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*Foundations for Modernity:
The Impact of the Battle of Sekigahara (1600)
and Tokugawa Ieyasu on Japan*

ABSTRACT: This article analyzes the impact of Tokugawa Ieyasu's victory at the Battle of Sekigahara (1600) on the history of Japan. On the basis of Tokugawa-era primary sources, including government regulations, financial documents, philosophical and moralist texts, cultural observations, memoirs, and diaries, the author argues that the Battle of Sekigahara led to the creation of the Tokugawa shogunate, which set the stage for modern Japan during its years of relative isolation by fostering proto-nationalism, modernization, and demobilization.

KEYWORDS: early modern history; modern history; Japan; Battle of Sekigahara (1600); Tokugawa Ieyasu; Meiji Restoration; proto-nationalism; modernization; demobilization

Introduction

At the height of the Battle of Sekigahara (1600), seventeen-year-old Kobayakawa Hideaki ordered his men to change sides and spurred the forces of Tokugawa Ieyasu on to victory, ending a time of civil war in Japan.¹ The influence of this battle on the creation of modern Japan extends beyond the Tokugawa era (1603-1868), *sakoku* ("closed country," 1633-1853),² and the Meiji Restoration (1868) into the twentieth century. A turning point in history, the Battle of Sekigahara directly impacted the world stage by adding Japan to it as a powerful nation.

In Japan, the "Warring States Period," the *sengoku* era, lasted from the mid 1500s until 1600, an era full of battling *samurai* (professional warrior) clans, as the Emperor lost power and various *daimyo* (fief holders and warlords of their own domains called *han*) fought to become *shogun* (feudal military leader).³ The *bakufu* (tent or military government) served as the *shogun's* base of operations. In the late 1500s, Oda Nobunaga (1532-1582) began the process of unifying the

¹ Paul K. Davis, *100 Decisive Battles: From Ancient Times to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 206; Stephen Turnbull, "Sekigahara, Battle of (1600)," in *The Oxford Companion to Military History*, ed. Richard Holmes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 116; Martin J. Dougherty, *100 Battles: Decisive Conflicts That Have Shaped the World* (London: Parragon, 2012), 77; Mikiso Hane and Louis G. Perez, *Premodern Japan: A Historical Survey*, 2nd ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2015), 181.

² *Sakoku* refers to the period during which Japan closed its borders to foreign commerce and interaction. The government evicted all foreigners and priests, except for the Dutch who were permitted the use of Nagasaki as a trading port. For Japanese terminology used in this article and exact translations, see David J. Lu, ed., *Japan, A Documentary History: The Dawn of History to the Late Tokugawa Period* (New York: Routledge, 2015; first published 1997), iii; see also David J. Lu, ed., *Japan, A Documentary History: The Late Tokugawa Period to the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2015; first published 1997), iii.

³ For a list of shoguns, see Hane and Perez, *Premodern Japan*, 325-326. For a chronology of the Warring States Era, see Lu, *Japan, Documentary History: Dawn*, xii-xiv.

country.⁴ After Nobunaga's death, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598), Nobunaga's most loyal vassal, took up the reign and united Japan under his rule.⁵ Two years after Toyotomi's death, the *daimyo* split into two factions, the Western and Eastern forces. The Western forces, led by Ishida Mitsunari, supported the young heir, Toyotomi Hideyori (1593-c.1615), and the Eastern forces supported Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542-1616), one of the vassals tasked with watching over the heir.⁶ On October 21, 1600, the Western and Eastern Forces met in the modern-day Gifu Prefecture of Japan at the Battle of Sekigahara in a decisive match to determine the next leader of the newly unified state.⁷ Tokugawa and the Eastern forces' victory led to the creation of the Tokugawa rule over Japan, spanning the next 250 years until the last Tokugawa *shogun* resigned in 1868.⁸

For the *sengoku* and *sakoku* eras, government documents, scholarly essays, and personal journals make up the majority of the primary sources available to us. Unlike earlier eras such as the Nara (710-794) or Heian (794-1185), for which women's personal diaries supply rich information,⁹ sources from the Tokugawa or Edo period (1603-1868) were mostly written by men. Some sources also came from foreigners. One such source supplied information for the next generation of Dutch traders who stayed at Dejima¹⁰ as the only outsiders to interact with Japan during its state as a relatively isolated country.¹¹ A collection of diaries from the Dutch at Dejima between 1700 and 1740, called *The Deshima Diaries*, provides a perspective on Tokugawa Japan from a European merchant viewpoint. Many of the Dutch traders who authored these diaries encountered both the Japanese elite and the everyday Japanese around Dejima. Letters, documents, and census reports reflect the state of post-Sekigahara Japan and provide insight into life under the various Tokugawa *shoguns*.¹² Documents from the *bakufu*, as well as

⁴ Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013; first published 2002), 12-13.

⁵ Edwin O. Reischauer and Albert M. Craig, *Japan: Tradition and Transformation* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1978), 78.

⁶ Hane and Perez, *Premodern Japan*, 179-182.

⁷ Turnbull, "Sekigahara," 116. For a map of the modern-day prefectures of Japan and their traditional names, see Lu, *Japan, Documentary History: Dawn*, xvii-xxi.

⁸ Arthur L. Sadler, *The Maker of Modern Japan: The Life of Tokugawa Ieyasu* (New York: Routledge, 2011; first published 1937), 17-36.

⁹ *The Confessions of Lady Nijo*, trans. Karen Brazell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973), vii-xxvii.

¹⁰ Dejima, also spelled Deshima, was an artificial island created off the coast of Nagasaki Bay where Dutch traders could conduct business without entering or residing in Japan. Nederlandsche Oost-Indische Compagnie [NOIC], *The Deshima Diaries: Marginalia (1700-1740)*, ed. Paul van der Velde and Rudolf Bachofner, (Tokyo: Japan-Netherlands Institute, 1992), xiii-xvi.

¹¹ NOIC, *The Deshima Diaries*, xiv-xviii.

¹² James L. Huffman, *Modern Japan: A History in Documents*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 11-20.

personal journals, also offer perspectives on this time period. Opinion pieces by Confucian scholars advocating for social change became more common in the late 1700s.¹³ Confucian philosophers like Kumazawa Banzan (1619-1691) and Ogyu Sorai (1666-1728) wielded influence during the Tokugawa period when the state was backing Confucianism. The basic beliefs of Confucianism legitimized the *shogunate* (government of the shogun) by encouraging the idea of knowing one's place and justifying class structure.¹⁴

Scholarship on this era includes the works of Mark Ravina, a specialist in modern Japanese history. Ravina's 2016 article "Tokugawa, Romanov, and Khmer" compares Tokugawa rule with the rule of other Asian leaders during the eighteenth century,¹⁵ while his 2017 monograph on the Meiji Restoration explains Japan's role on the world stage.¹⁶ Sarah C. M. Paine's recent work, *The Japanese Empire*, covers Japanese history from the Meiji Restoration until World War II.¹⁷ Historians of the Tokugawa and Meiji eras agree that Tokugawa Ieyasu created the modern state, although there is some debate over how he accomplished this. Another point of agreement among scholars is that, despite the small skirmishes after 1600, the Battle of Sekigahara was the decisive victory Tokugawa Ieyasu needed to consolidate power.¹⁸ Scholars believe Japan's nationalism developed with the restoration of the Emperor,¹⁹ but its formation began under the Tokugawa and evolved to complement the new regime.

Tokugawa Ieyasu's victory at the Battle of Sekigahara served as his gateway to institutionalize the Tokugawa hegemony. While this battle allowed the Tokugawa to become the epitome of the era of *shoguns*, it would eventually lead to the end of the *shogunate* system. Japan underwent social, political, economic, and military change because of the Battle of Sekigahara that would fundamentally alter the state. This article argues that the Battle of Sekigahara led to the creation of the Tokugawa *shogunate*, which set the stage for modern Japan during its years of relative isolation by fostering proto-nationalism, modernization, and demobilization.

¹³ Lu, *Japan, Documentary History: Dawn*, 243-244.

¹⁴ Hane and Perez, *Premodern Japan*, 221.

¹⁵ Mark Ravina, "Tokugawa, Romanov, and Khmer: The Politics of Trade and Diplomacy in Eighteenth-Century East Asia," *Journal of World History* 26, no. 2 (2015): 269-294.

¹⁶ Mark Ravina, *To Stand With the Nations of the World: Japan's Meiji Restoration in World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 207-214.

¹⁷ Sarah C. M. Paine, *The Japanese Empire: Grand Strategy from the Meiji Restoration to the Pacific War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1-8.

¹⁸ To understand the battle itself, a map recreating the battlefield, illustrating battle pathways and tactics, contributes to a better overall picture of the main decisive moment, and can be found in Dougherty, *100 Battles*, 77.

¹⁹ Gordon, *Modern History of Japan*, 135-137.

I. Proto-nationalism

The Battle of Sekigahara created a unique national identity. Isolation from the rest of the world allowed the Japanese to further develop their societal and cultural landscape. A new sense of unity grew amongst the *chonin* (townspeople) and peasants. Under the Tokugawa peace, new forms of art and entertainment surfaced in developing urban areas. *Kabuki* (a form of theater), the tea ceremony, woodblock printing, and puppet shows became commonplace within the cities. While some of the rising forms of art and entertainment that made up the culture of this time had existed before the Tokugawa era, these practices gained widespread acclaim and new heights under the Tokugawa.²⁰

Unity and uniformity were key concerns for the *bakufu*. Following the Tokugawa's rise, Western ideas and Christians became taboo. The *bakufu* advocated for unity by telling the people how to live their lives. Every Japanese citizen had to be affiliated with a Buddhist or Shinto temple, and Christianity was declared illegal.²¹ Governmental regulations were implemented to bring a sense of unity and hierarchy. One set of Tokugawa regulations in 1655 detailed how the familial disputes of peasants, merchants, and city folk would be handled and settled by the *bakufu* and *daimyo*.²² The "Regulations of Villagers" in 1643 outlined the way of life for villagers and prohibited villagers from building houses inconsistent with their station in life, brewing or selling *sake* (rice wine), or dying clothing purple or crimson.²³ These regulations remained in place throughout the Tokugawa era. In the early years, *samurai* and *daimyo* strictly enforced the regulations, but they became relaxed as time went on. Stemming from pre-modern "House Codes," these regulations controlled the population and informally carried over into the Meiji era. "House Codes" had differed from clan to clan during the earlier "Warring States Period." Modeled after the reigning *bakufu* in most cases, "House Codes" were standards of conduct.²⁴ While they had been around for centuries, the Tokugawa regulations achieved their goal of unity by instilling in the lower levels of society a unifying feeling of resentment. For the first time, the *shogunate* exercised authority over each *han*, a

²⁰ Hane and Perez, *Premodern Japan*, 237-243.

²¹ Reischauer and Craig, *Japan*, 89-90; Hane and Perez, *Premodern Japan*, 171-174.

²² "Regulations for the Residents of Edo, 1655," in Lu, *Japan, Documentary History: Dawn*, 215-218.

²³ "Regulations for Villagers, 1643," in Lu, *Japan, Documentary History: Dawn*, 213-215. See also Constantine Nomikos Vaporis, ed., *Voices of Early Modern Japan: Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life during the Age of the Shoguns* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2014; first published 2012), 28-31.

²⁴ Reischauer and Craig, *Japan*, 61. For more information on Edo's laws for the military class, see Reischauer and Craig, *Japan*, 82-84.

system called *baku-han*. Before the creation of the Tokugawa *baku-han*, the various *hans* had remained separate and answered only to their respective *daimyo*.²⁵

In an effort to increase unity and loyalty in order to prevent rebellions, intellectuals supporting the *bakufu* used Confucian philosophies as methods of propaganda. “The Heaven-Appointed Duty of Subjects,” a document from the *Daigaku Wakumon* of Kumazawa Banzan and written between 1686 and 1691, outlined the duty of the Japanese people to revere and aid the *bakufu*. Kumazawa wrote this piece in a question-and-answer format. When asking the question of what the duty of a subject was, he answered, “He should impute goodness to his lord and take mistakes upon his own head. He should not assume authority for himself, but impute all authority to his lord.”²⁶ Kumazawa detailed how he felt the relationship between subject and ruler should work, but his arguments were full of contradictions. First, he advocated for individual responsibility, but in the next sentence he advised to pass all authority on to the leader. Aside from his championing of obedience, Kumazawa also supported the idea of a ruler who would earn the obedience of his people, a Confucian concept known as *jinsei* (benevolent rule). According to the Japanese Confucian philosopher Ito Jinsai (1627-1705), it was the “Heavenly-appointed duty of subjects [...] to help his lord exercise benevolent government (*jinsei*) by obeying the judgment and commands of his lord, or making up for his shortcomings.”²⁷ Such notions regarding obedience toward one’s lord easily transferred over to the Emperor after the Meiji Restoration, yet the idea of *jinsei* would continue to be an ideal.

While the *bakufu* attempted to achieve national unity through policies, the people in cities came together naturally as different forms of art gained popularity and a type of popular culture emerged. The growing population of the *chonin* allowed the arts to flourish with the creation of pleasure quarters in the cities. One of these art forms was the “tea ceremony,” detailed, for example, in the recollections of Chikamatsu Shigenori (1695-1778) about the tea room, as well as viewing and participating in a tea ceremony.²⁸ Pulling from aspects of Zen Buddhism, tea ceremonies offered a ritualistic, calming atmosphere that even the *samurai* favored.²⁹ Entertainment became an important aspect of society within cities, so much so that areas of the larger cities were designated solely for such purposes and referred to as pleasure, amusement, or entertainment quarters, thus turning into the main cultural hubs.³⁰ The entertainment quarters in Edo (renamed Tokyo in 1868) were particularly famous and known as the

²⁵ Lu, *Japan, Documentary History: Dawn*, 204-205.

²⁶ “Heaven-Appointed Duty of Subjects,” in Lu, *Japan, Documentary History: Dawn*, 248-251.

²⁷ “Ito Jinsai’s Daily Observance,” in Lu, *Japan, Documentary History: Dawn*, 249.

²⁸ “The Tea Ceremony,” in Vaporis, *Voices of Early Modern Japan*, 173-175.

²⁹ Hane and Perez, *Premodern Japan*, 141-142.

³⁰ Gordon, *Modern History of Japan*, 38-39.

Yoshiwara District.³¹ Since this area was intended for the amusement of the *chonin*, *samurai* were not allowed there, but they nonetheless regularly infiltrated the premises to enjoy the various forms of entertainment on display.³² The upper class favored *no* drama (a form of theater featuring masks), while the *chonin* preferred *kabuki* plays and puppet shows with *yoruri* (small, hand-controlled puppets) and *bunraku* (puppets two-thirds the size of humans).³³

Tokugawa and Meiji historians consider Japanese nationalism a phenomenon that occurred after the Meiji Restoration. When they examine the *hans* and *daimyo* within the centralized *bakufu*, the semi-autonomous status of the various domains seems to suggest that the Tokugawa era lacked national unity.³⁴ Thus, scholars believe that the newly empowered Emperor of the Meiji period brought the Japanese people together and instilled a sense of unity that had been lacking during the earlier feudal period.³⁵ Admittedly, nationalism evolved and changed to fit the new Meiji state, but proto-nationalism did exist during the Tokugawa era in the form of Japanese culture. Entertainment and art brought the people together and thus contributed significantly to their collective identity.

A unique national identity replaced the warring clans who had only been loyal to the *daimyo*. Government policies aided in this transition, but the urban population was the driving force. By the mid 1700s, pleasure quarters in larger cities became so popular that the *bakufu* had them moved to the outskirts.³⁶ Pleasure quarters drew all walks of life: city dwellers, merchants, nobles, and *samurai* traveled to the edges of cities to see a play, shop, or indulge at a bar or restaurant. And cultural ideas, like the tea ceremony or *kabuki*, have prevailed until the present day.

II. Modernization

The Battle of Sekigahara created a governing body that provided all the tools needed to modernize. Tokugawa Ieyasu developed methods of quelling insurrections before they could begin. Unwittingly, these policies established the means to modernize, which the instigators of the Meiji Restoration, the *tozama* clans (outsider *daimyo* who had been on the losing side at the Battle of Sekigahara), would later use to their advantage. During this time of relative rather than complete isolation (due to trade with the Dutch and interaction with foreign fishermen in the Sea of Japan), the elite of the Tokugawa era knew of the

³¹ Gordon, *Modern History of Japan*, 18.

³² Reischauer and Craig, *Japan*, 105.

³³ Reischauer and Craig, *Japan*, 107-109; Hane and Perez, *Premodern Japan*, 145.

³⁴ Mark Ravina, "State-Building and Political Economy in Early-modern Japan," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 54, no. 4 (1995): 997-1022.

³⁵ Gordon, *Modern History of Japan*, 68-69.

³⁶ Gordon, *Modern History of Japan*, 18.

outside world's happenings.³⁷ And, as will be shown below, *sankin kotai* (alternate attendance, requiring the *daimyo* to reside at the Tokugawa court every other year) ultimately led to an improved infrastructure and a money economy.

Rangaku (Dutch learning) was a common practice of the Tokugawa era; it entailed studying texts from the Dutch to be educated in Western knowledge.³⁸ The scholar Sugita Gempaku (1733-1817), who trained in medicine and specialized in surgery, wrote a memoir in 1815 that explains when his interest in the field had first started. Sugita reminisced about his pursuit of knowledge with friends regarding *rangaku* by asking each other questions:

If we can directly understand books written by them, we will benefit greatly. However, it is pitiful that there has been no one who has set his mind on working in this field. Can we somehow blaze this trail? It is impossible to do it in Edo. Perhaps it is best if we ask translators in Nagasaki to make some translations. If one book can be completely translated, there will be an immeasurable benefit to the country.³⁹

Sugita's recollections demonstrate how young people viewed and participated in *rangaku*. Since not all students were learning Dutch, translators were a necessity, yet academics knew the value of learning from the texts and information that the Dutch provided. Dutch merchants brought tradable goods besides books with them. In spite of their relative isolation, educated Japanese learned about science, philosophy, and history from the West. *Rangaku* allowed the elites of the Tokugawa to build an awareness of the rest of world and stay up to date with the newest information.

Government documents and academic testimonials written by Ogyu Sorai (1666-1728) and Mitsui Takafusa (1684-1748), as well as the *Osaka Shogyo Shukanroku* or "Records of Business Practices of Osaka," follow the emergence of a new money economy. Before the practice became inconvenient, the Japanese had used rice as a currency and determinant of wealth. Coin money had existed since the Nara period, but was not widely used.⁴⁰ The amount of rice the land of a *daimyo* produced determined a *daimyo's* status. According to Ogyu Sorai, "[i]n olden days, the countryside had hardly any money and all the purchase was made with rice or barley but not with money."⁴¹ To be considered a *daimyo*, one had to produce ten thousand *koku*, or 51,200 bushels [of rice], each year.⁴²

³⁷ Hane and Perez, *Premodern Japan*, 290.

³⁸ NOIC, *The Deshima Diaries*, xv-xvi.

³⁹ "The Beginning of Dutch Studies in Japan," in Lu, *Japan, Documentary History: Dawn*, 258-266, here 264.

⁴⁰ Hane and Perez, *Premodern Japan*, 137.

⁴¹ "Spread of Money Economy, 1716-1735," in Lu, *Japan, Documentary History: Dawn*, 228-241, here 229.

⁴² Reischauer and Craig, *Japan*, 81; Hane and Perez, *Premodern Japan*, 127-130. For a chart featuring the equivalents of Japanese measurements in the metric and U.S. systems, see Lu, *Japan, Documentary History: Late Tokugawa Period*, i.

Contemporary documents affirm the growth of commerce during the Tokugawa era and the switch to a money economy.⁴³

Following the increase in commerce, the merchant class gained power over the rest of the society. Merchant firms flourished and provided loans, for example the funds to improve Tokugawa society for public works such as schools.⁴⁴ Ogyu explained that, with the new economy, “merchants become masters while samurai are relegated to the position of customers, unable to determine prices fixed on different commodities.”⁴⁵ Traditionally, merchants had been considered lower class due to Confucian beliefs that found money-making distasteful.⁴⁶ Now, as the merchant class rose to power, the *samurai* class declined. Under the Tokugawa, merchants came to dominate Japan’s cultural world.⁴⁷ This rise of commerce would eventually speed up the Meiji agenda, but the lengthy process of change from the *koku* (a measurement of rice) to a money economy was already occurring under the Tokugawa *bakufu*.

After the Battle of Sekigahara, Tokugawa Ieyasu knew he had to keep the *daimyo* in line to prevent a challenge to his rule. One of his solutions was known as *sankin kotai* which required *daimyo* to live in Edo every other year, while the family of the *daimyo* had to stay in Edo full time.⁴⁸ In accordance with this practice, *daimyo* heirs lived their life until they became *daimyo* with little knowledge of the *han* they would soon be expected to oversee. *Daimyo* families passed their titles and positions down through hereditary lineage. Since *Sankin kotai* forced the families of *daimyo*, including the future *daimyo*, to stay in Edo year-round, almost like hostages,⁴⁹ when the title was passed on to the new *daimyo*, the latter became responsible for running a fiefdom that he knew little about and had perhaps only briefly, sometimes never, visited before.⁵⁰

On the other hand, *Sankin kotai* brought about the beginning of public works and infrastructural improvements. From all over Japan, *daimyo* were forced to travel to the capital, meaning new structures were required. The *daimyo* needed roads to travel with their large parties to and from their *han*. Alongside these new roads, hostels and supply stores were built, and new villages arose where before there had only been farmland. Farmers and peasants of *hans* were forced

⁴³ “Growth of Commerce,” in Lu, *Japan, Documentary History: Dawn*, 228-236.

⁴⁴ Huffman, *Modern Japan*, 18.

⁴⁵ “Spread of Money Economy, 1716-1735,” in Lu, *Japan, Documentary History: Dawn*, 228-241, here 229.

⁴⁶ Hane and Perez, *Premodern Japan*, 204.

⁴⁷ Hane and Perez, *Premodern Japan*, 207.

⁴⁸ David B. Carpenter, “Urbanization and Social Change in Japan,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (1960): 155-165, here 158-159. A document with specific instructions for this system can be found in Lu, *Japan, Documentary History: Dawn*, 208.

⁴⁹ Hiroaki Sato, *Legends of the Samurai* (New York: Overlook Duckworth, 1995), xxii.

⁵⁰ Reischauer and Craig, *Japan*, 86.

to comply with these needs. A text by the *daimyo* Matsudaira Sadanobu (1759-1829), "Tax Burdens Suffered by the Farmers" (1781), targeted the burdens put onto the peasants that Matsudaira advocated should change. Matsudaira wrote of the high taxes endured by the farmers that made them fear officials to the point that farmers did anything they could to keep officials happy: "When *corvée* [forced] labor is imposed on them [i.e., farmers], they build highways, bridges, and dikes, and send off travelers."⁵¹ To avoid higher taxes, the peasants built all the infrastructure that the *daimyo* demanded. As a direct result of *sankin kotai*, public works such as roads and bridges were built, which would facilitate further modernization during the Meiji era.

Through policies meant to strengthen the power of the *bakufu*, the Tokugawa laid the foundations of a modern state. The people of the state learned from the West, despite their relative isolation. Instead of exchanging rice, *sankin kotai* forced the *bakufu* to change to a money economy and improve infrastructure, which aided urban development. Years later, after the arrival of Commodore Perry in 1853, when the new Japanese government decided to modernize, they found only few aspects of the economy and country that needed to change.

III. Demobilization

The Battle of Sekigahara created a period of peace that severely weakened the military. The few skirmishes that occurred after the Battle of Sekigahara, such as the Siege of Osaka (1614-1615) and the Shimabara Rebellion (1637-1638), happened before 1700 and caused little trouble for the *bakufu*'s forces.⁵² With the rise of the Tokugawa, demand for *samurai* plummeted. Tokugawa Ieyasu significantly decreased the number of *samurai* and *daimyo* after assuming the position of *shogun*. The majority of former *samurai* were recruited into the bureaucracy. The remaining *samurai* accompanied *daimyo* during *sankin kotai* or stayed behind to watch the *han*. Few *samurai* retained their battle prowess, and even fewer took advantage of their status to become educated. Declining and entitled, the *samurai* were a dying class in Tokugawa society. By the Meiji era, the military knew less about warfare and weaponry than the warlords of Japan's distant past.

The eighteenth-century *Deshima Diaries*, a logbook that follows the daily life of Dutch traders at Dejima, an artificial island off the coast of Nagasaki, contain a diary kept by the *opperhoofd* (Dutch for "chief trade officer") Ferdinand de Groot. The diaries follow the Dutch's daily interaction with the Japanese, Chinese, and Korean merchants, and their fellow Dutch traders. De Groot's diary chronicles three years of his time at Dejima. Unlike his fellow traders' diaries, his involves more of his interaction with the Japanese than his livelihood. In April 1705, De

⁵¹ "Tax Burdens Suffered by the Farmers, 1781," in Lu, *Japan, Documentary History: Late Tokugawa Period*, 279-280.

⁵² Hane and Perez, *Premodern Japan*, 290-293.

Groot recorded a fight he had witnessed between two Japanese men: “The clerk, Moeimon, tried to intervene but he was trampled underfoot, so one of the *stadsbongioisen* [Japanese town commanders/officers/*samurai*] tried to frighten them by pulling out his sword. However, suddenly the sword slipped from the scabbard and others had to hold the *stadsbongiois* back who would have surely attacked the fighters. As a result, the *norimon* [Japanese palanquin] carrier of the *opperbongiois* [Japanese senior commander/official] has been dismissed.”⁵³ The scene De Groot depicted showcased the *samurai*’s loss of their warrior status. Any *samurai* prior to 1600 knew that control over their movements and *katana* (the traditional samurai sword) meant the difference between life or death in any dangerous situation. After his embarrassment, another *samurai* kept the first from attacking. During the “Warring States Period,” any offense by the lower classes to a *samurai* would have resulted in death or heavy punishment.⁵⁴ By the time of De Groot’s memory, the *samurai* had lost their revered status to the point at which they were unable to stop a simple street fight between *chonin*.

Samurai relied on their lord to pay their stipend and lacked other formal sources of income.⁵⁵ In a text written in 1796, the academic Takano Tsunemichi (1729-1815) mentioned *samurai* bowing and kneeling to merchants and peasants as they engaged in handicraft to sell their wares because of inadequate income from the *daimyo*. Takano made the analogy that “the *samurai* spirit is constantly on a downward trend, as if pushing a cart downhill.”⁵⁶ A once prominent and privileged social class declined as the era progressed because of impoverished *daimyo*. Debts increased amongst the *daimyo* and *samurai* because, despite their reduced wealth, they were unable to adopt a different lifestyle. Furthermore, as the *samurai* spirit declined, it faced corruption. In 1855, Fujimori Taiga (1799-1862) wrote that *sankin kotai*, which allowed *han samurai* to live in Edo, led to *han samurai* discovering bad habits, indulging in debauchery, and living frivolously rather than becoming literate.⁵⁷ By 1800, warriors were no longer needed within the *bakufu*, which further eroded the self-respect of the remaining *samurai*.⁵⁸

In 1853, the *daimyo* Tokugawa Nariaki (1800-1860) wrote a resolution for the arrival of U.S. Navy Commodore Matthew C. Perry to aid the *bakufu* in their decision over whether or not the country should be opened. Nariaki’s response to the crisis addressed Japan’s policies regarding coastal defense and advocated for the policy of *joi* (“expelling the barbarians”). Nariaki recalled Japan’s former

⁵³ NOIC, *The Deshima Diaries*, 64. For an explanation of Dutch words and a glossary, see NOIC, *The Deshima Diaries*, xii-xiv, 561-569.

⁵⁴ Reischauer and Craig, *Japan*, 49.

⁵⁵ Gordon, *Modern History of Japan*, 30.

⁵⁶ “Decline in Samurai Morale, 1796,” in Lu, *Japan, Documentary History: Late Tokugawa Period*, 277.

⁵⁷ “Corruption of Samurai, 1855,” Lu, *Japan, Documentary History: Late Tokugawa Period*, 276.

⁵⁸ Lu, *Japan, Documentary History: Late Tokugawa Period*, 274-275.

military prowess from 1200 to 1600. In his first reason for refusing a policy of peace, Nariaki adamantly claimed that “foreigners both fear and respect us” because of Japan’s past military achievements, ranging from the conquest of Korea in ancient times, the repelling the Mongols in the thirteenth century, and the invasion of Korea in the sixteenth century, to the suppression of Christianity from 1596 to 1644.⁵⁹ By listing military feats that had largely been accomplished before the establishment of *sakoku*, Nariaki implicitly acknowledged that for the past two (Tokugawa) centuries, Japan’s military had not really engaged in any acts of valor to recommend them.

Scholars agree that the poor military of the Tokugawa at the time Commodore Perry arrived aided the United States in achieving their goal to reopen of Japan for the purpose of trade and port access to resupply. The majority acknowledges the link between the demilitarized state and the acceptance of the “Unequal Treaties,” but not all connect this to the modern state.⁶⁰ The “Unequal Treaties” were a set of seventeen treaties that Japan signed with foreign powers following the reopening of the country that shifted the balance of power heavily in favor of the Europeans. The first treaty that set the tone for the rest of the “Unequal Treaties” was the Treaty of Shimoda with the United States (1858).⁶¹ Japan only managed to modernize after the Tokugawa had resigned their power to the instigators of the Meiji Restoration and the *sonno joi* (“revere the Emperor and expel the barbarians”) movement.

The *samurai*, the great warriors who had prepared for each battle to be their last, had become politicians or peasants. Few *samurai* still carried *katana* and believed in *bushido* (“the way of the warrior”), while the rest waited for their next stipend and for orders from the *daimyo* or *bakufu*.⁶² Demobilization drove the Japanese into a corner when, in 1853, Commodore Perry arrived with a fleet of U.S. Navy ships and an ultimatum from U.S. President Filmore regarding the opening of the country.

Conclusion

The decisive victory at Sekigahara in 1600 allowed Tokugawa Ieyasu, albeit inadvertently, to set the stage for modern Japan. Governmental policies meant to maintain the state’s stability laid the foundations for modernity, the political evolution that the *bakufu* had intended to stifle by enacting the policy of *sakoku*. Under the Tokugawa *shogunate* the emergence of proto-nationalism, modernization, and demobilization paved the way for the rapid modernization of the Meiji era.

⁵⁹ “Tokugawa Nariaki to Bakufu, 14 August 1853,” in Lu, *Japan, Documentary History: Late Tokugawa Period*, 282-286.

⁶⁰ Ravina, “State-Building and Political Economy,” 999-1004.

⁶¹ Gordon, *Modern History of Japan*, 50-51.

⁶² Sadler, *Maker of Modern Japan*, 389.

The descendants of those who had fought against the Tokugawa at the Battle of Sekigahara, the *tozama*, had to bide their time for 250 years. Incensed by their helplessness at the arrival of Commodore Perry in 1853, the Japanese began a campaign for rapid militarization and industrialization. Elites from the *tozama* clans, specifically the Choshu, Satsuma, Tosa, and Hizen clans, instigated the beginning of the Meiji era through a “revolution from above.”⁶³ During the reign of Emperor Meiji (r. 1867-1912), the *genro* (oligarchs/elder statesmen functioning as the emperor’s advisors) used rapid modernization and westernization to create the Japanese Empire of the World War II-era.

Following the Meiji restoration (1868), Japan entered the world stage as a prominent player during World War I and later became a charter member of the League of Nations (1920). Brief international confrontations and naval successes against Russia and China bolstered the Japanese morale on the journey to gain further global recognition. The Japanese Empire subsequently conquered and annexed the surrounding areas, including Korea, parts of China, and the Kurile islands. Thus, not only did the Battle of Sekigahara impact the future of Japan, but that of the entire Asian continent.

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⁶³ Mark Ravina, *The Last Samurai: The Life and Battles of Saigo Takamori* (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2004), 151-159.