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Japan's Great Sword Hunt

1588 AD

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Notes

Before 1588 peasant farmers and other commoners were allowed to carry swords and other weapons for defence or simply for decoration.

During the Warring States Period armed peasant farmers were frequently deployed from their farming activities to make up units of foot soldier units in the armies of their Daimyo.

Towards the end of the 16th century however, some random groups of peasants and monks used their weapons in risings against their Daimyo and Samurai masters.

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Notes

In response, Japan's second unifier Toyotomi Hideyoshi, in his role as 'imperial regent', sought to eliminate this potential problem in 1588 AD by announcing an edict that would remove weapons from all civilians, and thereby cement the superior role of the Samurai class within Japan's four class feudal system .

Henceforth, farmers and other civilians were forbidden to carry swords or other weapons, and swords were reserved solely for the samurai warrior class.

However to placate the farmers angered by this law, Hideyoshi also decreed that the metal from the confiscated weapons would be melted down and used to create a giant image of the Buddha at a historic monastery in Nara. The edict asserted that in this way, farmers will benefit not only in this life but also in their lives to come.

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Notes

Hideyoshi also decreed that Samurai had to choose between being **Jizamurai Samurai** (part time warriors / farmers, domiciled in the villages) or fulltime **Gokenin Samurai** required to live within the castles of their Daimyo.

This move pleased the farmers as it removed the arrogant Samurai from their fields and villages, and gave them access to more land.

This policy in turn led to the evolution of castle towns, since the samurai required services which only merchants and artisans could provide.

The policy also restricted the numbers of soldiers who could henceforth be available to man armies in future Japanese conflicts.

Finally, it removed arms from some 90% of the peasant population, leaving just 7% of the population (the Samurai class) with that right.