

THE EDICTS OF TOYOTOMI HIDEYOSHI:
EXCERPTS FROM COLLECTION OF SWORDS, 1588

Introduction

The unification of Japan and the creation of a lasting national polity in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries required more than just military exploits. Japan's "three unifiers," especially Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598) and Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616), enacted a series of social, economic, and political reforms in order to pacify a population long accustomed to war and instability and create the institutions necessary for lasting central rule. Although Hideyoshi and Ieyasu placed first priority on domestic affairs — especially on establishing authority over domain lords, warriors, and agricultural villages — they also dictated sweeping changes in Japan's international relations.

In 1588, in what has come to be known as the "sword hunt," Hideyoshi decreed that farmers should be disarmed, essentially guaranteeing the samurai elite a monopoly on the instruments of violence.

Selected Document Excerpts with Questions

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**The Edicts of Toyotomi Hideyoshi:
Excerpts from Collection of Swords, 1588**

(a) The Edict:

1. Farmers of all provinces are strictly forbidden to have in their possession any swords, short swords, bows, spears, firearms, or other types of weapons. If unnecessary implements of war are kept, the collection of annual rent (*nengu*) may become more difficult, and without provocation uprisings can be fomented. Therefore, those who perpetrate improper acts against samurai who receive a grant of land (*kyūnin*) must be brought to trial and punished. However, in that event, their wet and dry fields will remain unattended, and the samurai will lose their rights (*chigyō*) to the yields from the fields. Therefore, the heads of the provinces, samurai who receive a grant of land, and deputies must collect all the weapons described above and submit them to Hideyoshi's government.

2. The swords and short swords collected in the above manner will not be wasted. They will be used as nails and bolts in the construction of the Great Image of Buddha. In this way, farmers will benefit not only in this life but also in the lives to come.

**Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on
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3. If farmers possess only agricultural implements and devote themselves exclusively to cultivating the fields, they and their descendants will prosper. This compassionate concern for the well-being of the farms is the reason for the issuance of this edict, and such a concern is the foundation for the peace and security of the country and the joy and happiness of all the people.

...

All the implements cited above shall be collected and submitted forthwith.

*Vermillion seal of Hideyoshi
Sixteenth year of Tenshō [1588], seventh month, 8th day*

(b) Commentary

All the swords possessed by farmers in this country have been collected for the ostensible purpose of making nails for the erecting of the Great Image of Buddha. ... But truthfully, this is a measure specifically adopted to prevent occurrence of peasant uprisings (*ikki*). Indeed various motivations are behind this.

Questions:

1. What reasons does the edict give for the collection of all weapons from farmers?
2. How do you think you would have reacted to this as a farmer at the time?
3. Why does Hideyoshi promise that the collected swords will be used to construct the Great Image of Buddha?
4. What do you think Hideyoshi's motivations were in decreeing this disarmament of the farmers?