

The Decline of Japanese Firearm Manufacturing and Proliferation in the Seventeenth Century

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Abstract

In November 1965 an article titled “Giving Up the Gun” by Noel Perrin appeared in *The New Yorker*. A decade and a half later the article was expanded into a book of the same name. *Giving Up the Gun* was and remains a significant work, in that it is the only English text devoted exclusively to why Japan, a country that had rapidly adopted and produced firearms in the second half of the sixteenth century, suddenly stopped firearm manufacturing and innovation in the seventeenth century. Noel Perrin’s theories for this regression received heavy criticism and were largely dismissed, with many citing that Japan did not willingly give up firearms but rather that firearms became irrelevant due to the end of warfare in Japan. This work explores the historiography of the subject, as well as addresses other works regarding the period, to determine the validity of Perrin’s claims and why firearms declined in Japan. The findings of this narrative indicate that while some of Perrin’s theories are unsubstantiated, his main argument that Japan willingly chose to halt firearm manufacturing and innovation is merited.

Introduction

In the mid-sixteenth century, following the introduction of the arquebus by the Portuguese in the 1540s, firearm development and innovation began in Japan. Within decades of their arrival, thousands of firearms were being produced annually. The proliferation of firearms occurred at such a rate that by 1575 over 3,000 of Oda Nobunaga’s men possessed firearms.³¹⁶ By the time of the first Japanese invasion of Korea in the 1592, it is estimated that thirty percent of

³¹⁶ Louis G. Perez, *Japan at War: An Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2013), 87.

Toyotomi Hideyoshi's initial fighting force was equipped with personal firearms.³¹⁷ During the seventeenth century, in the decades following the rise of the Tokugawa bakufu in 1603, however, the manufacturing of firearms ceased. There are a number of theories for why this occurred, including one that states firearms became irrelevant as a result of the Sengoku, or "Warring States", Period's end. This paper argues that firearm innovation and manufacturing did not become irrelevant, but rather that it was deliberately ended by the Edo bakufu in order to weaken the daimyo and consolidate their political hegemony.

Historiography

The decline of Japanese firearm innovation and manufacturing following the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600 has been given very little attention among historians. To my knowledge only one work, *Giving Up the Gun: Japan's Reversion to the Sword, 1543-1879* by Noel Perrin, has been strictly devoted to the subject. In his foreword Perrin states, "A civilized country, possessing high technology, voluntarily chose to give up an advanced military weapon and to return to a more primitive one. It chose to do this, and it succeeded."³¹⁸ Perrin gives five reasons for why Japan willingly stopped firearm development and innovation. The first reason he provides is that the number of samurai who could possess firearms made the bakufu disdain their widespread proliferation and accessibility. "The warrior class in Japan," Perrin explains, "was very much larger than in any European country, amounting to somewhere between 7 and 10 percent of the entire population...In no European country did the warrior class much exceed one percent"³¹⁹ Taking conservative population estimates into account, this would equate to no less than half a million individuals having the potential to possess firearms. The extent of the bakufu's fear that the daimyo would arm these vast numbers of warriors and threaten the

³¹⁷ Samuel Jay Hawley, *The Imjin War: Japan's Sixteenth-century Invasion of Korea and Attempt to Conquer China* (Seoul: Royal Asiatic Society, Korea Branch, 2005), 102.

³¹⁸ Noel Perrin, *Giving up the Gun: Japan's Reversion to the Sword, 1543-1879* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1979), ix.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

bakufu's hegemony, Perrin argues, is evident in the gun controls that came following the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600. Gun manufactures, he explains, were forced to live in the city of Nagahama, while a series of edicts and provisions, such as the ban on building ocean going vessels in 1605, were initiated.³²⁰

The second reason Perrin gives concerns the geopolitical state of the period. Perrin argues that major quantities of firearms were given up as Japan had forgone plans to invade any country following the Imjin War and that "the Japanese were such formidable fighters, and islands are by nature so hard to invade, that territorial integrity could be maintained even with conventional weapons"³²¹ The third theory Perrin provides is that the "symbolic value" placed on the sword by the Japanese was greater than in any European nation. In Japan, the sword indicated social status. "You couldn't even have a family name" Perrin explains, "unless you also had the right to wear a sword"³²² The fourth theory he gives is that the "de-emphasis of the gun took place as part of a general reaction against foreign ideas—particularly Christianity and the Western attitude toward business"³²³ The fifth and final reason Perrin gives is that the Japanese, he asserts, preferred swords over firearms due to the aesthetic value of the body movements associated with a sword. "In Japanese aesthetic theory," Perrin explains, "there are some fairly precise rules about how a person of breeding should move his body...it is better if his elbows are not out at awkward angles....A man using a sword, especially a Japanese two-handed *katana*, is naturally going to move his body in accordance with many of these rules. But a man firing an arquebus is not."³²⁴

Perrin's first theory, which states that the bakufu feared that firearms would reach the vast number of daimyo and the men under them and threaten its authority is agreed on by other historians. According to Thomas D. Conlan in

³²⁰ Perrin, *Giving up the Gun*, 58.

³²¹ *Ibid.*,35.

³²² *Ibid.*,36.

³²³ *Ibid.* 41.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*,43.

Weapons & Fighting Techniques of the Samurai Warrior 1200-1877 AD, “After the Tokugawa had achieved a position of political hegemony, they deemed it unnecessary to continue to be innovative in weaponry. Instead the Tokugawa forced smiths to congregate in easily supervised areas, and they prohibited other *daimyo* from manufacturing cannon or learning how to produce these weapons, or for that matter, acquiring the best gunpowder recipes...The Tokugawa strove to limit knowledge of important military technologies, and monopolize the access to these weapons”³²⁵ Still, other historians provide that it was the cessation of war and ultimately peace that ended firearm production and innovation in Japan. Stephen Turnbull in *Samurai: The Story of Japan’s Noble Warriors* states that it was “the establishment of the Tokugawa Peace” that led firearms and artillery to be “neglected.”³²⁶ Peter A. Lorge in *The Asian Military Revolution: From Gunpowder to the Bomb*, directly challenges Perrin stating, “Perrin’s view was simply wrong; the Japanese did not give up guns...The gunpowder revolution in Japan that was founded upon the changing nature of warfare in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century was not so much halted or reversed as rendered irrelevant by peace.”³²⁷

Conrad Totman, in a review of Perrin’s work, takes a similar position, stating, “The decline in production and use of guns was a byproduct of other developments, not an end in itself. Guns went out of style because war ended. Had it continued, the use of guns would have continued”³²⁸ Totman then argues that it was the disarming of the general population that accompanied the peace that led firearms to go into disuse. “This enabled the samurai rulers,” he explains, “to suppress, even without resort[ing] to firearms, the riots and local eruptions that

³²⁵ Thomas Conlan, *Weapons & Fighting Techniques of the Samurai Warrior, 1200-1877 AD* (London: Amber, 2008), 198.

³²⁶ Stephen R Turnbull, *Samurai: The Story of Japan's Noble Warriors* (London: Collins & Brown, 2004), 207.

³²⁷ Peter Allan Lorge, *The Asian Military Revolution: From Gunpowder to the Bomb* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008), 63.

³²⁸ Conrad Totman, “Review of Noel Perrin’s *Giving Up the Gun*,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 39. Issue 3. (1980), 600.

proliferated as the Tokugawa period advanced. With the public rendered defenseless, guns became an unnecessarily expensive and cumbersome instrument of deterrence once intra-samurai fighting had ceased and the samurai rulers had settled in their in their castle towns. Peacekeeping became a matter of urban patrol, which required dependable weapons that could be used swiftly, quietly, and in close quarters-swords and pikes, not matchlocks”³²⁹ In *Japan at War: An Encyclopedia*, William Johnston holds an identical position, stating, “Despite the role that firearms played on the battlefield during the 16th century, once peace was established following the rise of the Edo bakufu in 1603, firearms fell into disuse. Samurai needed little more than their swords to claim their monopoly on the use of coercive violence in society.”³³⁰

While Lorge, Conrad, and Johnson’s theories that it was the “peace” that brought an end to gun production are sound, they fail to address that the Tokugawa bakufu took an active effort to halt gun production in Japan. While it is true that gun production drastically decreased during the “peace,” it was not the “peace” that caused firearm manufacturing to end. Rather, firearm production and innovation was systematically controlled and ultimately ceased because the Tokugawa bakufu wished to do so. Because of firearm regulations and strong enforcement by the bakufu, the daimyo simply could not produce and develop new firearms as they had throughout the sixteenth century. Consequently, the bakufu themselves had no need to produce firearms in great quantities and funds were diverted elsewhere. It was the bakufu’s regulations and edicts that occurred at the start and during the peace, not the peace in and of itself, that led to the decline of firearm manufacturing throughout Japan. With this in mind, I only accept some of Perrin’s theories, in particular the bakufu’s distrust of the warrior class/daimyo and the geopolitical situation of the period. The idea that guns were given up because of symbolic or aesthetic purposes, or because they went against an innate Japanese hatred toward

³²⁹ Totman, *Review*, 600.

³³⁰ Louis G. Perez, *Japan at War: An Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2013), 87.

western culture, has no historical basis. The Japanese rapidly adopted guns as soon as they arrived in the mid-sixteenth century and continued to be produced and improved for over six decades. It was only when the Tokugawa bakufu directly stepped in and limited gun production and innovation that it came to an end.

Gun Control 1570-1630's

In 1603, three years following the Battle of Sekigahara, the Tokugawa shogunate or Edo bakufu, was established. At that time the major gun manufacturing centers in Japan were Nagahama and Sakai.³³¹ There were however a vast number of gunsmiths outside these centers working independently for daimyo and local lords throughout Japan. Fearing opposition, the bakufu set out almost immediately to limit the production of guns in Japan, namely that occurring under the daimyo. In 1607, the bakufu declared that all firearm and gunpowder production was to be restricted to Nagahama, while all orders for firearms in the city had to first be processed through Edo. Tokugawa Ieyasu, Perrin states, "admonished them not make any weapons for other daimyo." Gunsmiths were also prohibited from traveling to the other provinces and ordered not to inform anyone of the proper recipe for gunpowder or to teach techniques of gun manufacturing to anyone save for officials of the Tokugawa bakufu.³³² To ensure the enforcement of this edict, a new position, the Commissioner of Guns (*Teppo Bugyo*), was created. "In short," Perrin explains, "starting in 1607, guns could be made only under license from the central government."³³³ With virtually no orders being approved or asked for by the government, many gunsmiths and powder makers switched to sword making or other various occupations. In the following decades, with few gun makers remaining, the price of firearms rose immensely, thus further limiting their accessibility.

By the 1620s, the government had a well-established monopoly over all

³³¹ Conlan, *Weapons & Fighting Techniques*, 157

³³² Perrin, *Giving up the Gun*, 62.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 58.

firearm production in Japan. According to Perrin, production dropped to such an extent, that by 1706, “the production at Nagahama amounted to 35 large matchlocks in even years, and 250 small ones in odd years.”³³⁴ As there were over a million individuals in the warrior class, such a small amount was negligible. The final nail in the coffin came in 1632, when the bakufu created a bureau to control the dissemination of ammunition and powder.³³⁵ While the government had gained control of firearms production in Japan by the 1620s and bullet and gunpowder production a decade later, they could not as readily control the influx of firearm imports to Japan. However, the edicts passed in 1630s, collectively known as the “seclusion edicts,” enabled them to control this as well.

Firearm Control and Trade Regulations in the 1630s, Seclusion Edicts

Provisions that inhibited the daimyo from obtaining guns from abroad began nearly four decades before the seclusion edicts were introduced. In the 1590s, Toyotomi Hideyoshi attempted to limit trade that occurred between daimyo and foreigners in the western domains. According to Michael S. Laver in *The Sakoku Edicts and the Politics of Tokugawa Hegemony*, “Because Hideyoshi could not be sure of the absolute loyalty of these daimyo, a sound military and economic strategy was to control the institutions that provided potential rivals with a large amount of revenue and possible foreign allies. In that context, Hideyoshi not only moved licensed foreign trade through a rudimentary shuinsen system but also placed Nagasaki itself under his own personal control.”³³⁶ When the Tokugawa bakufu rose to power, measures to limit the daimyos’ access to foreign goods became a top priority. This can be seen as early as 1605, when the bakufu prohibited any Japanese from building ocean-going vessels. Ronald P. Toby in *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan*, explains the bakufu’s intentions behind this, stating:

³³⁴ Perrin, *Giving up the Gun*, 63.

³³⁵ Conlan, *Weapons & Fighting Techniques*, 197.

³³⁶ Michael S. Laver, *The Sakoku Edicts and the Politics of Tokugawa Hegemony* (Amherst, NY: Cambria, 2011), 31.

“Until this time, both daimyo and the great merchant houses possessed ships that rivaled even European ships in size and seaworthiness. This edict [the seclusion edict]—though ostensibly valid for the entire country—was aimed primarily at the western daimyo[s], most of whom had fought against the Tokugawa at the Battle of Sekigahara in 1603. It was no secret that the Tokugawa did not entirely trust these daimyo, who had sworn allegiance only after being defeated in battle. That Ieyasu implemented such a restriction should come as no surprise. It is easy to imagine the power and wealth the western daimyo stood to gain by having a fleet of large ships operating in the China Sea and Indian Ocean regions. The Tokugawa house, still trying to bolster a politically precarious position was eager to stamp out all possible sources of opposition...The act of curtailing the Kyushu daimyo’s ability to profit from foreign trade was similar to the ulterior motive behind the *Sankin-kōtai* measure (“the alternative attendance,” the institution that required daimyo to spend half of their time attending the shogun in Edo and the other half in their home domains; their wives and children were required to remain in Edo full time as “hostages”-to deprive the daimyo of excess funds that might be put to rebellious uses”³³⁷

With the daimyo unable to legally build ships for foreign trade, the bakufu’s next move was to control the flow of foreign imports into the country. A major step toward this occurred in 1614, when Tokugawa Hidetada restricted Dutch and English ships to Hirado while the Portuguese were confined to Nagasaki. Further steps toward achieving this goal came in 1624, when all Spanish were deported, while a year prior the English East India Company closed operations in Japan.

³³⁷ Ronald P. Toby, *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan: Asia in the Development of the Tokugawa Bakufu* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1984), 34.

The final step towards halting any future proliferation of firearms in Japan and limiting their accessibility to the daimyo came with the seclusion edicts in the 1630s, namely the Sakoku Edict of 1635. According to Toby, the sakoku system was conceived in order to “eliminate any potential challenges to the Tokugawa, whether they be foreign or Japanese” and thus “establish unquestioned political, military, and economic control throughout the country.”³³⁸ The first three edicts read: 1. The sending of Japanese ships to foreign countries is strictly forbidden. 2. The travel of Japanese people to foreign countries is forbidden. If a person secretly travels abroad, that person will be punished with death, and the ships along with their captains [owners] must be detained while the incident is reported to the authorities. 3. Japanese who return after having crossed over to and lived in foreign countries will be punished by death.³³⁹ Japanese living abroad, especially in areas with European settlement such as the Philippines, Batavia, or Macao, could no longer provide information or bring advanced weaponry back to Japan. Even more important, the edicts made it impossible for the daimyo to send ships abroad or travel themselves in order to obtain firearms. As Conlan states, “These tight controls and other surveillance precluded daimyo from procuring weapons from abroad.”³⁴⁰ To ensure firearms were not brought to the daimyo, the bakufu tightened regulations on foreigners trading in Japan. In 1639, four years following the Shimabara rebellion, Tokugawa Iemitsu banned Macao-Nagasaki trade and forbade all Portuguese from entering Japan. The strict enforcement of this policy became clear when, a year following the ban sixty Portuguese, emissaries from Macao were executed. Two years later, in 1641, the Dutch were forced out of Hirado and confined to Deshima Island in Nagasaki harbor while the Chinese were restricted to a walled segment of Nagasaki port. With the closing of unprofitable English East India Company trading posts and a ban on Iberians, the Dutch, Chinese, Koreans, and Ryukyuan were the only substantial foreign trade partners

³³⁸ Toby, *State and Diplomacy*, 5-9.

³³⁹ Laver, *The Sakoku Edicts*, 16.

³⁴⁰ Conlan, *Weapons & Fighting Techniques*, 197.

remaining. Official diplomatic relations were only established with the Yi Dynasty, as the Dutch. Chinese and Ryukyuans were not seen to have adequate status in accord with Tokugawa interpretations of hierarchy. Consequently, no arms deal would ever be made between a European power and the Tokugawa bakufu. With foreign trade and travel abroad, as well as firearm production, being strictly regulated, the bakufu had effectively ended the “threat” of firearm proliferation in Japan.

Post 1630s

Following the 1630s the bakufu strove to maintain their monopolization on firearm proliferation for two centuries. Consequently, the concealment of foreign firearm technology was a major priority of the government. “Even when they were aware of new inventions,” Conlan states, “they did not allow this knowledge to spread. For example, we can document flintlocks first appearing in Japan in 1643, and a Dutch captain gave another example to the eighth Tokugawa shogun, Yoshimune, in 1721, but these weapons did not achieve widespread popularity, or use in Japan. ...The tokugawa strove to limit knowledge of important military technologies, and monopolize the access to these weapons.”³⁴¹ When a censorship bureau was established to review Dutch texts entering the country, one of its primary objectives was to ensure that the documents did not hold any information regarding firearm technology. The monopoly on firearms was further protected by rejecting offers from foreign expeditions and nations wishing to establish diplomatic relations or trade in firearms. In 1673 when the British ship *Return* entered Nagasaki harbor and applied for the reopening of Anglo-Japanese trade it was rejected.³⁴² Over a century later little changed. For example, in 1792 the bakufu dismissed a petition from Adam Laxman to open Russo-Japanese trade, as well as

³⁴¹ Thomas Conlan, *Weapons & Fighting Techniques of the Samurai Warrior, 1200-1877 AD* (London: Amber, 2008), 198.

³⁴² Stephen R Turnbull, *Samurai: The Story of Japan's Noble Warriors* (London: Collins & Brown, 2004), 207.

another from Count Rezanov. The bakufu was so successful in its anti-foreign relations/trade propaganda that many Japanese began to view voluntary isolation from the west as “ancestral law.” For instance, Hayahi Junsai wrote “It is the law of our ancestors to not permit trade with nations other than China and Holland.” According to Constantine Nomikos Vaporis in *Voices of Early Modern Japan*, “with the force of time, the restrictions imposed induced a state of mind, or mentality, in which the ideal state for Japan was one of isolation.”³⁴³ Toby further sheds light on the subject, stating, Diplomacy became less intense; two-thirds of the embassies from Korea, for example, came in the first third of the Tokugawa period. Trade declined as well, and diplomatic issues became both less frequent less strongly felt. Over the course of the eighteenth century this atrophied state of foreign relations came to be viewed as the norm, to be interpreted as ancestral law, attributed to the decisions of the first three shoguns.”³⁴⁴ Consequently, when progressive writings seeking to increase trade with foreign nations, such as those of Honda Toshiaki (1744-1821), were released, they were largely ignored or dismissed.

With the bakufu actively maintaining their monopoly, the edicts and regulations against firearm manufacturing and trade went relatively uncontested for two centuries. Into the mid-nineteenth century, however, many, including the shogun, began to realize Japan’s inferiority in firearm technology and feared exploitation or even colonization. In 1825, Aizawa Seishisai wrote in his book *New Proposals (Shinron)* that the only way to resist western powers was to adopt western weapons. During the 1830s and 40s both Aizawa Hakumin and Hashimoto Sanai suggested forming an alliance with one of the Western powers to defend Japan. Otsuki Bankei suggested forming trade relations with Russia and Russia alone in order to shield itself from Western powers. Sakuma Shozan stated that “Japan could not avoid the same fate as China unless she could quickly discover and

³⁴³ Peter Allan Lorge, *The Asian Military Revolution: From Gunpowder to the Bomb* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008), 63.

³⁴⁴ Toby, *State and Diplomacy*, 240.

put to use the secret of Western warfare and firearms”³⁴⁵ According to Toby, “He devoted himself to studying modern Western works on weaponry and warfare through the medium of the Dutch language in order to understand the sources of Western strength and learn how to use them to make Japan strong enough to defer Western encroachment.”³⁴⁶ In 1845, Fujita Toko (1806-55) in *Hitachi-obi* proposed three solutions to countering foreign encroachment, which include “1. Repel the ‘barbarians’ and stop them from reaching the ‘lands of the gods. 2. Establish relations with the West in order to study and adopt those elements of its civilization that would enable it to demand equality with it. 3. Allow the barbarians’ to trade with Japan temporarily to appease them until Japan became strong enough to expel them.”³⁴⁷ The shogun was so weak by this period, however, that when Tokugawa Nariaki attempted to secure funds for rearmament, he was unable to do so. According to William McOmie in *The Opening of Japan, 1853-1855*, “Due to economic changes that had undermined the feudal base, the shogunate and many of the fiefs were bankrupt and could not purchase or manufacture the weapons required to defend Japanese shores from modern warships. Moreover, the traditional bakufu-first policy meant that the bakufu would not allow the fiefs to become stronger than himself.”³⁴⁸ The bakufu was so weak by the mid-nineteenth century that it finally gave up on its effort to monopolize gun proliferation and “urged the daimyo to build cannons and ships to expel foreign intruders.”³⁴⁹

Conclusion

Japanese firearm manufacturing and innovation ceased in the seventeenth century because it was deliberately put an end to by the Tokugawa bakufu, not

³⁴⁵ Ibid, 32.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 32.

³⁴⁷ Ibid, 51.

³⁴⁸ William McOmie, *The Opening of Japan, 1853-1855: A Comparative Study of the American, British, Dutch and Russian Naval Expeditions to Compel the Tokugawa Shogunate to Conclude Treaties and Open Ports to Their Ships* (Folkestone: Global Oriental, 2006), 22.

³⁴⁹ McOmie, *The Opening of Japan*, 53.

because of the irrelevance of firearms due to the peace that followed the Sengoku Period. The bakufu introduced a number of edicts, including the consolidation of gunsmiths into Nagahama, as well a number of trade regulations that ultimately inhibited the daimyo from obtaining both domestic or foreign firearms. With the daimyo unable to access firearms, the Tokugawa government had no need to produce firearms itself. It was not until the nineteenth century that the regulations and edicts became contested, as many feared foreign encroachment. By the time an active call to rearm became prevalent; the Tokugawa government did not have the financial means to do so. By the nineteenth century, Japan was devoid of firearm manufacturing and innovation and it was not until after the arrival of Perry in 1854 that it resumed.