Tokugawa Yoshimune Biography

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Biography

Tokugawa Yoshimune (1684-1751) was a Japanese ruler, or shogun. He attempted most energetically to revitalize the Tokugawa shogunate after it began to encounter economic and other difficulties in the late 17th and early 18th centuries.

Established in the early 17th century by Tokugawa Ieyasu at Edo (present-day Tokyo), the Tokugawa shogunate was based on a form of government that has been described as "centralized feudalism." Beginning with Ieyasu, the Tokugawa shoguns exercised hegemony over some 260 daimyos, or regional barons, who in turn ruled their own virtually autonomous domains. The chief means by which the Tokugawa were able to maintain this hegemony was the policy of national seclusion that they instituted in the 1630s. According to this policy, only the Dutch and the Chinese were permitted to trade on a limited scale at the single port of Nagasaki.

When the seventh shogun died without an heir in 1716, he was succeeded by Tokugawa Yoshimune, the daimyo of a branch family of the Tokugawa. Yoshimune had been a successful administrator and reformer in his own domain, and he now sought to apply his ideas on the national level. His reforms included a restressing of the martial arts among the country's ruling warrior (samurai) class, the reclamation of agricultural lands, and the reminting of coins to correct the periodic debasements engaged in by his predecessors.

Scholars are in disagreement about the success of Yoshimune's reforms, many of which were highly reactionary. But he was responsible for at least one measure that was unquestionably of great importance for the future. On the advice of his aides, Yoshimune lifted the ban on the importation of foreign books that had been imposed at the time of adoption of the national seclusion policy. So long as they did not deal with Christianity, which the Tokugawa regime regarded as a dangerously subversive creed, books from China and the West could henceforth (from 1725) be brought into Japan through Nagasaki. It was through these books that a small but crucial number of Japanese scholars were able to acquire a basic knowledge of advancements in Western technology that proved invaluable to their country when it was forced to abandon its seclusion policy and to enter the modern world in the mid-19th century.

Yoshimune abdicated the office of shogun in favor of his son in 1745. He died 6 years later.