

The Seclusion of Japan

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32 - Tokugawa Iemitsu, "CLOSED COUNTRY EDICT OF 1635" AND
"EXCLUSION OF THE PORTUGUESE, 1639"[Home](#)[Syllabus](#)[Primary Readings](#)

For nearly a century Japan, with approximately 500,000 Catholics by the early 1600s, was the most spectacular success story in Asia for European missionaries. Why did so many convert? Some undoubtedly were attracted by the Christian message of salvation, but others hoped to gain economic or political advantage. The daimyo of Omura seems to have converted in the hope of attracting more trade to his port city of Nagasaki, and Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582) the general who unified approximately half of Japan, encouraged Christian missionaries to undermine the political influence of the powerful and wealthy Buddhist monasteries. Nobunaga's tolerance of missionary activity was the main reason for the many converts in the region around Kyoto, Japan's imperial city.

Although the dynamics of Japanese politics at first favored the European missionary effort, when those dynamics changed, Christianity was persecuted and finally crushed. Nobunaga's successor, Hideyoshi (1536-1598), launched the antiforeign, anti-Christian policy that culminated in the Tokugawa exclusion edicts. Hideyoshi distrusted Europeans' motives after the Spaniards conquered the Philippines and came to question the loyalty of certain daimyo who had converted. In 1597 he ordered the execution by crucifixion of nine Catholic missionaries and seventeen Japanese converts. In their singleminded pursuit of stability and order, the early Tokugawa also feared the subversive potential of Christianity and quickly moved to obliterate it, even at the expense of isolating Japan and ending a century of promising commercial contacts with China, Southeast Asia, and Europe.

Japan's isolation policy was fully implemented by Tokugawa Iemitsu, the grandson of Ieyasu and shogun from 1623 to 1641. He issued edicts that essentially closed Japan to all foreigners and prevented Japanese from leaving. The first of the following two documents, the most famous of Iemitsu's edicts, is directed to the two commissioners of Nagasaki, a port city in southern Japan and a center of Christianity; the second deals with the continuing missionary efforts of Portuguese Jesuits, who refused to abandon their activities despite the regime's persecution.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. According to the edict of 1635, what steps are to be taken to suppress Christianity?
2. How are commercial dealings with foreigners to be handled before they are ended altogether?
3. In what ways did the 1635 edict affect the shogun's Japanese subjects?
4. Does trade or Christianity seem to have been the greater threat to Japan, according to the 1635 edict?
5. What were the reasons for the promulgation of the 1639 edict? How did it differ from the 1635 edict?

CLOSED COUNTRY EDICT OF 1635

1. Japanese ships are strictly forbidden to leave for foreign countries.
2. No Japanese is permitted to go abroad. If there is anyone who attempts to do so secretly, he must be executed. The ship so involved must be impounded and its owner arrested, and the matter must be reported to the higher authority.
3. If any Japanese returns from overseas after residing there, he must be put to death.
4. If there is any place where the teachings of the [Catholic] priests is practiced, the two of you must order a thorough investigation.
5. Any informer revealing the whereabouts of the followers of the priests must be rewarded accordingly. If anyone reveals the whereabouts of a high ranking priest, he must be given one hundred pieces of silver. For those of lower ranks, depending on the deed, the reward must be set accordingly.
6. If a foreign ship has an objection (to the measures adopted) and it becomes necessary to report the matter to Edo,¹ you may ask the Omura² domain to provide ships to guard the foreign ship. . . .
7. If there are any Southern Barbarians³ who propagate the teachings of the priests, or otherwise commit crimes, they may be incarcerated in the prison. . . .
8. All incoming ships must be carefully searched for the followers of the priests.

¹ Modern Tokyo, the seat of the Tokugawa government.

² The area around the city of Nagasaki.

3 Westerners.

9. No single trading city shall be permitted to purchase all the merchandise brought by foreign ships.

10. Samurai⁴ are not permitted to purchase any goods originating from foreign ships directly from Chinese merchants in Nagasaki.

11. After a list of merchandise brought by foreign ships is sent to Edo, as before you may order that commercial dealings may take place without waiting for a reply from Edo.

12. After settling the price, all white yarns⁵ brought by foreign ships shall be allocated to the five trading cities⁶ and other quarters as stipulated.

13. After settling the price of white yarns, other merchandise [brought by foreign ships] may be traded freely between the [licensed] dealers. However, in view of the fact that Chinese ships are small and cannot bring large consignments, you may issue orders of sale at your discretion. Additionally, payment for goods purchased must be made within twenty days after the price is set.

14. The date of departure homeward of foreign ships shall not be later than the twentieth day of the ninth month. Any ships arriving in Japan later than usual shall depart within fifty days of their arrival. As to the departure of Chinese ships, you may use your discretion to order their departure after the departure of the Portuguese *galeota*.⁷

4 Members of Japan's military aristocracy.

5 Raw silk.

6 The cities of Kyoto, Edo, Osaka, Sakai, and Nagasaki.

15. The goods brought by foreign ships which remained unsold may not be deposited or accepted for deposit.

16. The arrival in Nagasaki of representatives of the five trading cities shall not be later than the fifth day of the seventh month. Anyone arriving later than that date shall lose the quota assigned to his city.

17. Ships arriving in Hirado⁸ must sell their raw silk at the price set in Nagasaki, and are not permitted to engage in business transactions until after the price is established in Nagasaki.

You are hereby required to act in accordance with the Provisions set above. It is so ordered.

7 A galleon, an oceangoing Portuguese ship.

8 A small island in southwest Japan, not far from Nagasaki.

EXCLUSION OF THE PORTUGUESE, 1639

1. The matter relating to the proscription of Christianity is known [to the Portuguese]. However, heretofore they have secretly transported those who are going to propagate that religion.

2. If those who believe in that religion band together in an attempt to do evil things, they must be subjected to punishment.

3. While those who believe in the preaching of the priests are in hiding, there are incidents in which that country [Portugal] has sent gifts to them for their sustenance.

In view of the above, hereafter entry by the Portuguese *galeota* is forbidden. If they insist on coming [to Japan], the ships must be destroyed and anyone aboard those ships must be beheaded. We have received the above order and are thus transmitting it to you accordingly.

The above concerns our disposition with regard to the *galeota*.

Memorandum

With regard to those who believe in Christianity, you are aware that there is a proscription, and thus knowing, you are not permitted to let priests and those who believe in their preaching to come aboard your ships. If there is any violation, all of you who are aboard will be considered culpable. If there is anyone who hides the fact that he is a Christian and boards your ship, you may report it to us. A substantial reward will be given to you for this information.

This memorandum is to be given to those who come on Chinese ships. [A similar note to the Dutch ships.]