The Great Peace of Tokugawa
Japan, 1603-1868

Summary of Event
During the sixteenth century, Japan was a feudal state. Prior to 1570, local conflicts among the powerful feudal lords known as daimyo were frequent as clans and fiefdoms waged war throughout the country. As a result, Japan's shoguns were unable to exercise absolute control over the daimyo. At the time, Buddhism also played an important role in Japanese politics as well-fortified, organized monasteries threw their support behind local leaders. The power of the monasteries waned between 1570 and 1580, paving the way for Toyotomi Hideyoshi to unify Japan under his rule in 1590. Toyotomi marked strict geographic boundaries between all feudal fiefs. In 1603, Tokugawa Ieyasu succeeded Hideyoshi as shogun to originate two and a half centuries of Tokugawa rule.

Ieyasu ruled from his military fortress in Edo (present-day Tokyo), three hundred miles from the imperial capital of Kyoto. His fortress was defended by moats, embankments, and stone walls arranged in concentric circles two miles in diameter, perhaps influenced by European castles of the day. Ieyasu knew that in order to maintain the peace, he needed to preserve a strong defensive posture and exert centralized control over a unified Japan. Behind the walls of his impressive fortress, Ieyasu developed a structured political and social framework that gave him the means to exercise authority. As a result, a large bureaucracy emerged to manage civil affairs. A prime minister and council of state advised the Tokugawa on political matters. A corps of secret police, the metsuke, were dispatched to dispel subversives. The Tokugawa also stationed observers in Kyoto to monitor the affairs of the court. The practice of royal abdication was revived, weakening the emperor. The Tokugawa also imposed several codes, covering everything from royal affairs to criminal and civil behavior.

In order to sustain dominance over the powerful daimyo, the Tokugawa implemented practices that organized the lords into distinct categories. Each class of daimyo was afforded a certain level of autonomy and privilege. The shimpan, composed of families of the shogunal line, were ranked the highest. The fudai daimyo—allies of Ieyasu—were given some autonomy over local affairs. Former enemies of Ieyasu, the tozama daimyo, were ranked lowest and watched carefully. All daimyo were further ranked based on the value of their land and their annual production of rice. Ieyasu ordered all daimyo to spend time in Edo under the practice of sankin kotai (alternate attendance). Daimyo were forced to maintain two residences, one in their own territory and one in Edo.

Not only were the feudal lords ranked, but all members of society were classified into four discrete groups. Movement across class lines was limited by hereditarily and by mandate. Military commanders, some daimyo and some samurai, were ranked the highest. Peasants were ranked second, highlighting the importance of agriculture in the country. Artisans were ranked third. Together, farmers and artisans gained because their lifework resulted in the production of highly valued material goods. Despite having some intellectual and cultural influence on Japanese society, merchants were ranked lowest. Confucianism viewed merchants as unproductive, feeding off the work of others.

The Tokugawa's dominance over the domestic affairs of Japan was instrumental in maintaining
social tranquility. Internal strife diminished while the feudal system held strong. Still, external forces had some economic and cultural influence on the country. The first Westerners to arrive in Japan were Portuguese traders in 1543. By 1600 all manner of foreign merchants and missionaries had tried, with varying degrees of success, to set up shop in Japan. Christianity had also been adopted by a significant number of people and threatened to upset the status quo. After several reversals of policy and the realization that the toleration of Christianity was not necessary to preserve economic contacts, Ieyasu finally outlawed Christianity and endorsed the persecution of Christians. In 1637 Japanese citizens were forbidden to leave the island for fear that they might return with subversive ideas. Those who were abroad at the time were not allowed to return. With the exception of a single Dutch trading post, all aliens were forced out of Japan by 1641 and were not allowed back into the country. Strict isolationism prevailed, and for two centuries, Japan was characterized by peace and order.

Japan’s self-imposed quarantine resulted in significant social and economic changes. One aspect was the tremendous growth of cities and towns and the growth of urban life. The merchant class, although regarded as the lowest social and political class, prospered during this time. Banks and grain markets emerged and thrived. Guilds and merchant associations showed up in towns and villages causing shifts in the demographics of the country. New industries sprang forth, internal trade barriers were eliminated, and commerce flowed freely. While some villages prospered, others saw negative effects of goods production significant populaces of some towns were required to perform the unskilled labor necessary for manufacturing.

After a century of isolation, Japan slowly began to accept Western ideals. By 1720 the ban on European books—except those concerning Christianity—was lifted; still, study of the humanities and Western philosophy was discouraged. Realizing the necessity of modernization, small groups did, however, form to study Western sciences. A contingency also began to recognize that Japan, with limited resources and a growing population, could not support a higher standard of living without opening its borders again to foreign trade. The desire for Japan to become a world power left some intellectuals questioning the shogunate form of government, support for the emperor began to grow. While new ideas challenged the status quo, government control hindered the consolidation of any subversive ideologies, and an organized front against the shogunate never surfaced. Nevertheless, these concepts became catalysts in the eventual downfall of the shogun.

By the mid-nineteenth century, dissatisfaction was growing among all levels of society. The need for modernization and economic expansion grew, as did the desire for strong imperial authority. Isolationist policies were holding strong, but gradual and forceful Western expansion was making its way eastward. The British
established the first trade agreement between the East and West with China in 1842. A decade later the United States was positioning itself for similar privileges.

By the early 1850s the United States had expanded its borders as far as the Pacific Ocean, establishing a base of operations for further expansion. The shortest route to Asian markets was north, along the west coast, past Alaska, and through Japan. The Americans saw Japan as a way station for travel to and from other Eastern nations. European powers were already making their presence known, and the United States needed to act fast to gain the upper hand. In 1853 U.S. Naval Commodore Matthew C. Perry set sail for Japan to establish contact. Perry arrived in Edo Bay on July 8, 1853, carrying a letter from President Millard Fillmore requesting peace and friendship and free trade. Negotiations, conducted mainly in Dutch, lasted nine days. Perry pledged to return in one year with a larger force to implement the American requirements.

The shogunate was baffled. On one hand the acceptance of Perry’s demands meant that other nations would soon follow, as they did in China. On the other hand, refusing the U.S. requests meant the return of Perry with a large, modernized military force. In a radical move, the emperor was consulted for the first time in six and a half centuries. Perry returned early in February 1854 with a fleet of eight ships to complete the treaty. After several weeks of negotiation, the Treaty of Kanagawa was signed on March 31, 1854. The treaty outlined terms for peace, commerce, and diplomatic relations between the two nations. Ratification was swift in both Kyoto and Washington. News of the treaty spread quickly, and within two years seventeen European nations had established similar agreements with Japan.

In 1856 the United States sent Townsend Harris, a New York City businessman, to Edo as the first consul to Japan. He received little support from the Department of State, but in 1858 managed to firm up a new, more comprehensive treaty with Japan.

The Harris Treaty, as it came to be known, outlined several provisions for trade that favored the United States. The West had formally and permanently settled in Japan. Eastern and Western thought fused together, and some Japanese advocated complete Westernization, while others opposed it with rising nationalist fervor.

The effects of the Harris Treaty were immediately noticed. Inequities in the agreement had a disastrous effect on Japan’s economy. Cheap imports and low tariffs upset the balance of trade. The shogunate’s support for the treaty was opposed by the emperor and its failure provided political ammunition for opponents of the shogunate system. Some daimyo strongly opposed any Western intrusion. Anti-Western emotion ran high, and in 1863 a British diplomat was killed by an anti-Western lord of the Satsuma fief. The British reacted strongly to the incident, and in August 1863 ships of the British fleet decimated Kagashima, the capital of Satsuma. The Satsuma were so impressed by the British show of force that they became allies of the British, developing a navy patterned after the royal model.

The leaders of the anti-foreign movement had always resented Tokugawa rule from Edo, and advocated the restoration of the emperor’s power. No match for foreign military strength, they focused their energies inward and plotted the downfall of the shogunate. In 1867 the last shogun, Tokugawa Yoshinobu, retired under the pressure of the southwestern clans. Fifteen-year-old Mutsuhito took control of imperial power while taking the name of Meiji (“enlightened government”). The capital was moved from Kyoto to Edo, renamed Tokyo. In 1867 the lords of the most powerful clans surrendered their feudal fiefs to the emperor, and an imperial decree in 1871 abolished all feudal fiefs and established central administration of the entire nation.