Lead: Historical study often helps reveal twists in the human journey. Consider history’s turning points: Japan rediscovers the gun.

Intro: A Moment in Time with Dan Roberts

Content: In 1543, visiting Portuguese explorers jumped from the deck of a Chinese commercial ship into Japanese shallow waters and with their muskets shot a duck. The unfavorable results on the duck were duly noted by Lord Tokitaka, who
purchased from the Portuguese two guns and commissioned his swordsmiths to copy these new weapons. Within a century firearms were playing a widespread, destructive role in the dynastic and feudal warfare consuming the Japanese upper class. These weapons were very good, indeed the Japanese significantly improved on comparable European designs. One such innovation was waterproof rain protection for the ignition platform, but soon the Japanese abandoned firearms and mostly returned to handheld weapons such as the sword and the bow and arrow.

The problem was that a gun was a preeminent insult to the Japanese approach to personal warfare. The
spirit of the samurai warrior emphasized skillful manipulation of the sword, known as the “soul of the samurai.” Firing a gun required no particular skill. It was efficient and deadly but also graceless. Within another century firearms were being handed over to lower-class peasants to use and eventually were relegated to the trash pile. Not until the arrival of American Commodore Perry in 1853, did Japan break with its rejection of firearms and re-embrace modern military technology.

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Resources


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