

Chapter 15 Viewpoint Activity

European traders met different receptions in different parts of Asia. Japan under the Tokugawa shoguns (textbook pages 388–389) welcomed Europeans at first, then chose isolation. Here two experts on Japanese history describe that decision. ♦ *As you read, notice the different explanations for the shoguns' choice. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

Japan's Shoguns Reject the West

John Whitney Hall The final element in the Tokugawa intellectual environment was, then, the factor of isolation. . . . Tokugawa Ieyasu showed himself anxious to develop foreign trade and for some time remained friendly to the Christian missionaries. But his efforts to obtain full control of the destinies of the country and to assure complete loyalty to his regime led step by step in the direction of closure. . . .

There can be no denying that the adoption of the seclusion policy was a major turning point for Japan. The contrast between a Europe about to embark upon an era of important economic and scientific development and a Japan voluntarily closing its doors to the outside world, is quite dramatic. Moreover, fear of Christianity in Japan was such that within a few decades the authorities imposed a severe censorship on the importation of books from the West. . . . We do know, however, that closure insured peace, and that in peace Tokugawa Japan had the opportunity to develop its political institutions and its economic and cultural resources.

Donald Keene. . . [F]or almost a hundred years from the time of the first Portuguese visitors, the Japanese engaged in trade and other relations with Europeans, including Portuguese, Spaniards, Dutch and English. Converts to Christianity were made even among important members of the military aristocracy, and some Japanese dignitaries went on embassies to Europe and America, chiefly in connection with religious matters.

But increasingly repressive measures against Christianity were adopted by the government, beginning in the late sixteenth century, in an effort to wipe out what was considered to be a threat to the security of the country. The government feared that Christian converts might divide political loyalties, and might even

facilitate the invasion of the country by a European power. The example of the Philippines, conquered by the Spaniards in the sixteenth century after intense missionary activity, served as a warning to the Japanese, and by 1639 both the Spaniards and Portuguese had been forbidden to visit the country.

“The government feared that Christian converts might divide political loyalties.”

Sources: (1) *Japan from Prehistory to Modern Times*, by John Whitney Hall (Dell Publishing, 1970); (2) *Japanese Literature*, by Donald Keene (Grove Press, 1955).

Questions to Discuss

1. According to both these writers, what were the main fears prompting the shoguns to close Japan to the West?
2. What political reason does Keene suggest for the shoguns' decision?
3. **Making Comparisons** How did Tokugawa Japan compare with Europe at the same time? Do the writers of these selections think the decision for isolation was a good idea?