Tokugawa Bakufu Political System [Encyclopedia Entry]

Michael Wert
Marquette University, michael.wert@marquette.edu

States for a possible end to its trade embargo with Japan while simultaneously preparing the nation for war. "If Japan's hundred millions merge and go forward," he declared, "wars can be won with ease." When it became apparent that U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt would not rescind his demand for a Japanese evacuation of China, Tojo authorized the navy to attack U.S. military installations in Pearl Harbor, the Philippines, and elsewhere in December 1941.

The initial phase of World War II in the Pacific was characterized by a lightning series of Japanese victories over British and U.S. forces. These successes boosted Tojo's prestige at home and led to greater acceptance of his views on the legitimacy of force. By June 1942, however, the U.S. victory at the Battle of Midway had stopped Japanese expansion in its tracks and commenced a long string of heavy defeats. By 1943, Tojo had assumed the additional post of Military Procurement Minister, and the following year, he became Chief of the General Staff. When the fall of Saipan in July 1944 placed Japan in the range of U.S. bombers, however, Prince Konoe arranged for Tojo's dismissal as Prime Minister.

When Allied authorities came to his residence with an arrest warrant, Tojo tried and failed to kill himself. Upon recovering, he was put on trial by an international war tribunal for crimes against humanity and was sentenced to death. He accepted all responsibility for the outbreak of hostilities to absolve the emperor of any blame. He was subsequently hanged on December 23, 1948.

John C. Fredriksen

See also: February 26 Incident; International Military Tribunal for the Far East; Ishiwara Kanji; Konoe Fumimaro; Kwantung Army Adventurism; Shōwa Emperor (Hirohito); Tripartite Pact; World War II, Pacific Theater.

Further Reading

Tokugawa Bakufu Political System

The Tokugawa bakufu political system represented a mixture of pre-Tokugawa shōgunal institutions and innovations implemented by the early Tokugawa shōgun. Hereditary daimyō continued to rule over semi-autonomous domains, relying on their own lands for resources, and supported by samurai loyal only to them. The shōgunate established a general set of rules for maintaining tenuous control over the daimyō, but relied upon daimyō cooperation to maintain domestic stability and even international relations—for example, by asking daimyō to engage with the Ryukyu Kingdom, Korea, and the Ezo lands to the north. The Tokugawa shōgunate devoted its attention to a centered, but not centralized, rule over Japan. Much of its administration was focused in Edo and, to a lesser extent, the surrounding Kanto region, with offices in key cities such as Osaka, Kyoto, and Nagasaki. In many ways, however, the Tokugawa shōgunate mirrored the domains. For example, it depended on its own lands—nearly one-fourth of all land in Japan—for economic resources. Likewise, it created similar recruitment and promotion structures for its own samurai.
Of the nearly 22,500 Tokugawa samurai, nearly 17,000 worked within the shōgunate’s bureaucracy. Many of these samurai received little compensation and were generally underemployed; some even struck out on their own as rōnin, finding various odd jobs where they could. Managing these lower-ranked samurai, often called “housemen” (gokenin), was a constant struggle for the shōgunate. The regime wanted housemen to use their time constructively—for example, by maintaining preparation for possible military activity. Some acted as intendents who managed the Tokugawa lands located throughout the Kanto plain that surrounded Edo. Others worked as minor functionaries in the various magistrate offices. The rest of the Tokugawa liege vassals, known as the “bannermen” (hatamoto), ranged in rank and income from 500 to 9,500 koku, a rank just below daimyō. Although many were indistinguishable from housemen, bannermen could theoretically claim special privileges—for example, having an audience with the shōgun. Bannermen staffed the mid-level bureaucratic positions: the Edo city magistrate, commissioners of finance and foreign relations, and inspectors. Each position brought with it financial benefits on top of their hereditary stipends. More importantly, these roles gave ambitious vassals a chance to affect Tokugawa policy. A small percentage of bannermen also managed fiefs, similar to daimyō domains, from which they could draw material and human resources.

Above the liege vassal samurai were the vassal daimyō (fudai), whose putatively close connection to the Tokugawa progenitor, Ieyasu, made them trustworthy for protecting the Tokugawa realm. This group also staffed the higher posts, such as the Keeper of Osaka Castle, the Kyoto Deputy, Master of Court Ceremony, and the Magistrate of Temples and Shrines. More importantly, they filled the highest positions, acting as the junior and senior councilors who set Tokugawa policy. Although the title “Great Councilor” (tairō) existed, it was largely titular, except when it was occupied by Ii Naosuke. None of the previously described positions were permanent, and mechanisms were in place to break political impasses, such as the ability to create ad hoc committees, create new magistrate offices, or assign trusted men to concurrent positions. Some office-holding daimyō were essentially glorified bannermen: they might have small fiefs, but lacked the castle stronghold that defined the classic image of a daimyō. Instead, they spent most of their time in Edo focused on their shōgunate duties.

Many of the roughly 23 Tokugawa-relative daimyō (shimpan) were, like the outer daimyō (tozama), shut out from formal shōgunate positions. Nevertheless, the “Three Houses” (sanke) were important because they provided a pool of heirs should the shōgun fail to produce one. Moreover, the smallest of the three, the Mito domain, maintained a hereditary role, by custom, as adviser to the shōgun. Although close to the Tokugawa legacy, the proximity of these domains did not lead to simple acquiescence to the shōgunate. In Mito’s case, the early 19th-century daimyō, Tokugawa Nariaki, criticized the Tokugawa shōgunate for not “expelling the barbarians” from Japan.

Several informal channels existed within the shōgunate that allowed outsiders to gain at least a minority voice. Daimyō, regardless of their status, as well as noble families in Kyoto could influence the shōgun and shōgunal politics through their “women of the great interior” (ōoku)—hundreds of women who served the shōgun and managed his domestic needs. Thus they played an important function in the political cliques
that tied together key liege vassals, noble families, and daimyō. Moreover, wealthy merchants and other commoners who lent money to the shōgunate submitted memorials regarding, for example, how to reform shōgunal finances. Gradually the shōgunate allowed input from outer daimyō and court nobles, thus weakening its position as the ruling institution in Japan.

*Michael Wert*

**See also:** Buke Shohatto; Civil Wars, Sengoku Era; Ii Naosuke; Muromachi *Bakufu*; Tokugawa Ieyasu; Tokugawa Nariaki.

**Further Reading**


**Tokugawa Bakumatsu Military Reforms**

By the 19th century, leaders within the shōgunate, and daimyō throughout Japan, bemoaned the backward state conditions of their military organization and technology, and complained about the deteriorating state of the samurai class as a reliable pool of skilled warrior-bureaucrats capable of maintaining stability in Japan. The shōgunate’s solution was to streamline its military organization, eliminate inefficiency, provide new sources of military technology from Western countries, and reinvigorate samurai physical and moral training. The first reforms were brief, occurring in 1854, the year that treaties were signed with the United States. They consisted of cost cutting, expanding coastal defenses, and encouraging military drills and frugality among the samurai. Domains carried out these reforms as they saw fit—for example, increasing the number of schools available for samurai learning and martial arts. The reform did little to change the Tokugawa military, however, as other domestic concerns attracted the shōgunate’s attention—major reform would have to wait until the 1860s.

The most expansive institutional military changes occurred as one part of a broad effort called the “Bunkyū Reforms” of 1862. These reforms included a shifting of the political relationship between the shōgunate and the court, whereby the shōgunate recognized itself as subordinate to the emperor, and institutional reforms such as the weakening of the alternate attendance system (*sankin kōtai*). On the military front, the shōgunate increased purchases of Western weaponry, like the newly invented Minie rifle, which possessed greater range and accuracy than previously available rifles. The shōgunate encouraged domains to buy warships, and even sent men abroad for training. It also established firing ranges. Other reforms included a complete reorganization of the military structure, using a Dutch model of “tactics of three combat arms,” which employed light infantry armed with Minie rifles, artillery units, and heavy and light cavalry. Taking advantage of its close relationship to France, the shōgunate invited several military advising missions to Japan. From the mid-1860s and throughout the early Meiji period, French drill and military science continued to influence the modern Japanese military. This included a French-led construction of an arsenal, dockyard, and iron works at Yokosuka, with plans to build a shipyard that would buttress the shōgunate’s navy.