

CHAPTER 2

ODA NOBUNAGA'S ORGANIZATIONAL REFORMS

Oda Nobunaga's Life and the Course of His Political Consolidation

Oda Nobunaga was born in 1534 during the Warring States period in an illegitimate branch of the Oda family, as the eldest son of Oda Nobuhide who was a deputy *shugo* (*shugodai*) in Owari province (Aichi prefecture). After succeeding to the headship of his family in 1551, Nobunaga attacked another deputy shugo, Oda Nobutomo, at Kiyosu Castle, thereby consolidating the Oda family and unifying Owari province.¹

In 1560, Nobunaga advanced toward Kyoto leading a large army and defeating the great lord Imagawa Yoshimoto for control of the three provinces of Suruga, Tōtōmi, and Mikawa (Shizuoka and Aichi prefectures) at the Battle of Okehazama. With his renown as a warrior growing, in 1567 he intervened in the internal feud of the Saitō daimyo house in the neighboring province of Mino (Gifu prefecture). Nobunaga destroyed the Saitō, annexed Mino province, and consolidated his position as a daimyo in the central region of Japan.

Civil wars continued unabated at that time throughout the provinces and in Kyoto. Ashikaga Yoshiaki (d. 1597), the rightful successor to the Ashikaga shogunate, fled the unstable political conditions in Kyoto for the provinces, where he sought to restore his political position. Yoshiaki requested the assistance of Oda Nobunaga who had recently risen in power. Nobunaga accepted that request. In 1568, he entered Kyoto in

support of Ashikaga Yoshiaki, installing Yoshiaki as the fifteenth shogun of the Muromachi bakufu. As the actual power holder advising Yoshiaki, Nobunaga had begun his advance toward centralizing political authority.

Up to 1582 when Nobunaga's retainer Akechi Mitsuhide rebelled and assassinated him at Honnōji temple in Kyoto, Nobunaga accomplished many achievements. Nobunaga's battle for political unification in the Warring States period brought him up against daimyo in the many provinces surrounding him, including Asai Nagamasa, Asakura Yoshikage, Takeda Shingen, and Mōri Terumoto. Nobunaga also did battle with the power of long-established Buddhist groups such as the forces of Mount Hiei and the "single-minded league," peasant uprisings, *Ikkō ikki*, which spread throughout Japan and were inspired by the doctrines of the Honganji branch of True Pure Land Buddhism (*Jōdo shinsbū*).

In a different vein, Nobunaga opened the way for overseas trade, Christianity, and Western culture. He developed new methods of warfare based on the match-lock gun, itself a new type of weapon. He constructed a splendid fortress, Azuchi Castle, a massive early modern castle that left a profound impression on its observers as a symbol of political authority. Through such accomplishments coupled with his volatile but outstanding personality, Nobunaga laid waste to the order and culture of the medieval world, while creating a fundamentally new society.²

Characteristics of Oda Nobunaga's Rule

The first factor that demands our consideration about the characteristics of Nobunaga's rule is his drawn out confrontation with the forces of the Ikkō ikki of Honganji temple, a dispute that ended in bloodshed. Indeed the experience of the war with the Ikkō ikki set the tone for Nobunaga's rule and effected great changes in the political authority of daimyo.

The True Pure Land sect, responsible for the religious doctrines of the Ikkō ikki, is a branch of Pure Land Buddhism founded by Shinran (d. 1262) in the Kamakura period in the thirteenth century premised on the idea that faith in the salvation of the Buddha Amida enables Nyorai believers to be born into Pure Land paradise after death. Amid the many varieties of Pure Land beliefs, Shinran asserted that the magnificent cer-

emonies practiced by earlier forms of Buddhism were superfluous. He emphasized the importance of faith in the salvation of Amida Buddha by chanting Amida's name single-mindedly. The name Ikkō sect, or "single-minded sect," was coined because of the sect's concentration on the single-minded invocation of Amida Buddha's name: *Namu Amida Butsu*.

In the fifteenth century, Rennyo (d. 1499), Shinran's descendant (Shinran was a monk, but he disavowed the prohibitions against marriage) acceded to the office of chief priest of Honganji temple of the True Pure Land sect. The sect spread among peasants throughout Japan thanks to Rennyo's energetic proselytizing. The Ikkō ikki consisted of peasants who embraced the beliefs of the True Pure Land sect and organized themselves through their faith in the Buddha Amida Nyorai. These peasants fermented rebellion, calling for the expulsion of warrior overlords in hopes of creating a Pure-Land paradise in contemporary society rather than in the world after death. The Ikkō ikki was both a religious movement and a formidable political movement with a peasant rebellion at its core.

The Ikkō ikki utilized violence in many regions and waged fierce battles with warrior lords. Nobunaga, seeking to unify the country, was forced to face the problem of Ikkō ikki head on. His contest with the power of Honganji temple progressed for ten long years beginning in 1570. In that period, Nobunaga destroyed an Ikkō ikki in Ise Nagashima in 1574. In the same year, an Ikkō ikki suddenly appeared in Echizen province, destroying the Asakura daimyo house. Shimotsuma Yoriteru, a warrior priest from Honganji, became lord of Echizen province and transformed the province into a territory held and administered by the Ikkō ikki. Nobunaga invaded Echizen with a military force of 30,000 men, and he suppressed the Echizen ikki in the following year, 1575. In this case, as in others, Nobunaga completely massacred his opposition. Approximately 20,000 corpses cluttered the capital of Echizen, and it was said that no trace of anyone living could be seen.

The Ikkō ikki of Honganji temple sought the establishment on earth of a Buddhist kingdom based on the ideas of the True Pure Land sect. Their political organization ranged from powerful families and petty lords

to the peasantry in the broadest meaning of the term, encompassing farmers and the general populace. Using the ideas of the True Pure Land sect, the Ikkō ikki sought to overthrow the control of warrior overlords.

On the one hand, Nobunaga responded to this peasant-level political movement by deploying extreme military force to crush it. However, on the other hand, as Professor Asao Naohiro has illustrated, Nobunaga used political ideas to confront the beliefs of the Ikkō sect and create a stable way of controlling the peasantry.³ Nobunaga recognized the need to promote this type of policy during a period of warfare. He understood that establishing rule by naked force would not ensure his continual control over the peasantry. He searched for a system of rule that the peasantry would accept and continue to adhere to, and one that they would recognize as socially legitimate.

After crushing the Echizen Ikkō ikki in the ninth month of 1575, Nobunaga promulgated a nine-article edict called the *Echizen kuni okite* 越前国掟 addressed to Shibata Katsue, whom Nobunaga had appointed to govern the province.⁴ The edict expressed Nobunaga's political ideas clearly in writing. It prohibited using peasants arbitrarily for forced labor and prevented illegal taxes levied beyond the fixed annual tributes. The edict stated: "There shall be no unjust taxes levied against the farmers of the province." In addition, the edict read, "Correct methods for carrying out legal judgments shall be a fundamental rule." The ruler could not hand down arbitrary punishments and favor relatives. The edict proclaimed the necessity of fair politics and just legal decisions, locating justice (*kōgi*) in the personal political authority of the public ruler who brought fairness and peace to the land.

The second most crucial issue in Nobunaga's policies was the creation of an army premised on the separation of warriors and peasants.⁵ The Mino and Owari regions exhibited a high level of agricultural production which allowed powerful landlords from the upper-level peasantry to stop engaging in agricultural production and become village leaders and even samurai. Nobunaga organized these senior peasant leaders and petty lords into lower level warrior groups, creating a standing army that he stationed near his castles. The soldiers in these armies were liberated from

the limitations of the natural cycle of agricultural cultivation and its labors, making a long term of military service possible.

Nobunaga demonstrated his superior tactical ability by his deployment of new military weapons like the match-lock gun. Using this weapon, Nobunaga was able to form lower level fighting groups that possessed the ability to fight in various battles for a long period since they were free from the need to engage in farming. Nobunaga organized groups of highly mobile foot soldiers wielding match-lock guns on a large scale, and these became the foundation of his army.

He also brought the city of Sakai under his direct control. Sakai was an entry-point for foreign trade and the most highly developed center for manufacturing at the time. Nobunaga organized many blacksmiths in Sakai under the direction of the wealthy merchant Imai Sōkyū (d. 1593). Imai supplied large quantities of high quality and reliable match-lock guns to Nobunaga. Since the saltpeter needed for gunpowder and the lead used for bullets were foreign products, Nobunaga ensured a reliable supply of these items by controlling Sakai's foreign trade.

Nobunaga's great military strength grew out of his concern for the rapid mobility of his military, divided into peasants and samurai groups, and equipped with extremely reliable guns. Nobunaga's new method of military organization and of structuring warrior groups facilitated his countrywide military conquest.

Nobunaga as an Autocrat and His Efforts to Depict Himself as a God

In contrast to the other daimyo of the Warring States period, the warrior lords in various provinces, and the peasantry as represented by the Ikkō ikki whom he all battled with, Nobunaga viewed political ideology as indispensable in establishing and consolidating his political power. Nobunaga's ideas transcended the political rule of the daimyo of the Warring States period. His achievements served as a key impetus in the move toward new, early modern models of political power.⁶

Nobunaga developed his political power by force and without mercy. He did not show reserve in ruthlessly crushing warriors and peasants

who opposed him. However, as mentioned earlier, Nobunaga sought to create a stable form of rule that would endure, and he realized that to do so it was more important to control people's minds. The characteristics of the political system that Nobunaga tried to create used political ideology to influence the world view of his retainers. Nobunaga as political and military overlord demanded allegiance from all of his military underlords and faithful obedience verging on religious reverence. He sought to bring an end to the many rebellions of followers against their rulers, and tried to create a system of rule that confirmed the overwhelming ascendancy of the ruler. The concluding section of the aforementioned *Echizen kuni okite* stated:

Understanding of the faithful obedience to my [Nobunaga's] exact orders in all matters is of paramount importance. You must revere me in any situation. You must think respectfully of me even when you are not in my presence. . . . As long as you conduct yourself in this manner you will be able to realize everlasting prosperity and unsurpassed success as samurai. Above all else, it is crucial to fully grasp what is set forth here.

The edict declared that absolute obedience to Nobunaga's wishes and worship of Nobunaga were keys for his warrior followers' military success and their everlasting fame. Here, we can detect Nobunaga's political maneuver toward consecrating himself as a deity. We can derive a similar conclusion from the records of Louis Frois (d. 1597), a Jesuit priest who lived in Japan in this period and knew Nobunaga well. According to Frois's accounts of Nobunaga's haughtiness and pride: "Nobunaga exclaimed there is no ruling god in the universe superior to him, and he desired that he be worshiped on earth, stating that there was no one worthy of worship besides him."

Azuchi Castle, the splendid and towering fortress Nobunaga built, could be seen from far a way and gave a strong impression to everyone under Nobunaga's rule of his absolute authority. Nobunaga also completed a religious institution called Sōkenji within the walls of this castle.

He declared that on his birthday, the twelfth day of the fifth month, everyone in Japan should make a pilgrimage to that temple.

According to Frois's records, the deity enshrined in that temple was none other than Nobunaga. Worship at the temple supposedly brought riches and honors to petitioners, cured diseases, and granted offspring and long life. Nobunaga pronounced that "wicked apostates will face destruction in this world and the next. Everyone must make regular dedications of worship and pay great respect to this temple [Sōkenji]."

Nobunaga certainly had a great share of personal charisma, and this served as a driving force behind the rapid development of the characteristics of his rule. For instance, his strong personality impelled him to act quickly against his enemies and attack them headlong; it was also manifest in his triumphant tactical ability in his use of match-lock guns in the Battle of Nagashino where he routed the mounted troops of the Takeda daimyo house, heralded as the most powerful in the Warring States period.

His personality is reflected in his ingenuity in the construction of a representative symbol of his identity as an absolute lord in the grand and sumptuous fortress of Azuchi Castle, which left a deep impression on many people. But, more than any other factor, Nobunaga's record of victories and no defeats in his long-lasting campaigns increased his personal authority further than any other factor. For warrior lords who gambled with their lives on the battlefield, a record of continuous victories in battle more than anything else indicated Nobunaga's divinity, and they embraced the supernatural belief that heaven granted Nobunaga superior power and divine favor.⁷

Personal reverence and absolute loyalty to Nobunaga's wishes became naturally accepted among the retainers of the Oda house, toward the calm and forward-looking Nobunaga who had brought huge losses to the followers of the True Pure Land sect participating in the Ikkō ikki and had destroyed the Buddhist religious institution on Mount Hiei. The beliefs that Nobunaga stood for the "way of the warrior" (*bushidō*), that he embodied the rule of all under heaven, and that he held supreme power became widely accepted.

Nobunaga's Organizational Reforms and Political Dissent: Autocracy and Resistance

The novelty of Nobunaga's rule becomes apparent when we compare it to the rule of other daimyo of the period such as the Mōri who ruled ten provinces in the Chūgoku region.⁸ Mōri Motonari held the rank of daimyo, but he was only the top lord among other "lords of the province" (*kokujin ryōshu*). The political mechanism that the Mōri created preserved the structure of a *kokujin* league (*ikki*) at its core and had a daimyo structure of rule overlaying it.

Victorious in the Battle of Itsukushima in 1555, the Mōri organized the local lords of the provinces of Aki and Bingo into a provincial group (*kunishū*). Mōri Motonari consolidated his power in both these provinces as daimyo by 1557. *The Articles of Agreement* (*mōshiwase jōjō* 申合条々) created in the Mōri domain were a set of edicts that set prohibitions against military actions and against moving troops from encampments. The manner in which this document set forth its orders deserves attention because it represents an umbrella-style of compact between the Mōri, who ruled as daimyo, and the provincial lords: the Kitsukawa, Shishido, Amano, Kobayakawa, Hiraga, and the Kumagai.⁹

Although the Mōri were daimyo, they were also one among many lords of the province, and they were daimyo only by virtue of the fact that they were the leaders of the local lords. The political power of the Mōri house can be referred to as *primus inter pares*. The structure of the league of local lords did not disappear but remained as part of the political structure. This form of daimyo provincial control constituted a political order in keeping with medieval patterns of rule employed by the local lords (*zaichi ryōshu*), because it maintained the complete autonomy and independence of the local lords.

As I explained in the previous chapter about the political tendency of local lords in the provinces and the so-called leagues of men of the provinces (*kokujin ikki*), the horizontal form of organizational structure of leagues inevitably became reorganized into more vertical structures

during periods of increased instability. On the one hand, we can certainly recognize this trend within the Mōri domain of Aki province. However, on the other hand, we can also find in the example of the Mōri that the league structure did not disappear, and this was a general tendency of the way political power worked in this period. The same pattern occurred in many other daimyo houses of the Warring States period besides the Mōri.

The preceding example illustrates the epochal nature and historical watershed of Nobunaga's regime. Nobunaga overcame structural limitations through the force of his charisma. He established the foundation for a completely new and distinctive type of vertical political organization which defined early modern Japanese society and constituted a form of administrative mechanism that set the patterns for rule in Japan for a long time after. Nobunaga's deeds and policies were certainly ground breaking.

He crafted a clear break from the typical pattern of daimyo rule in the Warring States period by transforming the political order and constructing a completely new form of organization. It marked a break from medieval society, but, his method of political organization did not continue into the early modern period unchanged. Nobunaga's extremely despotic form of rule ruptured medieval patterns while succeeding in realizing a revolutionary transformation of society. Yet, at the same time his was a brutal and bloody reign of terror.

The massacre of the Ikkō ikki does not need repeating. Nobunaga also handed down cruel punishments against the companions and relations of people who opposed him, such as Asai Nagamasa and Araki Murashige. He also punished and banished even those who were obedient to him, on a whim or a preference. A typical example was that of Sakuma Nobumori, a chief hereditary vassal of the Oda house who was exiled to Mount Kōya, where he starved to death. In addition, Nobunaga decided to banish his senior retainers Hayashi Michikatsu, Andō Iga and his son, and Niwa Ukon all for petty offenses.¹⁰

Mitsuhide's Rebellion

Akechi Mitsuhide's rebellion against Nobunaga needs to be understood from the standpoint of Nobunaga's behavior. In Mitsuhide's perspective, he feared that the fate of Sakuma Nobumori would someday be his own, and so Mitsuhide hurried to attack Nobunaga first to protect himself. The temptation to make his bid to take over Nobunaga's realm probably also occurred to Mitsuhide. However, Mitsuhide's rebellion likely came about impulsively, a result of complicated and daunting intentions.

If we examine this situation objectively, the problem of Mitsuhide's rebellion was none other than Nobunaga's superior system of provincial administration. In other words, we need to understand Mitsuhide's rebellion was a defensive act of resistance of a retainer fighting against an absolutist government — a culmination of the political dynamics that gave rise to Nobunaga's absolutist form of government and his use of repressive political power which committed atrocities.

Nobunaga wrought numerous innovative changes that facilitated the transition from medieval society to early modern society. For instance, he transformed medieval political structures and the modes of organization used by daimyo of the Warring States period. Yet, Nobunaga's epoch-making political power proved unable to extinguish the feelings of independence of the warrior lords who served under him. Accordingly, he relied on absolutism and force. His political system inevitably disintegrated as a result. Mitsuhide's rebellion brought not only death to Nobunaga, but it struck a blow against the political system that he created. Nobunaga's new political structure could not help but destroy any attempts at its own fundamental revision.