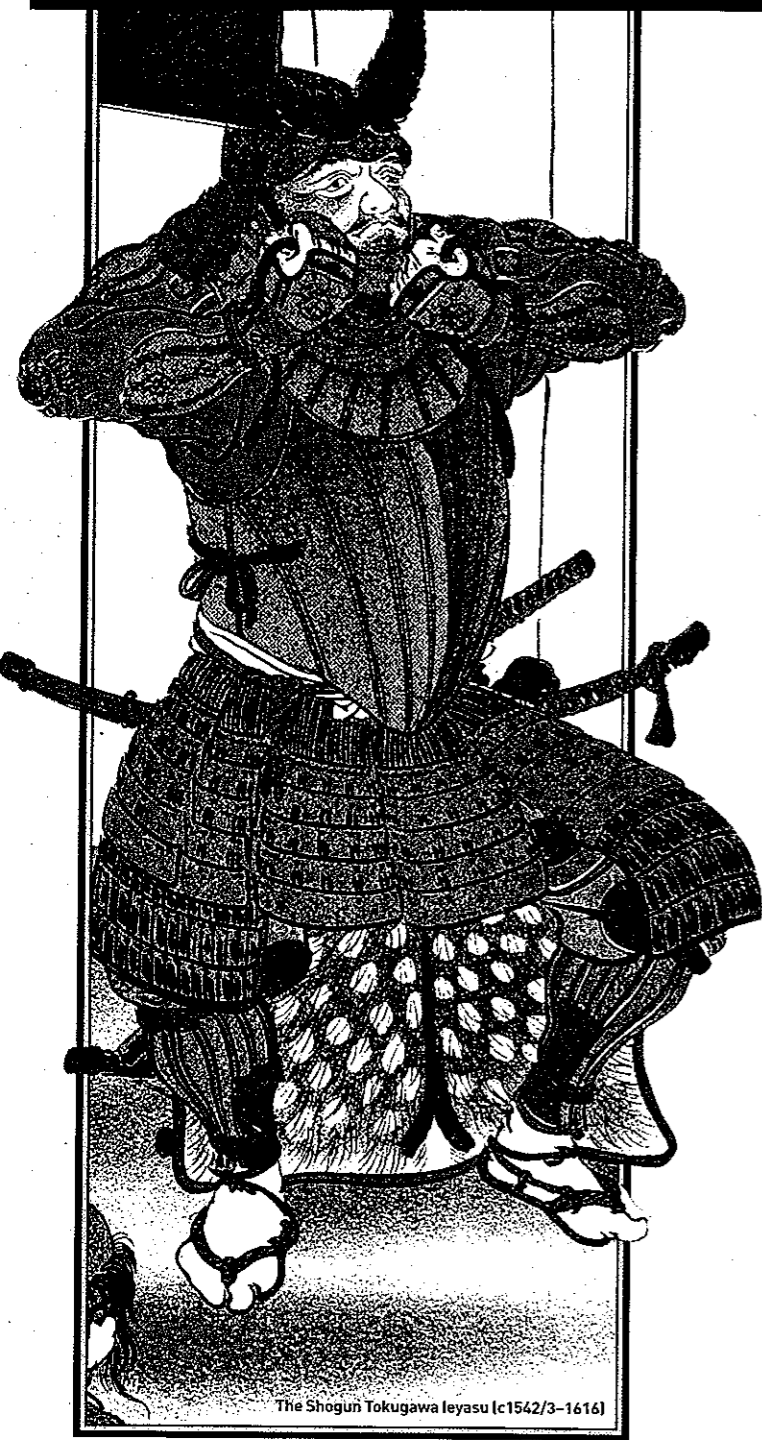


THE GREATEST SHOGUN



The Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu (c1542/3–1616)

To coincide with BBC One's *Heroes and Villains*, **Frank McLynn** reviews the life of Japan's most celebrated warlord, Tokugawa Ieyasu

THE MAN we know as Tokugawa Ieyasu (this was not the name he was born with, and Japanese patronymics are a minefield) occupies the same role in Japanese history as Napoleon in that of France, a titan, a colossus alongside whom even the most important figures of other eras appear as minnows. One way to look at his achievement is as follows. At the beginning of the epoch known as The Period of Warring States (c1467–1551), a time of continuous civil war, Japan boasted 260 daimyos (lords) each with his own fief and retainers. By 1551 this number had been whittled down to about a dozen warlords, but by Ieyasu's death there was just himself, the shogun, a ruler as supreme and unchallenged as Louis XIV in France.

The Shogunate he founded would see Japan through the years of isolation until 1868 when it opted for modernisation. How did he achieve this? It was a mixture of luck, patience, political genius and continuity, for Ieyasu was third in a line of mighty despots who had tightened central control.

Japan in 1550–1600 made the transition from a clan-based, patrimonial society whose twin bases were the village and slavery, to a feudal society with all samurai owing allegiance to a supreme lord, the castle not the village as the central institution and serfdom replacing slavery. Yet Japanese feudalism was not like that of medieval Europe: there were no powerful barons to challenge the king, simply a hierarchy of lords who owed allegiance to an all-powerful central despot.

A very hard upbringing

Tokugawa Ieyasu was born into the Matsudaira clan in Mikawa province in eastern Japan. His early years were something of a nightmare, for the Matsudaira clan was split in its loyalty between the two most powerful clans of the region, the Oda and Imagawa. As a consequence the boy was a pawn in the game of hostage-taking, ritual suicide (seppuku) and slaughter of heirs that characterised Japan in the 16th century.

Seemingly born old and wise, Ieyasu, who began his career as a very minor lord, realised early that one had to identify where the power was and follow the most powerful. In this way he gradually worked his way up from something like the fourth division of daimyos to the premier league. He spotted that Nobunaga, chief of the Oda clan, was the coming man and made himself Nobunaga's vassal.

For a while Ieyasu was eclipsed by Shingen, leader of the Takeda clan, a superior general who defeated Ieyasu in 1572.

But Shingen was killed a year later in a siege and Oda Nobunaga tasked Ieyasu with extirpating the Takeda as a political force. By 1580, Nobunaga was supreme ruler of Japan (the emperor was a mere figurehead) and Ieyasu his right-hand man.

Suddenly Nobunaga was assassinated and Ieyasu seemed likely to have been involved in his downfall. He kept his head down while the second great despot Toyotomi Hideyoshi became Japan's suprema. Hideyoshi made desultory attempts to crush Ieyasu, but most of his energies were spent in smashing opposition to his rule in western Japan. For six years Ieyasu avoided major conflict with Hideyoshi, either adopting Fabian tactics in face of any significant armies or allowing himself the luxury of minor victories over Nobunaga's generals to prove his credibility. Hideyoshi meanwhile had his hands full dealing with a succession of pretenders in western Japan. Finally both men accepted the inevitable. An exhausted Hideyoshi, at last victorious in the west, accepted Ieyasu as his chief vassal. Ieyasu made formal submission to his overlord at Osaka Castle in 1586.

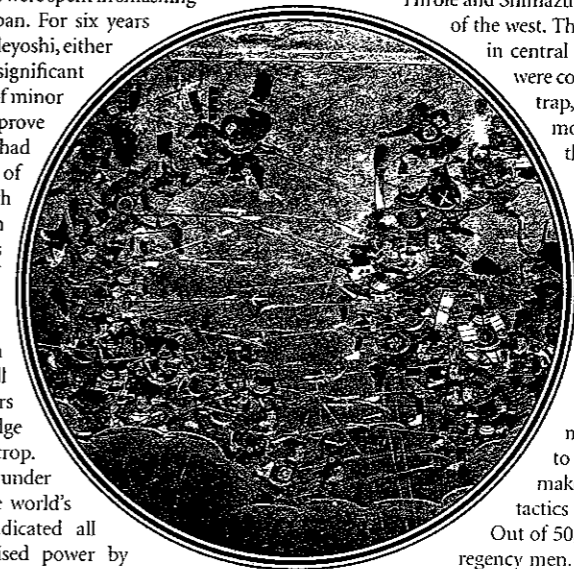
Hideyoshi's reforms, even more than Nobunaga's, transformed Japan. All samurai were garrisoned, while farmers were disarmed and kept on a knife edge with a two-thirds tax of the rice crop. Hideyoshi revolutionised the economy (under him Japan produced one-third of the world's gold and silver) and ruthlessly eradicated all territorial opposition to his centralised power by destroying the strength of any militarily credible clans still in existence. This time his target was the formidable Hojo clan that controlled the six provinces of the Kanto region in northern Japan. He unleashed Ieyasu on them and, after a bloody war (1587–90), mass suicide of the Hojo leaders destroyed the clan's power for ever.

Hideyoshi now played what he thought was his trump card by ordering Ieyasu to change fiefs, relocating him from Mikawa to the Kanto, with his new capital at Edo (modern Tokyo). The idea was to destroy Ieyasu's power base, but he underestimated the other man's resilience and ingenuity. In a remarkably short time, the resources at Ieyasu's disposal far exceeded those he had in Mikawa. Angry at his own mistake, Hideyoshi dared not wage a campaign against Ieyasu while the western clans simmered sullenly, waiting for their moment of revenge.

He "solved" his problem by an invasion of Korea, using all the armies of western Japan for the purpose. But the solution went horribly wrong when the Chinese crossed the Yalu river to aid the Koreans: the result was stalemate, followed by a long armistice. Ieyasu cunningly made sure none of his troops were sent to Korea. In alarm at his exposed position, Hideyoshi finally summoned Ieyasu to take up permanent residence in Kyoto as his adviser (1593). We don't know if it was on the advice of the machiavellian Ieyasu that the war in Korea was renewed, with the same indecisive results (1597), but suddenly Hideyoshi died (1598). Ieyasu's hour seemed to have struck.

Yet Hideyoshi left a five-man regency (to rule until his son came of age) and five super-bureaucrats known as the commissioners. Under the leadership of Ishida Mitsunari, one of the commissioners, this junta prepared to contest Ieyasu's

Part of a screen that depicts Ieyasu's capture of Osaka Castle



Ieyasu thought through political tactics five or six moves in advance, like a great chess player

evident plans to become the next shogun. Both sides were ready for war and, on paper, Ieyasu's enemies had the best generals and warriors. It was west (regents and commissioners) versus east (Ieyasu).

Ieyasu's political genius manifested itself at this point. Ishid was deeply unpopular for an arrogant, supercilious and hectoring manner, and so Ieyasu was able to suborn four key commanders (Kato Kiyomasa, Kobayakawa Hideaki, Kikkaw Hiroie and Shimazu Yoshiro) who hated the self-styled leader of the west. The decisive battle took place at Sekigahara in central Japan on 21 October 1600. The regent were confident that they had coaxed Ieyasu into a trap, and for the first three hours of the battle, they seemed to have the edge. Then Ishida ordered the contingents that lay in ambush in the surrounding hills to come down on Ieyasu's rear and flanks and annihilate him. Unfortunately for him, these were the very contingents led by the disgruntled men that Ieyasu had made over. When the order to outflank was given, to Ishida's consternation nothing happened. Even worse, after initial hesitation, Hideaki joined Ieyasu, but not before Ieyasu had ordered his gunners to open fire on his position to help him make up his mind. The collapse of Ishida's tactics led to a slaughter of the western army. Out of 50,000 men who fell that day, 40,000 were regency men. Following Bushido custom, Ieyasu had the skulls of his enemies meticulously counted.

The patience of a predator

Now with supreme and uncontested power, the ever-patient Ieyasu waited until 1614–15 before destroying Hideyoshi's son (and the legitimate heir to the Shogunate) in a spectacular assault on Osaka Castle. He died in 1616, after a career of glittering achievements. He used his English favourite Will Adams to build a Japanese navy; he expelled all Spanish and Portuguese missionaries and laid the foundation for Japan's two centuries of hermetic seclusion; he corresponded with King James VI and I; and he eliminated all conceivable enemies to the Tokugawa succession.

It is possible to mount a revisionist case against Ieyasu, to allege that he was above all supremely lucky, always in the right place at the right time. But this would be to underrate his incredible patience, his ability to take the long view over several decades and to think through political tactics five or six moves in advance, like a great chess player. Some of Ieyasu's recorded observations, though based on the Buddhist notion of karma, read remarkably like an eastern version of the thoughts of Marcus Aurelius. Though not a great military captain, Ieyasu was a political genius: the decisive battle of Sekigahara had been essentially won by his man-managing talents before a single shot had been fired. His career is a classic illustration of one of the most hackneyed maxims – everything comes to him who waits. **■**

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BOOKS

Heroes and Villains: Inside the Minds of the Greatest Warriors in History by Frank McLynn (BBC Books, 2007)

TV

Heroes and Villains is on BBC One in January



Frank McLynn is a historian who has written many acclaimed biographies