagari*) and how it was implemented. I will use the numerous cases of peasant protest (*ikki*), both violent and peaceful, to examine the success, failures and intentions of the sword hunt and the ways in which commoners performed their power. Through studying the sword hunt, it is possible to understand the nature of power in early modern Japan.

Horikawa's dual roles as samurai and artisan are striking, but not unique. Partially inspired by Confucian philosophy and ancient Chinese legends of turning weapons into plowshares, with the Sword Hunt Edict Hideyoshi ostensibly encouraged peasants and commoners to concentrate on farming and improving their industrial skills, thereby opening the way to national safety and happiness for all people and creating a clear line of separation among the status groups.<sup>5</sup> However, in practice, the line was more nebulous. Samurai-artisans like

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Wert, "Necrology of Angels: Violence in Japanese History as a Lens of Critique," in *The Darker Angels of Our Nature: Refuting the Pinker Theory of History and Violence* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 176–96.

<sup>5</sup> National Diet Library. *Nihonbunkashi daikyūban* 日本文化史第 9 卷. Japan: *daitoukaku* 大鐙閣, 1922.



Horikawa, merchants who used their wealth to purchase the countenance of a samurai, and armed commoners guarding the barriers (*sekisho*) between domains all performed multiple roles in different status groups.<sup>6</sup> This is because the Great Peace was not intended to concern itself of the condition of the non-elite as armed or unarmed; the Sword Hunt was not concerned with individual people so far below the state's line of sight.

Outwardly, Hideyoshi's Peace Policies were directed toward his entire realm under the sky (*tenka*), but practically speaking, very little in the day-to-day life of peasants (*hyakushō*) changed. Now devoid of their own armies and under the close eye of the centralizing government, the ruling strata was the primary target of what Luke Roberts calls the performance of the Great Peace.<sup>7</sup> The idea of performing power and subservience was not a new concept in Japan. As long as one played the appropriate role in the immediate situation—using the correct form of language based on the conversation partner, wearing the right clothes for the event, or gifting the proper present—one's individual world continued to turn without consequence.<sup>8</sup> For the commoners who might have limited interaction with government officials, it meant that they did not have to openly display their loyalty to state mandates on a regular basis and so, life continued more or less as normal.<sup>9</sup> Horikawa and the fact that his life did not change shows that the sword hunt was a performance of the ruling elite—his swords continued to sell and low level violence continued even amidst Hideyoshi's adjusted social structure and the Great Peace it was supposed to generate.

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<sup>6</sup> Constantine Nomikos Vaporis, *Breaking Barriers: Travel and the State in Early Modern Japan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Luke S. Roberts, *Performing the Great Peace: Political Space and Open Secrets in Tokugawa Japan*, 0 edition (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> For more on the presentation of power in pre-and-early modern Japan, see Pitelka, *Spectacular Accumulation*; Watzky, *Chikubushima*; Levine, *Daitokuji*.

<sup>9</sup> With marginally less risk of being conscripted, of course.

## POLICIES OF PEACE

There are numerous copies of the Sword Hunt Edict itself, as Hideyoshi wrote to his daimyo (domain lords) individually with his demands to disarm the populace. Mary Elizabeth Berry goes into detail on one such vermilion seal document, and William deBary includes another in his compendium of sources.<sup>10</sup> These were the orders. However, very little instruction seems to have come from the state on how to actually go about the disarmament; nor do there seem to be many further accounts of the sword hunt on an individual provincial basis. Few enough, in fact, that some scholars have asked whether it even happened, bringing into question the effectiveness of the Tokugawa regime. Was the Great Peace truly as peaceful as the shogunate proclaimed? Orthodox historians of Japan, such as John Hall or Kozo Yamamura, highlight the centralizing state as the source of lasting peace, leading to a hyperfocus on the unifiers as individuals. It certainly cannot be denied that the Japan of today would not exist without Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, or Tokugawa Ieyasu, but some argue that their reputations are inflated.<sup>11</sup>

Many cite Nobunaga as the one to initiate the developments that ended the Warring States Period, gaining momentum throughout central Japan and a steady following, including both Hideyoshi and Ieyasu. Although he placed a heavy emphasis on public displays of authority, using military, architectural and cultural demonstrations to legitimate his rule, his

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<sup>10</sup> Mary Elizabeth Berry, *Hideyoshi* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1990); Wm. Theodore De Bary et al., *Sources of Japanese Tradition: Volume 1: From Earliest Times to 1600*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> For example, Brown in “State, Cultivator, Land: Determination of Land Tenures in Early Modern Japan Reconsidered” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 56, no. 2 (1997): 421–44.

policies were more or less consistent with Japanese tradition.<sup>12</sup> Despite his success, Nobunaga never became shogun and maintained a certain amount of respect for the court.

Hideyoshi swooped in immediately upon Nobunaga's death, wresting power from the presumed heirs and instilling his own sense of legitimacy via elaborate mortuary rituals for the late ruler. He continued expanding Nobunaga's domain, simultaneously issuing a number of policies—the Peace Policies-- meant to lock the social order in place and thereby keep the peace. Hideyoshi relied on religion and tradition to legitimate his own rule and many scholars attribute the beginning of two and half centuries of peace to his policies.<sup>13</sup> Hideyoshi himself, however, did not live long enough to see many of them through; one of his seminal policies, the Sword Hunt (*katanagari*), was only in place for ten years before his death. As many of his social policies, such as cadastral land surveys, were meant to bind the social order in place and eliminate social mobility, they naturally took a long time to become effective and the Tokugawa, having eliminated Hideyoshi's heirs, continued and expanded upon Hideyoshi's ideas.

Because Nobunaga focused primarily on military expansion, Hideyoshi was able to concentrate on his social policies, so that “Japan, we are told, finally shook off the bloody, gloom-filled feudalism of the era of ‘the country at war’ (Sengoku) and attained a national unity and more porous society that opened into the boisterous, plebian-centered culture of Edo.”<sup>14</sup> However, the process was remarkably ageless, relying heavily on old practices, such as traditional spheres of power. In fact, “all three unifiers followed this pattern. Although they implemented significant policy changes, these changes did not constitute a political or social revolution. Little from the past was unequivocally repudiated in the establishment of early

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<sup>12</sup> Jeroen P. Lamers, *Japonius Tyrannus: The Japanese Warlord, Oda Nobunaga Reconsidered* (Leiden: Hotei Pub., 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Andrew M. Watsky, *Chikubushima: Deploying the Sacred Arts in Momoyama Japan* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Gregory P. A. Levine, *Daitokuji: The Visual Cultures of a Zen Monastery*, 1st ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), pg. 118.

modern Japan.”<sup>15</sup> Berry describes the four tiers of power as being led by the shogun and his functionaries in the capital, who would send out military governors (*shugo*) in charge of provincial rule. In turn, the military governors exercised authority over the men of the land (*kokujin*) who did most of the day to day running of the cultivators and commoners.<sup>16</sup> This system remained largely unchanged, although Hideyoshi worked to disrupt the connection between the daimyo and the peasants by frequently reassigning domains and destroying castles. Additionally, despite the removal of most of the emperor’s practical power, the court remained influential in the arts as well as retaining a degree of religious authority.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the religious institutions themselves were left with the majority of the country’s spiritual agency, despite their place under Hideyoshi’s, and later the shogunate’s, thumb. The idea was not necessarily to create an authoritarian regime, both out of practicality and a sense of tradition, but rather to ensure that no one would be able to assume power as Hideyoshi had, gradually using the chaos of the Sengoku Era to rise through the ranks from a low position. It is therefore important to look individually at each Peace Policy, examining the intent and the reality to understand how Hideyoshi was performing power.

Hideyoshi’s Peace Policies (*heiwarei*), were meant to freeze the social order to prevent further uprisings. At the center of the strategy was separation of the status groups; with no social mobility, the perennial wars of the Sengoku Period could finally come to an end. Because of the Peace Policies, local lords would no longer be able to make power grabs, using force to expand their domains and causing challenges to the increasingly centralized state would cease. The Peace Policies are typically broken down into three categories: castle destruction, cadastral

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<sup>15</sup> Lee Butler, *Emperor and Aristocracy in Japan, 1467-1680: Resilience and Renewal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002), pg. 289.

<sup>16</sup> Mary Elizabeth Berry, *The Culture of Civil War in Kyoto* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pg xxix

<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Lillehoj, *Art and Palace Politics in Early Modern Japan, 1580s-1680s* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2011).

land surveys, and weapon restrictions.<sup>18</sup> Castle destruction reduced the financial and military might of the elite. Land surveys redistributed land allocations and tied peasants to their individual plot, as well as created a steady flow of taxes for the government. Weapons restrictions formed status markers and were an everyday reminder of one's role in life. All three contributed to the lasting peace, but only the land surveys had a strong effect on the day-to-day life of the peasants, unsurprisingly eliciting the greatest response.

### ***Castle Breaking (shirowari)***

On his rise to power, Hideyoshi, confident in his control and ascension, made the bold declaration: “I shall order them to level the castles of the whole land to prevent further rebellions and to preserve the nation in peace for over fifty years.”<sup>19</sup> Castles



Figure 2 Oda Nobunaga ordered Sakuma Nobumori, the top retainer of the Oda clan depicted in this ukiyoe, and Shibata Katsuei, a vassal of the Oda clan, to build Sunomata Castle, but they failed to do so. Nakazawa Toshiki, *Toyotomi's Record of Achievements Kinoshita's One Night Sunomata Castle*, woodblock print, Touken World, <https://www.touken-world-ukiyo.jp/mushae/art0007400/>.

were not only an obvious display of strength of the numerous warlords that Hideyoshi was trying to rein in, but they were also centers of trade and supplies, a gathering place of possible army recruits and tax revenue, as well as a symbol of culture and authority. Hideyoshi knew this well. His rapid construction of Sunomata Castle under orders from Oda Nobunaga is sometimes considered the start of Hideyoshi's favor in the eyes of Nobunaga and the beginning of

<sup>18</sup> Hisashi Fujiki, *Toyotomi heiwarei to sengoku shakai* (Tokyo: Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai, 1985).

<sup>19</sup> Shimonaka, ed., *Nihon shiryō shūsei*, p. 255. Translated by Mary Elizabeth Berry

Hideyoshi's own rise to power.<sup>20</sup> With Hideyoshi's successful completion of Sunomata Castle, several other warlords lost their standing with Nobunaga, failing to complete the fortifications on the difficult terrain where the Sai and Nagara Rivers met in what is now Gifu Prefecture. Hideyoshi, however, was able to construct the castle so quickly it was sometimes called Sunomata Ichiya Castle—Sunomata 'One Night' Castle, seen in figure 2. Understanding the effects castles had on establishing power, Hideyoshi determined that destroying regional castles would secure his authority, both militarily and culturally. The policy of castle breaking was so effective that Tokugawa Ieyasu continued the process well after his own ascension, assuring that Hideyoshi's prophecy of fifty years of peace would be a gross underestimation.

Although the term 'castle' might be considered rather extravagant to refer to the rough fortifications of walls or other physical barriers in sixteenth century Japan, castles nonetheless had an important role on the war front. A basic method of disrupting the constant warfare, interrupting crucial supply stations for armies that frequently ranged across hundreds of kilometers, it was an obvious tactic to destroy and otherwise limit military fortifications. For example, Nambu Nobonao of Mutsu lost thirty-six of forty-eight fortifications and all but six citadels in Tamba were destroyed.<sup>21</sup> Under Hideyoshi, military fortifications were gradually becoming more sophisticated, featuring complex moats, gun stations, iron-cleated doors, mazelike approaches, and fireproofed walls.<sup>22</sup> Somewhat ironically, the militaristic castles built under Hideyoshi's reign are the ones that survived, not because of their more advanced safety measures, but because they saw less battle, allowing them to become everyday symbols of status, much like swords. Ieyasu therefore limited each daimyo to a single castle.

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<sup>20</sup> George B Sansom, *A History of Japan to 1334-1615* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1961), pg. 278.

<sup>21</sup> Tadachika Kuwata, *Toyotomi Hideyoshi kenkyu* (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1975), pg. 298-300.

<sup>22</sup> Mary Elizabeth Berry, *Hideyoshi* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1990), pg. 133.

Traditionally, castles were a means with which to control the surrounding territory, rather than an inherent maximizing of military potential. Compared to the military encampments of the Nanbokuchō Period (1336-92) that David Spafford describes, which left no discernible archaeological remains and thus point to a more transitory nature than castles, the fortifications that emerged in the fifteenth century represented a steadfast connection between the lord who lived there and the nearby populace.<sup>23</sup> In part, the relationship between the lord and townspeople was inspiration for the alternate attendance system (*sankin kotai*) later implemented in the Tokugawa period to control the domain lords. It is therefore unsurprising that, when Kobayakawa Takakage was given the province of Iyo by Hideyoshi, Kobayakawa declared Matsuyama Castle the seat of his government and issued a proclamation to the powerful families of Iyo that anyone with a castle should leave the region. The lords of the castles in Iyo subsequently retreated to the fields, or became village headmen.<sup>24</sup> Castle towns (*jōkamachi*) came to be inhabited by lower-level samurai and commoners, the towns serving as physical reminders of class separation since “most of the area, and all its desirable space, was given over to samurai residences and temples, leaving artisans and merchants squeezed into what remained.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, this was a place where the different status groups officially designated by the state intermingled and had to play their role, whether this was via architecture regulations or more portable status symbols such as swords.

Destroying the castles disrupted centers of domanial authority. Towns naturally developed around castles, increasing trade and economic opportunities. People naturally gathered around the monuments of security, and trade and commerce flourished, as in the

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<sup>23</sup> David Spafford, *A Sense of Place: The Political Landscape in Late Medieval Japan*, Illustrated edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013).

<sup>24</sup> “Futamimachi Shi 双海町誌,” *Ehime no Kioku えひめの記憶*, n.d., <https://www.i-manabi.jp/system/regionals/regionals/ecode:3/40/view/11586?keyword=%E5%88%80%E7%8B%A9>.

<sup>25</sup> Marius B. Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 2002), pg. 142.

castle towns of Kanazawa and Sendai. Today, most large towns in Japan trace their roots to castle towns.<sup>26</sup> Castles and the towns that surrounded them acted as physical markers of social status, a stage on which to perform.<sup>27</sup> Hideyoshi wanted to control these stages.

### ***Surveying the Land***

At the center of Hideyoshi's plans were economic and social restructuring. He intended to upend the more-or-less feudal structure that allowed individual powers to rise and created dozens of small polities that could function independently of any centralized, 'nationalized' government. Despite the tripartite system of influence-- military, cultural, and religious-- nothing tied the provinces together economically or politically. Consequently, Hideyoshi restructured the tax system, implementing what came to be known as the *kokudaka* system. The *kokudaka* system tied peasants to a piece of land in which the tax collectors could estimate the amount of crops which were supposed to be produced based on an equation involving the amount of land (*koku*), the quality of the soil, the climate, and other factors. With this information in hand, the tax collectors could predict each year's taxes and the centralizing government would have a steady source of income. The key component, however, was determining land distribution, as the process established a clear distinction between social groups because family heads were required to register their family in the appropriate status group.

Land ownership was regulated by status group—for example, peasants could only own agricultural land while merchants could only have property in the city.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore,

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<sup>26</sup> James L. McClain, *Kanazawa: A Seventeenth-Century Japanese Castle Town* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1982).

<sup>27</sup> Marius B. Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>28</sup> Wakita Osamu, "The *Kokudaka* System: A Device for Unification," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 1, no. 2 (1975): 301.



Hideyoshi's land distribution completely disregarded historic property markers, so that any agreements or purchases that had been made in the past, by samurai or peasant, was likely to be nullified. When someone was assigned their plot of land during the cadastral surveys, the land was also evaluated for the potential quantity of rice (*koku*) that could theoretically be produced there; the amount of taxes that were to be paid was based off this hypothetical number, rather than the amount actually produced. The risk was obvious. Even in seasons of poor harvest, heavy rains, droughts, or disease, one would be responsible for the same tax amount as in the best of harvests.

The cadastral land surveys were conducted by state officials who scoured the various provinces, making note of who lived where and assigning peasants and landowners alike to different plots. Disrupting the long-standing land holdings throughout Hideyoshi's territory also disrupted the flow of taxes and thereby upset the local lords. More striking, however, is the peasant response. The surveys moved borders and the increased, fixed expectations of tax burdens gave the peasants less wiggle room in times of hardship. Villages in Japan had a history of acting autonomously, striking deals with local lords regarding protection and financial duties. The local lords, in turn, knew that they had to appease the local peasants, or else face the displeasure of village leagues (*ikki*),<sup>29</sup> whether they took the form of violent revolution, petitions, or strikes known as *nukemairi*.<sup>30</sup> With the interference of the land survey, not only were some farmers simply removed from their land, but they also lost bargaining power with local lords.

More than the castle breaking policies, more than the sword hunt or even the official class stratification declaration, the land surveys were the most invasive for the peasants. Compared to the other Peace Policies, the land surveys directly affected farmers' daily lives and

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<sup>29</sup> Michiko Tanaka, "Movimientos Campesinos Premodernos En Japón," in *Movimientos Campesinos en La Formación Del Japón Moderno*, 1st ed., vol. 4 (Colegio de Mexico, 1976), 45–68.

<sup>30</sup> Morten Oxenboell, *Akuto and Rural Conflict in Medieval Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018). Pg. 110.

therefore elicited the biggest response. In Aoki Koji's considerable (and contested) collection of peasant protests from 1580 up through the Meiji era, the opposition to the land survey is noticeable in the first thirty years it was implemented.<sup>31</sup> In roughly the year 1600, an uprising in Shinano Province in response to the land surveys resulted in 700 people put to death. The same year in nearby Mino, another protest rose up against the new lord who had been installed as a result of the land shuffle. In Tosa, the farmers set fire to the lord's house and burned the family to death.<sup>32</sup> Similar patterns can be seen throughout Hideyoshi's Japan indicating the level of unrest the land surveys inspired in the general populace.

The land surveys were possibly Hideyoshi's most influential policies, because they tied peasants to their land, tore local lords from their bases of power, and ensured a steady stream of income for the state. However, for peasants, the land surveys were a direct threat to their autonomy, marking the entry of the centralization of the government into the realm of the non-elite. Consequently, land surveys prompted the peasants to use the power of mass protest to voice their displeasure. The cadastral surveys can only be considered proper 'peace' policies when viewed from a larger scale. They were highly effective in establishing a clear line between social groups, as farmer-samurai (*jizamurai*) and others who existed between warrior and farmer officially had to choose which side their family would fall on for centuries to come. The surveys also conclusively separated the domain lords from their seats of power and set up a tax system that would help fund the formation of the Tokugawa shogunate.<sup>33</sup> In terms of macroviolence, then, from Hideyoshi's seat of power, the land surveys were a success. Narrowing the scope, however, and looking at individual domains, castles, or even villages,

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<sup>31</sup> Peasant protests that rose up against land surveys are referred to as *kenchi hantai*. It should be noted that Aoki's compendium has been criticized by scholars for overestimating the definition of 'protest' and 'violence'. Nonetheless, it is the most complete record of peasant protests that is available.

<sup>32</sup> Koji Aoki, *Hyakusho ikki sogo nenpyo* (Tokyo: San'ichi Shobo, 1975) pg. 12-18.

<sup>33</sup> Although the tax system would fail the Tokugawa shogunate in the end.

shows that the people and the land remained just as unstable as ever. Pockets of violence remained as peasants and commoners voiced their dissent on property lines and tax burdens.

## ANALYZING THE EDICT

Nara's Kofukuji Temple's Tomonin Diary entry on the second day of the second month of Tensho 16 (1588) begins with a note on the weather: "Rain on the 22<sup>nd</sup> day after the [sword hunt's] implementation. All the swords, spears, and metal fittings of all domains are to be hunted, and the whole of Nara is abuzz."<sup>34</sup> The Sword Hunt Edict was a series of proclamations, issued to individual provincial lords and temples who were then tasked with the collection of long and short swords, bows, spears, firearms, and any other forms of weapons from the people outside the samurai status group. The Sword Hunt Edict roughly indicated how the task was meant to be carried out—through the retainers of lords—and stated that the gathered metal would be used in the construction of a Great Buddha, thereby opening the way to national safety and happiness for all people.<sup>35</sup> However, there was a dual purpose to the sword hunt—stopping revolts before they could start.

The edict is divided into three straightforward clauses, with little room for misinterpretation. The first section states that "the farmers of the various provinces are strictly forbidden by His Highness to have swords, daggers, bows, spears, firearms, or other kinds of weapons in their possession." It declares these items 'unnecessary' for a farmer, who, upon taking up arms, would let their fields lie fallow and uncultivated during the uprising and after

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<sup>34</sup> Cited in Iichiro Tokutomi, *Kinsei Nihon kokuminshi* (Tokyo: Min'yusha, 1934), pg. 27-28. Translation my own.

<sup>35</sup> National Diet Library. *Nihonbunkashi daikyuuban* 日本文化史第 9 卷. Japan: *daitoukaku* 大鏡閣, 1922, pg. 90.

when the guilty received their punishment.<sup>36</sup> According to language used in similar legal documents, the punishment was often execution.<sup>37</sup>

These instructions clearly drew from the Buddhist tradition of separation of duties. The religiosity was emphasized in the second clause, where Hideyoshi stated that the collected swords would be melted down and “used as rivets and clamps in the forthcoming construction of the Great Buddha.”<sup>38</sup> In fact, a poem dating from 1589 on the gates of Jurakutei palace credited the birth of Hideyoshi’s daughter Tsurumatsu with the good karma received from the act of faith: “The child you have received is due to the pious act of building the Daibutsu, the clamps and nails for which are made from the spears and swords you confiscated.”<sup>39</sup> The statue that Hideyoshi had planned in Kyoto was to rival the enormous monolith created by Emperor Shomū in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, who requested help from everyone across Japan, declaring that even a handful of dirt would be rewarded with blessings from Buddha. Selflessly contributing to such a pious endeavor would not only earn the farmers karmic points as “an act by which the farmers will be saved in this life, needless to say, and in the life to come,” but also created an association between Hideyoshi and Buddhism, not unlike declaring divine right of rule. It even placed Hideyoshi on the level of an emperor famous for his piety.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> See Berry, *Hideyoshi*, pg. 102 for a translation of one such letter, bearing the vermilion seal that indicated an official notice from Hideyoshi. De Bary’s *Sources of Japanese Tradition v.2* contains a second translation.

<sup>37</sup> De Bary notes that “*seibai*, a word often seen in the documents of the unifiers’ regime and translated here as ‘to punish,’ frequently but not always means ‘to put to death’” on page 458 of sources and, in his compendium of peasant protests, Aoki Koji corroborates De Bary, listing countless numbers of agitators beheaded for their actions.

<sup>38</sup> Mary Elizabeth Berry, *Hideyoshi* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1990). pg. 102.

<sup>39</sup> *Daibutsuno kudoku mo are ya yarikatana kugi kasugai wa kodakara megumu* 大仏の功德もあれや槍かたな釘かすがいは子宝めぐむ in David D Neilson, “Methods in Madness: The Last Years of Toyotomi Hideyoshi” (2000), pg. 183.

<sup>40</sup> The use of cultural and religious symbols as a form of political currency are examined more closely by Morgan Pitelka in *Spectacular Accumulation* and Andrew Watsky in *Chikubushima: Deploying the Sacred Arts in Momoyama Japan*.

In addition to religion, in the edict Hideyoshi drew upon a connection to the legendary Chinese Emperor Yao, who “used precious swords and sharp blades as farming tools” in the establishment of a lasting peace in the 24<sup>th</sup> century BCE. In one set of instructions to his daimyo, Hideyoshi declared: “In foreign lands, the Tang Dynasty principle of peace and happiness for all people was used as the basis for the government's policy of benevolence, and the use of the sword and swordsmanship for farming tools. You must observe this intention, know the meaning of these words, and be diligent in farming and mulberry farming. Please collect these tools urgently.”<sup>41</sup> China had long been a model for Japanese elite culture, serving as inspiration in everything from politics to tea culture. Creating a link to the legendary Tang golden era in China emphasized the sophistication and righteousness of a Japan-wide disarmament. It also indicated to the peasants—if the blatant threat against their disobediences were not enough—that the edict was in their favor: “if farmers possess agricultural tools alone and engage completely in cultivation, they shall [prosper] unto eternity, even to [the generations of] their children and grandchildren.”<sup>42</sup> Therefore, according to Hideyoshi, the sword hunt was not simply a political move to protect his own status, but it was an act of compassion for the happiness of the people. Whether the peasants agreed with this—or even cared—is difficult to say. While the notice would have been visible to all, as notice boards were posted along the main roads and near towns with information on official edicts, wanted criminals, and other items of note on display, the information contained within would not disturb the lives of the farmers to a great degree.<sup>43</sup> In fact, Japanese historian Fujiki Hisashi argues that it was called a ‘sword hunt’ rather than a ‘collection’ for a reason. Because the purpose was not total disarmament, but

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<sup>41</sup> *Tenshou juurokunen shichigatsu yooka, Hideyoshi daiichi, rokugasa, Katanagari nigen* 天正十六年七月八日秀吉第一章六刀狩二元 cited in Ichiro Tokutomi, *Kinsei Nihon kokuminshi* (Tokyo: Min'yusha, 1934). Translation my own.

<sup>42</sup> Mary Elizabeth Berry, *Hideyoshi* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1990). pg. 102.

<sup>43</sup> Constantine Nomikos Vaporis, *Breaking Barriers: Travel and the State in Early Modern Japan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1995).

rather asking village peasants to seal off the exercise of their right to bear arms and acknowledging the presence of many weapons in their villages, the hunt played out more like a survey than a forced seizure.<sup>44</sup> In many cases, possession of the sword was permitted immediately after the investigation, indicating that the underlying intent emphasized a system of licensing and permits for carrying swords and not actual disarmament.<sup>45</sup>

### ***Points of a Practical Nature***

I have so far only been able to find passing reference to people ‘going sword hunting’ (*katagari okanoi* 刀狩行ひ), as there seems to be few records of the actual process of carrying out the sword hunt.<sup>46</sup> Given the time period, it is reasonable to assume any such documentation has been lost, but it does strike me as odd, given the litigiousness of early modern Japanese society and the comparatively high literacy rates that left a dense paper trail. For example, at least eight copies of the edict itself survive. Whether or not Hideyoshi’s orders that “the local officials and deputies are requested to take all of the weapons of war and to deliver them up [to Kyoto]” occurred is, at the moment, unclear.<sup>47</sup> It seems more likely that the villages, which had always been relatively self-governing, managed the basics of the sword hunt themselves,

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<sup>44</sup> Hisashi Fujiki, *Katanagari: Buki o fuinshita minshu* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2005). Pg. 84-87

<sup>45</sup> Hisashi Fujiki, *Katanagari: Buki o fuinshita minshu* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2005), 84-87.

<sup>46</sup> Nakayama writes: “According to the “Echizen Province Meiseki Kou” (Echizen Province Historical Sights), in September of Tensho 3, Shibata Katsue entered Kitanosho (Fukui City) and hunted for swords, which he cast into cast iron to be used as iron chains for the bridge over the Jinzu River.” Tarō Nakayama, *Seikatsu to Minzoku*, (Mikasa Shobō, 1942), 201.

<sup>47</sup> *Tenshou juurokunnen shichigatsu yooka, Hideyoshi daiichi, rokugasa, Katanagari nigen* 天正十六年七月八日秀吉第一章六刀狩二元 cited in Ichiro Tokutomi, *Kinsei Nihon kokuminshi* (Tokyo: Min’yusha, 1934). Translation my own. The document actually says simply to ‘deliver them up’ (致進上), but as Kyoto, as the seat of the emperor and the capital at the time, moving towards Kyoto was called going ‘up’ and leaving Kyoto was going ‘down’. Here it can be inferred that Hideyoshi meant to deliver them up to Kyoto in order to construct the Great Buddha statue.

indicating that Hideyoshi's orders were not carried out to the letter.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, the weapons were not actually used as materials for the construction of the Great Buddha, but rather, some or most of them were stored elsewhere to be ready for use in case of emergency; Kaibara Mashiken wrote in *Asano Zatsusai*, "The two castles of Osaka and Fushimi were used as a refuge for the hidden objects."<sup>49</sup> Consequently, many questions remain in regards to 'going sword hunting.'

According to Berry, 1,073 long swords (*katana*) were collected from Enuma county in Kaga, along with 1,540 short swords (*wakizashi*), 160 spearheads (*yarimi*), 500 bodkins (*kōgai*), and 700 daggers (*gokatana*).<sup>50</sup> Fujiki records a further 30,000 mixed long and short swords delivered to Kyoto from Shimazu province. Although no other weapons—spearheads, bodkins, daggers, or firearms—were received, Hideyoshi appeared satisfied.<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately, there is no official population record of Japan from the sixteenth century, so it is difficult to say for certain if these numbers constituted a significant percentage of each domain. McClain estimates, however, that Kanazawa alone, the capital castle town of Kaga, had a population of approximately 100,000 in the late seventeenth century.<sup>52</sup> If that was the population for one city, I suggest that the entire population of Shimazu domain was not insignificant. It should also be noted that long swords and short swords traditionally came in a pair (known as *daishō*); with this in mind, it is likely that many of the swords collected in both Enuma and Shimazu came from the same individual or family. Even if one were to assume that 30,000 individuals of Shimazu complied with the edict, the numbers seem low for a country just emerging from a century of war. Conscripted commoners were expected to prepare their own weapons for army

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<sup>48</sup> Hisashi Fujiki, *Katanagari: Buki o fuinshita minshu* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2005), 85.

<sup>49</sup> Takeo Ono, *Nihon heino shiron 日本兵農史論* (Tokyo: Yuhikaku, 1942), pg. 151. Translation my own.

<sup>50</sup> Mary Elizabeth Berry, *Hideyoshi* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1990). Pg. 104.

<sup>51</sup> Hisashi Fujiki, *Katanagari: Buki o fuinshita minshu* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2005). Pg. 81

<sup>52</sup> James L McClain, *Japan: A Modern History*. (W W Norton & Co Inc, 2001).



life and, more important, some form of defense was necessary to stave off roving bands of starving soldiers. It is therefore reasonable to assume that a large percentage of the population was armed and the 34,000 weapons we have record of being collected cannot be a full representation of the number of weapons that 16<sup>th</sup> century Japanese commoners possessed.

Although spears and other polearms would have been the more likely weapon for a lightly armed foot soldier, swords were not out of reach for commoners, either status-wise or economically. It was not until the mid-Tokugawa period that the paired swords came to truly embody the ‘soul of a samurai’ mythology that is showcased today in popular media; the most

**Figure 1: Sword Blades Exported from Japan to Ming China, 1432-1539 (Official Trade)<sup>6</sup>**

Year	Number of sword blades	Value per blade
1432	3,000	10 <i>kanmon</i>
1434	3,000	10 <i>kanmon</i>
1451	10,000	5 <i>kanmon</i>
1464	30,000	3 <i>kanmon</i>
1466	7,000	3 <i>kanmon</i>
1483	37,000	3 <i>kanmon</i>
1494	7,000	1.8 <i>kanmon</i>
1510	7,000	1.8 <i>kanmon</i>
1539	25,000	1 <i>kanmon</i>

Figure 3 Honma Junji and Sato Kanzan, eds., *Nihon-to zenshu* (Tokyo, Tokuma Shoten, 1966), 1:39. Accessed through Rogers, *The Development of the Military Profession in Tokugawa Japan*

famous of these promulgators, *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* by Nitobe Inazo, was not published until the turn of the twentieth-century. Swords could certainly command high value and were frequently a form of political communication associated with gift giving and ritual performances, but they were not necessarily associated with a single status group at the end of the Warring States period.<sup>53</sup> In fact, when swords were not produced by someone of Horikawa Kunihiro’s fame, they were not even particularly expensive. Figure 4 shows that, according to records in 1539, Ming China was importing roughly 25,000 swords at an estimated value of one *kanmon* (1000 copper coins) each; in port, some could go for as low as .3 *kanmon*. It follows, then, “that large numbers of swords were being produced in Japan for even lower costs, with the

<sup>53</sup> Morgan Pitelka, *Spectacular Accumulation: Material Culture, Tokugawa Ieyasu, and Samurai Sociability*, 2018.

result being, by the beginning of the Tokugawa Period, anyone who wanted a sword would have been able to find a sturdy, serviceable weapon at a negligible price.”<sup>54</sup> The accessibility of blades therefore suggests that it was not that the number of swords collected were low because commoners did not have them, then.

Finally, it is clear that the numbers recorded by Berry and Fujiki do not tell the full story with a simple question: where are the spears? Japanese samurai had fought on horseback since at least the fifth century and strategists know that, for any soldier on foot against a mounted enemy, polearms are the best option. Most commoners filled the ranks as foot soldiers (*ashigaru*), not able to afford a horse nor the required accoutrements; naturally, most of them would have been armed with a spear (*yari*). Despite this, between Enuma and the entire Kaga domain, Hideyoshi received only 160 spearheads? One might suggest that spear shafts are easily replaceable and spearheads are easier to hide than swords. However, Hideyoshi’s officials would certainly know that there were more than 160 spears to be found in all of Enuma and, if disarming the commoners really was the key point of the sword hunt, the officials would have gone to more effort to collect all kinds of weapons.

It seems odd to consider that the people of Japan, who had up until this point administered their individual villages largely autonomously--including defense against peasant leagues and bands of bandits-- who had made up the bulk of the armies in the preceding centuries, and who had long since discovered the influence a mob could wield over the ruling classes, would so calmly give up their weapons.<sup>55</sup> Berry and other scholars have been notably surprised by the “apparent absence of widespread resistance to the edict,” noting a few complaints in the Tomonin Diary, and a letter to domonial officials in Satsuma that indicated

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<sup>54</sup> John Michael Rogers, “The Development of the Military Profession in Tokugawa Japan” (Ph.D., Boston, Harvard University, 1998), pg. 17.

<sup>55</sup> For more on the history of peasant protest in Japan, see Bix, *Peasant Protest in Japan, 1590-1884*; Oxenboell, *Akuto and Rural Conflict in Medieval Japan*; White, *Ikki*.

that Kyoto had already received arms from across different provinces.<sup>56</sup> There was no sudden spike in the number of peasant protests in the immediate years after the edict was implemented and Hideyoshi consolidated his influence and Ieyasu brought the core of Honshu under centralized control.<sup>57</sup> It has been suggested that the peasants were simply tired of war. They were the ones who felt the effects most keenly when a hungry army roved through, helping themselves to the village's food and houses. Peasants, too, would benefit from peace and stability, certainly, but it is difficult to attribute the entire span of the Pax Tokugawa to a sense of exhaustion. Collective memory extends only a generation or two, after all. Berry further posits that people were intimidated, as Hideyoshi's edict brooked no argument; the consequences of resisting were "needless to say" swift punishment.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, capital punishment was decisively meted out to those who had a role in a peasant uprising and Koji marks thousands of deaths this way. As for violations of arms possession itself, however, infractions against prohibitions on sword bearing by commoners appear to have been frequent during the eighteenth century.<sup>59</sup> The villages were used to a degree of autonomy and had been known to strike bargains with local lords regarding taxes and social contracts. In fact, Fujiki suggests that sword collection was left to the villagers themselves, not even local lords or Hideyoshi-appointed officials.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Mary Elizabeth Berry, *Hideyoshi* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1990), pg. 105.

<sup>57</sup> See Michiko Tanaka "Movimientos Campesinos Premodernos en Japón" in *Movimientos Campesinos en la Formación de Japón Moderno*, 1976 for a convenient chart. Also Aoki Koji's *Hyakushō ikki sōgō nenpyō*.

<sup>58</sup> Berry, *Hideyoshi*, 105. It can hardly be argued that the peasants were simply not aware of the stern words; important notices were posted along main roads in a sort of medieval bulletin board (see Vaporis, *Breaking Barriers*).

<sup>59</sup> David L. Howell, *Geographies of Identity in Nineteenth-Century Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pg. 136.

<sup>60</sup> Hisashi Fujiki, *Katanagari: Buki o fuinshita minshu* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2005), pg. 86

## ***Getting to the Point***

The implications of the sword hunt were far-reaching. From a political perspective, it was certainly an effective move as it reduced many threats to Hideyoshi's power. Aside from the obvious military effects, the edict also had social, cultural, and economic overtones.

Militarily, the intention was simple: defang the daimyo. Samurai had become the officer class, with the bulk of the fighting men made up of non-elite peasants and farmers.<sup>61</sup> In the golden age of myths, battles were small and fought primarily by mounted archers; by the Sengoku Period, however, the population had grown and tactics had changed. The growing importance of castles led to developments in siege warfare, corresponding with a ballooning army size. Firearms were introduced to augment the volleys of arrows and walls of spears and could effectively employ large numbers against the more well-trained professional warriors.<sup>62</sup> These infantrymen (*ashigaru*) were largely conscripted, rewarded through pillaging rights rather than a stipend like the samurai, and were frequently required to arm themselves. Mobilizing peasants without having to provide weaponry for them meant that it was relatively simple for local lords to gather their own armies and challenge neighboring towns or even provinces for power. The resulting wars of the Sengoku period were many fronted and frequent. By disrupting the recruitment process—disarming the peasants and putting financial restraints on the daimyo—Hideyoshi was able to rein in the biggest military threat to his power.

The battleground also offered other ways for the general populace to leverage their influence. For example, the military elite were at times upstaged by peasants who earned positions of power via battle. Nobunaga, as was typical of Sengoku period, chose his vassals based on military merit rather than family ties. This meant that a peasant with no ties to the

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<sup>61</sup> Stephen Morillo, "Guns and Government: A Comparative Study of Europe and Japan," *Jworldhistory Journal of World History* 6, no. 1 (1995): 75–106.

<sup>62</sup> Lee takes care to note, however, that guns never replaced bows and Morillo argues that the stories of Nobunaga's revolution with gunmen is perhaps overstated.

samurai social group could become a valued vassal. Eventually, these vassals came to represent the new ruling elite during the Momoyama Period, upturning the monopolization the privileged samurai families had once had on violence.<sup>63</sup> Hideyoshi knew how dangerous this particular path was, as he himself was born the son of a foot soldier. Although he invented the myth of his mother's divine conception from the goddess Amaterasu to give legitimacy to his rule, the truth was that he earned the position through skill and luck in martial matters. When the country was ruled by a military government, power could be attained through proficiency in war and Hideyoshi needed to limit this opportunity, lest he himself be overturned by a fellow peasant who managed to rise through the ranks.

Finally, armed peasants were, in and of themselves, dangerous. The general populace can wield a great deal of influence via mass protest, as any student of Charles Tilly will say. The Ishiyama Honganji represented such a threat to Nobunaga's rise in part because they were able to mass produce and operate firearms to the same degree as Nobunaga himself; this is one reason why the resulting battle was so destructive.<sup>64</sup> Firearms were especially threatening because of the relative lack of training required and their effectiveness against armored and mounted samurai which were the tanks of their day. As a result, the introduction and production of firearms in Japan were carefully monitored by military officials, with gunpowder manufacture permitted in one province. Hideyoshi only extended Nobunaga's policy, as armed bands of peasants (*akuto*) *outside* of his central control posed such a threat to his expanding government. The long history of *akuto* bands, as discussed by Oxenboel, and the eponymous peasant uprisings are only two examples of weaponized peasants using violence against local bodies of

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<sup>63</sup> Jeroen Pieter Lamers, *Japonius Tyrannus: The Japanese Warlord Oda Nobunaga Reconsidered* (Leiden: Hotei Publ., 2000), pg. 31.

<sup>64</sup> Jeroen Pieter Lamers, *Japonius Tyrannus: The Japanese Warlord Oda Nobunaga Reconsidered* (Leiden: Hotei Publ., 2000).Pg. 174 For more on the battles of Honganji and the Ikko Ikki, see Carol Richmond Tsang, *War and Faith: Ikko Ikki in Late Muromachi Japan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center: Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2007).

authority successfully.<sup>65</sup> Disarming them was a straightforward method of reducing such a threat.

In addition to an obvious military threat, swords also had a crucial role as signals of social status and prestige. The importance of cultural symbolism as a measure of authority—especially in Japan—is a well-studied field, and studying swords and the sword hunt will only add to the conversation among scholars.<sup>66</sup> In his book *Chikubushima*, Watsky argues that art and architecture are ascribed value based on their context and setting; if the people or culture change, the value attached to the piece changes as well and can be difficult to discern later in time.<sup>67</sup> With the increasing purveyance of the non-elite taking up arms, the weapons began losing their prestige. Hideyoshi and others of the ruling status group might have desired a return to the golden age of warriors, the period of the *Heike Monogatari* and other legends. For example, because of that idolization of mythology, Hideyoshi claimed Minamoto lineage.<sup>68</sup> The desire to return to previous eras of glory and, while perhaps most keenly observed in Nobunaga's sense of tradition argued by Watsky, the sense of longing for the past is also reflected in Hideyoshi 'performance of lordship'.<sup>69</sup> Wrapping his authority in layers of gilt by immersing himself in high culture, such as theater and tea ceremony, or ascribing himself religious connotations through 'pious' endeavors like constructing a Great Buddha, Hideyoshi and other elite powers of his era used a showy kind of theater to legitimate their presence.

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<sup>65</sup> Morten Oxenboell, *Akuto and Rural Conflict in Medieval Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018), pg. 121.

<sup>66</sup> See Butler *Emperor and Aristocracy*, Levine *Daitokuji*, Pitelka *Spectacular Accumulation*, and Rogers *Performing the Great Peace* for examples.

<sup>67</sup> Andrew Mark Watsky, *Chikubushima: Deploying the Sacred Arts in Momoyama Japan* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), pg. 143.

<sup>68</sup> The other reason being the sense of legitimacy even a fake bond afforded him.

<sup>69</sup> Spafford, *A Sense of Place*; Peter D Shapinsky, *Lords of the Sea Pirates, Violence, and Commerce in Late Medieval Japan* (Ann Arbor, Mich: Center for Japanese Studies, The University of Michigan, 2014), pg. 122.

The sword, as a representation of the idealized past of the samurai, came to be one such symbol. It served as a reminder of the days when military might was the all-consuming political strength and the warriors who wielded them were the elite of the elite. The sword—particularly the paired swords (*daisho*)—were a clear and straightforward status symbol, in the same vein as the top knot or the surname. Hideyoshi was hardly the first to recognize this, either. Although peasants were nominally permitted to arm themselves in the Kamakura era, only the elite could carry a blade in the capital.

The sword hunt officialized the sword's cultural status, but, it did not necessarily change that status. There had always been a clear distinction between status groups, out of both Japanese and Buddhist tradition. For example, peasants did not have surnames. Family names were granted by the emperor and represented a notable lineage. They could be earned through great deeds, but this was equivalent to establishing a new noble house. Hideyoshi had to appeal to the emperor for a surname later in life, because it is very likely his parents did not have the status to possess a family name. For peasants, therefore, whether or not they were permitted to carry a sword did not change their status, as they still did not have a family name or any of the other trappings that marked nobility. Consequently, Hideyoshi validated the sword as a samurai symbol, but did not in and of itself change the social order.

## POINTS OF VIOLENCE

At the heart of the Sword Hunt Edict is the mandate of social division: farmers are meant to be farmers. Warriors are meant to be warriors. Maintaining this balance will lead to stability and is often credited for the resulting Great Peace, as the Tokugawa regime would continue and expand upon the same principle, such as limiting samurai participation in mercantile endeavors. That said, however, I question the effectiveness of this edict. Seventeenth century Japan looked quite different than early sixteenth century Japan, certainly, but the main power structures remained in place. All three unifiers relied on traditional means of legitimacy and authority. The court, although reduced in agency, was still the center of the arts and civilization. The temples and shrines continued to be relied on for their role in spiritual matters. And Tokugawa Ieyasu acquired the title of shogun, meaning the military government, as well, survived. This trifecta, known as the *kenmon* system, had been in place for centuries and Hideyoshi's policies did little to disrupt it, as these three pillars continued to rely on each other. Additionally, social mobility existed in limited capacities both before and after the Sword Hunt Edict, and the same can be said of the influence of the general populace in Japan. The people continued to unite to make themselves heard by those in power, as can be seen in the perseverance of leagues (*ikki*) up until the nineteenth century and the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate. If the Sword Hunt Edict, as a symbol of increased social barriers, was not as effective as Hideyoshi perhaps intended, what, then, is the legacy of the sword hunt?

In short, following Brown, this brings into question the measurable influence of the unifiers—even the state. How far did their reach truly extend? By looking closely at the records, it becomes clear that the state's Great Peace extended only to the elite ruling class. Although peasants and townspeople ostensibly turned in their weapons to the state, as I have shown this



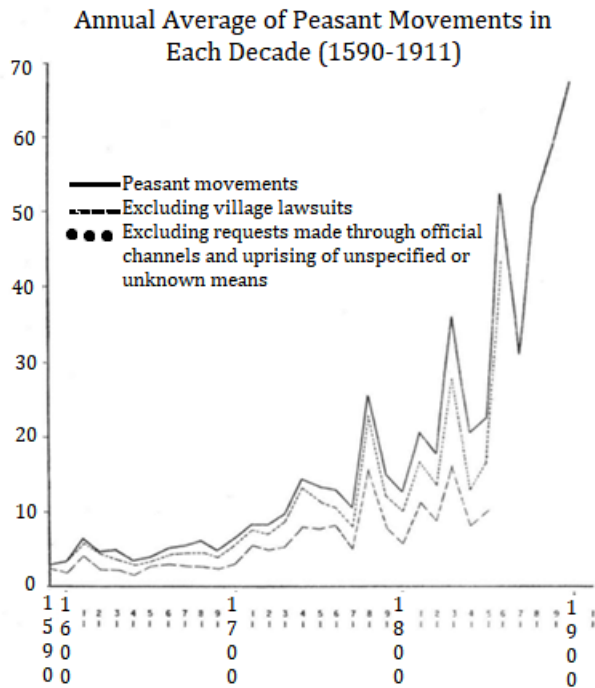


Figure 4 Adapted from Michiko Tanaka, "Movimientos Campesinos Premodernos En Japón," in *Movimientos Campesinos En La Formación Del Japón Moderno*, 1st ed., vol. 4 (Colegio de Mexico, 1976), 45–68, Note the uptick in protests around 1600, during the land surveys.

process was variable and often ineffective. Violence persisted in the countryside; Bix notes thousands of peasant uprisings between 1590 and 1871.<sup>70</sup> Tanaka records the steady increase in uprisings from 1590 to the end of the Meiji period, seen in figure 5.<sup>71</sup> According to Aoki Koji's compendium of peasant uprisings, a large proportion of these uprisings were in response to the cadastral land surveys, suggesting that this was the policy with the greatest effect on the peasant status group rather than the arms ban, as mentioned earlier. Comparable to the riots in response to the enclosure movement in sixteenth century England, these uprisings can therefore be considered social in nature, rather than political.<sup>72</sup> If *ikki* are social instead of political, then the shogunate's claim of a Great Peace that allowed a relatively stable government was able to emerge from the ashes of the Warring States Period might be true. However, that would deny the hundreds of uprisings that occurred throughout the country even in this so-called time of peace.

<sup>70</sup> Herbert P Bix, *Peasant Protest in Japan, 1590-1884* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. P., 1992), pg. xxi.

<sup>71</sup> Michiko Tanaka, "Movimientos Campesinos Premodernos en Japón," in *Movimientos Campesinos en la Formación del Japón Moderno*, 1st ed., vol. 4 (Colegio de Mexico, 1976), 45–68.

<sup>72</sup> Roger Burrow Manning, *Village Revolts: Social Protest and Popular Disturbances in England, 1509-1640* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988).

Stephen Turnbull points out that what is missing from all the impressive scholarship about Hideyoshi's policies "is much recognition of the opposition these measures provoked".<sup>73</sup> Aoki delimits at least eight different forms of peasant uprising (*ikki*), only one of them violent by nature. Continuing from Aoki's work, Bix notes 3,001 peasant uprisings that occurred between 1590 and 1857, using Yokoyama's work to further differentiate these by their social ramifications.<sup>74</sup> The most common protests were legal forms of appeal, including petitions for mercy (*shūso*), unrest (*fuon*) and disturbance (*sōdō*). While these were not uncommon in the late sixteenth century and early seventeenth century, the number of legal appeals drastically increased by the late stages of the Tokugawa era. Next, were illegal forms of appeal, such as flight or desertion (*chōsan*), forceful appeals (*gōso*) and riots (*bōdō*). Finally, there were confrontations using force that made up over sixteen percent of all forms of protests and included house-breaking (*uchikowashi*) and revolts (*hōki*). Yokoyama identified seventy-eight revolts in these two centuries of peace, roughly a third of which occurred in the first fifty years of unification, when peasants were said to have first been disarmed.<sup>75</sup>

As previously mentioned, the land surveys were especially provocative for peasants and the tax system Hideyoshi created would become one of the greatest problems in Japan during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Yoshida Disturbance, also known as the Yoshida Clan Paper Disturbance, was the largest revolt in the Yoshida fiefdom, involving some 9,600 people in 83 villages. In 1793, farmers who could no longer bear the burden of the Yoshida domain's paper monopoly and heavy taxes gathered at Yawatagawara in the neighboring domain of Uwajima Castle. When the response from the clan was not at all receptive to the

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<sup>73</sup> Stephen Turnbull, "The Ghosts of Amakusa: Localised Opposition to Centralised Control in Higo Province, 1589–1590," *Japan Forum* 25, no. 2 (June 2013): 191–211, 192.

<sup>74</sup> Herbert P Bix, *Peasant Protest in Japan, 1590-1884* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. P., 1992), pg. xxi.

<sup>75</sup> Toshio Yokoyama, *Hyakusho Ikki to Gimin Densho* (Higashimurayama]; Tokyo: Kyoikusha ; Hanbai Kyoikusha Shuppan Sabisu, 1985).

farmers' demands the outraged farmers resorted to forceful action. On the night of February 9, farmers from Takanoko Village<sup>76</sup> (now Shirokawa Town, Higashiuwa County) and Nobukawa Village (now Hiromi Town, Kitauwa County), gathered at Togigamori in Nobukawa Village. They began firing guns and blowing shells at noon on the following day, forcibly making their way up the Hiromi River to Ogura Village (now Hiromi Town). The situation was immediately reported to the Yoshida Clan Office, and Shigemon Yokota, a deputy magistrate, and others went to Ogura Village to negotiate with the villagers; several peasants were arrested. The farmers were dissatisfied with the arrests and rebelled, so Yokota and his group hid at the Iwatani village headman's house and escaped to Deme Village (now Hiromi Town) via a back road.

The peasants quickly doubled in number. By February 13th, a group 9,600 strong had invaded Yawatagawara, Uwajima Territory (present-day Uwajima City). In the face of such a violent, armed mob, the Uwajima yielded, even offering temporary shelter and provisions for those among the agitators who wanted to return to their villages. However, the peasants refused the conditions the Uwajima officials and held their ground, still ready for violence. Gidayu Ando, an official from Yoshida domain where the protest had originated, had initially tried to speak in favor of the peasants. When he heard that no progress had been made, he rushed to Uwajima on the night of the thirteenth, prepared to die to resolve the case. He committed ritual suicide (*seppuku*) the afternoon of the fourteenth, on the protesters' behalf. Gidayu's death had a strong influence on the revolvers. Negotiations between the Yoshida clan and the revolvers made rapid progress, and on the 15th, the clan accepted the eleven petitions submitted by the peasants, and the peasants left Yawatagawara on the 16th after the Yoshida clan accepted all the petitions.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Although some inscriptions say that Takanoko Village did not participate.

<sup>77</sup> “Ehimekenshi Kindai Ue 愛媛県史近世上,” *Ehime no Kioku えひめの記憶*, n.d., <https://www.i-manabi.jp/system/regionals/regionals/ecode:3/40/view/11586?keyword=%E5%88%80%E7%8B%A9>.

The Yoshida Clan Paper Disturbance took place nearly two hundred years after Hideyoshi first issued his edict. The ban on weapons was still in place, and the Tokugawa shogunate had repeatedly revised and reissued the same law. Nonetheless, the peasants of Yoshida and Uwajima were armed, carrying firearms to protest their increased taxes. It should go without saying that Hideyoshi was most intent on policing firearms, as he and the other unifiers had made efficient use of the imported and improved weapons during the Warring States period; during the Tokugawa period, gunpowder could only be produced in one place, Nagahama—nearly 500 kilometers from Yoshida. The disturbance shows that not only did commoners still possess firearms, but peasants were still using violence as a means to an end.

The Yoshida Clan Paper Disturbance demonstrates that violence persisted even during the Great Peace. The Great Peace, then, seems to refer exclusively to the elite. There was no surface level violence, no macroviolence, that would be visible to the shogun. The surface level peace allowed the shogun and his court to claim the Great Peace almost as a form of propaganda; it was, in a sense, another way of performing the Great Peace. Roberts' book *Performing the Great Peace* offers a look at the cultural logic behind Tokugawa politics, explaining why there are so many seeming contradictions in what was said and what actually happened—with no one batting an eye.

### ***The Point of Performance***

Roberts opens his book with an anecdote about a Miyake lord on his deathbed, with no official heir decided. In order for an heir to be officiated, a ritualized ceremony was required, attended by officials from the shogunate. Roberts cites a letter that explains that this ceremony was adequately played out and met all the requirements; the designated heir was official and could not be disputed. According to the letter, immediately after the ceremony was completed, the lord passed away in his bed, his mission fulfilled. However, that very same letter states that the lord had actually died *55 days earlier*, well before the ceremony and the heir had been

officialized. And yet, this discrepancy seemed to cause no concern. It was as if both dates were accepted as truth.<sup>78</sup>

Roberts continues to explain the shogunal logic behind such a Schrodingerian paradox: it was a matter of performance. The truth that the outside (*omote*) saw and that the inside (*uchi*) were presented with could be entirely different, yet both accepted as fact, as long as it fit the larger narrative being told. This offers one explanation for the lack of evidence of the sword hunt actually being played out. According to Roberts, “Behavior in *omote* situations and behavior in *uchi* spaces often contradicted each other. A lord might profess total compliance with an order from the Tokugawa government and yet ignore it back in his realm.”<sup>79</sup> In other words, the performance of subservience in a ‘public’ space (i.e. at court in Edo) was enough for the shogunate to be satisfied with a lord’s loyalty and give them space to operate independently in their home territory. Furthermore, as Howell posits, “regulations on practices like sword bearing took account of the situational nature of status relations”.<sup>80</sup> For example, “outcaste leaders in the Kanto sometimes wore swords when visiting the homes of commoner village officials at New Year’s. By going to the commoners’ homes, they recognized the officials’ superior social standing, but their sword bearing simultaneously served to assert their standing as leaders of their own communities”<sup>81</sup>. Similarly, headmen of commoner villagers might wear swords when appearing before samurai on official business, or something as simple as the special permission commoners had to wear swords for self-defense while traveling. Ultimately, Hideyoshi’s regulations created a social framework that established certain expectations in given scenarios

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<sup>78</sup> Luke S. Roberts, *Performing the Great Peace: Political Space and Open Secrets in Tokugawa Japan*, 0 edition (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2012).

<sup>79</sup> Luke S. Roberts, *Performing the Great Peace: Political Space and Open Secrets in Tokugawa Japan*, 0 edition (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2012), pg. 7.

<sup>80</sup> David L. Howell, *Geographies of Identity in Nineteenth-Century Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pg. 137.

<sup>81</sup> David L. Howell, *Geographies of Identity in Nineteenth-Century Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pg. 137.

dependent on the status of the people involved. It created a level of mutual understanding that meant the government could operate under a broad umbrella of peace and stability, even if there was occasional disruption at the bottom.

Rather than a means of actively monopolizing violence, the shogunate used the concept of the Great Peace to legitimize their power— suggesting that they were the ones who put an end to a century of war and the country should be thankful for this, respecting the bakufu as the creators of the Great Peace and justifying the state’s rule. However, the purpose of the sword hunt was neither to construct a Great Buddha nor was it to completely disarm the peasants. Instead, the Peace Policies lent credence to a situational hierarchy with an ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. The sword hunt was not a military endeavor, but a culturally political one. Because they were able to maintain the appearance of samurai monopoly of violence by keeping the peace at the upper, most visible level of society, the Tokugawa shogunate used the slogan of Great Peace for decades, the phrase appearing atlases, edicts, and histories of the time period.<sup>82</sup> By maintaining their own violence on a smaller, local level, peasants kept hold of the threat of mass violence to be deployed when necessary, as seen in the Yoshida Clan Paper Disturbance. For all intents and purposes, peace became another status symbol for samurai to display for all to see by virtue of their status groups; other groups came to admire and adopt the same status symbols, such as rich merchants carrying increasingly ornamental swords as accessories to prove their wealth. The purpose of the sword hunt was as intangible as it was effective. Based on the number weapons that remained in the hands of peasants, the steady increase in the appearance of *ikki*, and the few records of swords actually being collected, it appears no great effort went into physically removing swords from the reach of peasants. Nonetheless, the edict was effective. Swords became another part of the costume of performance, added and removed depending on

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<sup>82</sup> Michael Wert, “Necrology of Angels: Violence in Japanese History as a Lens of Critique,” in *The Darker Angels of Our Nature: Refuting the Pinker Theory of History and Violence* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 176–96.

the “situational nature of status relations” and relative rank based on the current location.<sup>83</sup> Maintaining the face of peace was a large factor of the enduring nature of the Tokugawa shogunate. It is difficult to say whether or not this was Hideyoshi’s intent when first issuing the sword hunt edict in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, but the symbolic essence of the edict had a lasting impact on early modern Japanese history.

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<sup>83</sup> David L. Howell, *Geographies of Identity in Nineteenth-Century Japan* (Berkeley, UNITED STATES: University of California Press, 2005), pg. 137

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