



## THE BATTLE OF SEKIGAHARA

By HERMANN BOHNER

*Professor Bohner, the outstanding German Japanologist, is known to our readers by his previous contributions to this magazine. The title of his present article means nothing to most non-Japanese; but to the Japanese "Sekigahara" is a term as familiar as Cannae or Waterloo is to the European. The author shows how all Japan's previous history converged on Sekigahara and what the battle there meant for the country's subsequent history.*

*In his description of the battle itself, Professor Bohner was assisted by Werner Kölln, a young German officer who has made a special study of the battle as well as of the battlefield under the guidance of Fuji Iizamon, the Japanese expert on Sekigahara. Werner Kölln has also translated Mr. Fuji's account of the battle, of which some excerpts are quoted here.—K.M.*

THE battle of Sekigahara may be called the most decisive battle in past Japanese history. It brought peace for two hundred and fifty years, and there are not many battles of this kind in history. At that time, Japan was as divided and dismembered as Europe is today. The battle of Sekigahara united Japan, united it for ever.

### 2.

*Seki* (関) means barrier, a kind of gate or narrow defile everyone must pass through; *hara* (原) means flat, level field; *ga* is the old genitive form. *Sekigahara* is the passage, the gate, between east and west: he who holds this passage holds all Japan. It is a well-known fact that the first thing Napoleon did was to study maps and to decide, long before a battle, that it would have to be fought at such and such a place and no other. If the most decisive battle in Japanese history had to be fought, where else could it have been fought than at Sekigahara? For strategic reasons, men decided to have the battle take place at this spot; but, seen from the vantage point of today, it would appear as if the battle itself had decided with mathematical precision and inevitable logic to be fought here.

### 3.

The old Japan was the South and the West; the new Japan was the wild East and North. The old Japan was Nara and Kyoto; the new Japan was Kamakura and Tokyo. The South and the West represented culture; the East and the North were wild country, colonial territory. The center of Japan is Yamato, the Nara district, where Emperor Jimmu founded the Empire. In a former article we compared Japan to a beehive, cell adjoining cell, each strictly partitioned from the other. Yamato is the central cell. In the sixth and seventh centuries, there was a flowering of culture here such as contemporary northern Europe hardly knew. Then, for strategic and other reasons, the capital was moved from Nara a few hours' march to the north: Kyoto became the capital for the next thousand years. The whole empire now blossomed forth like the England or Germany of the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries.

The *kuge* (court nobles) were the leading power in the state. The East and the North, however, remained wild country. The men there were colonists, peasant pioneers who had to defend them-

selves with their arms against the wild natives of those regions, the *ebisu*. These colonists were known as *bushi*—*bu* (武) meaning weapon, military, and *shi* (士) meaning (gentle) man—or *buke*, *ke* (家) meaning family, kin, clan. Life here was rough, harsh, primitive. At the capital with its culture, the people became over-refined, degenerate. The court aristocrats soon summoned some of the *bushi* clans to aid them in their intrigues. Once summoned, the latter gradually seized the power, even in the capital, even in the West and the South.

As in England during the Wars of the Roses, an almost interminable struggle set in in Japan between the two chief clans, the Minamotos and the Tairas. The Taira clan was defeated, its fleet sunk off Dannoura in 1185. For a while there was a strong *buke* regime. The *buke* placed a *bushi* official next to every *kuge* official, and it was these men who had the real power. However, this more or less peaceful period did not last very long. Among the *bushi*, within the clans themselves, discord broke out. Brother fought against brother, uncle against nephew. And the close of the Middle Ages saw a chaos of confusion and fighting.

## 4.

Then a strong hand, that of Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582), the first of the uniters of Japan, saved the situation. If it was the warrior who had wrought havoc in Japan, only a super-warrior could restore order. Nobunaga was the super-*bushi*. Like Napoleon, Nobunaga rose from obscure beginnings to the utmost heights. His end was that of a warrior. At a critical moment he had empowered his vassal Akechi Mitsuhide to muster 35,000 men against his enemies in the west; but the temptation was too great for Akechi. Instead of leading his troops to the west, he turned east toward Kyoto, moving against the Honnoji Temple where Nobunaga had his headquarters. Nobunaga, on hearing the tumult outside, came out to see what was happening; a few seconds later he fell, mortally wounded by the sword of Akechi himself.

## 5.

Now the second of the three great uniters of Japan made his appearance, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, Nobunaga's best and most loyal vassal. He immediately broke off the campaign which he happened to be waging against the Daimyo Mori, one of Nobunaga's opponents, and somehow managed to make peace with him. Then he hurried off to Kyoto and defeated and slew Akechi.

Hideyoshi came from even more modest beginnings than Nobunaga: originally he did not even have a family name! He was of peasant stock, and he was as slow and heavy as the soil itself. As a boy he showed no talent for anything. At the age of eight, after having lost his father, his relatives placed him in the care of monks. But before long the monks asked for him to be taken back again, as they could not do anything with him. At the age of thirty-three, he was still only permitted to bear the sandals in a Daimyo's procession. But, once discovered, this rustic, slow, shrewd, gentle man rose step by step, till at last he stood at the top, always deeply venerating the Emperor above him. Hideyoshi was Japan's West and South, the center of old Japan. The huge Osaka Castle, the biggest of those days, was Hideyoshi's stronghold.

## 6.

Hideyoshi's pinnacle was represented by his war against China over Korea: the Korean War. But at this pinnacle the great man fell ill (1598) and realized that he would never recover. His son and heir, Hideyori, was five years old. Now the old man began to move heaven and earth to safeguard the prospects of his heir and successor. He summoned the five most powerful rulers of the Empire and bound them by oath. He summoned the five great counselors and the intermediate counselors and made them swear allegiance. The most dangerous, taciturn, and powerful of all the great men was Tokugawa Ieyasu, the greatest Daimyo of eastern Japan. Hideyoshi called him to his sickbed and told him that

only he, Ieyasu, could keep the Empire tranquil, and he entrusted him with the care of Hideyori and the Empire. But Ieyasu remained cold and reserved, obstinately refusing this office. Hideyoshi, however, would not give up, and finally Ieyasu was installed as chief of the Five Regents whom Hideyoshi appointed just before his death. Maeda, another of the great Daimyos, was given the guardianship of Hideyori. Ieyasu was to supervise the general administration of the Empire.

Hideyoshi also ordered that there should be no giving or receiving of hostages or sureties among the Daimyos nor any political marriages arranged without consultation. The first to offend against this was Ieyasu. By means of three important political marriages he strengthened his own position as well as that of the East. The state counselors came to him in a body and demanded his resignation from the government as he had infringed upon Hideyoshi's commands. Very well, Ieyasu resigned. But he had achieved what he had set out to do. With cool calculation and an iron will he was striving for absolute power. This is the trend, and the battle of Sekigahara is its acme: the East, rough and harsh, wanted totality and had the one great leader; the West, Hideyori's side, accustomed to power and wealth, was an alliance without a leader.

## 7.

The battle of Sekigahara is unique if only for the fact that it represents the largest concentration of troops ever to have been assembled in Japan. On Ieyasu's side there were about 85,000 men; on the opposing side some 90,000. Translated into modern conditions, these figures probably represent ten or twenty times those numbers. Anyone familiar with high strategy knows that one of the greatest problems is that of bringing up sufficient numbers of troops. Those troops came partly from the furthest

North and South over immense distances.

At first Ieyasu would have no part in the whole affair. Why should he go west? He wanted first entirely to consolidate the East, and he was fighting there with one of the smaller Daimyos. But the West gave him no peace. Over there in the West there was a man who was always causing trouble, a jack-in-the-box, a little runt, far too small and unimportant in comparison to that giant, that grandee Ieyasu. Although this man was the very opposite of a worthy opponent and leader, he was in reality the



Tokugawa Ieyasu

driving force among the people of the West. Ieyasu knew the fellow well. He had risen from utter insignificance. Hideyoshi had discovered him as a temple boy who, when the thirsty Hideyoshi had once asked for some tea at a temple, had shown himself to be remarkably nimble. Since then, this unknown individual had risen higher and

higher, up to the most powerful position under Hideyoshi's regime, and everyone in the Empire knew his name: Ishida Mitsunari.

Then Hideyoshi had died; and, although this man was also one of the Five Regents appointed by Hideyoshi, he was actually no longer a power. Ieyasu and Maeda, the two great Daimyos, had all the power. Mitsunari, by means of countless intrigues, had sought to incite these two against each other so that they should destroy each other. He had almost succeeded when, at the last moment, another Daimyo, a friend of both the great Daimyos, interceded. But Mitsunari's intrigues continued. The anger over this scheming civilian rose to such heights that seven well-known Daimyos got together and swore to have Mitsunari's head. At this point, the latter saw no other way out than to put himself entirely at the mercy of Ieyasu, the most powerful of all the Daimyos. Ieyasu advised him to give up all his offices and to retire to private life on his tiny estate.

Outwardly, Mitsunari followed this advice, but at the same instant he began to spin new threads, this time against Ieyasu himself.

It was this Mitsunari who was the imp, the disturbance. Because of him there was no peace in the West. But what he had brought about now was indeed something tremendous. The greatest Daimyos of the West and a large number of the lesser nobles had all been assembled by him against Ieyasu. The latter, however, was still waiting. Not until he had tested the loyalty of the Daimyos of the East in certain local battles did he begin to think of a campaign against the West.

## 8.

Thus the people of the West saw Ieyasu approaching in full strength; his goal was undoubtedly Osaka and Hideyoshi's great castle there. They had to get in first and block his path at the defile of Sekigahara. Mitsunari had the mighty army advance in three groups on the three great imperial roads. The Easterners were approaching rapidly; the Westerners had to hurry if they really wished to block their road. The night of the last day of marching was pitch black; it was raining, and the rain turned into a tropical downpour. A cold wind set in and developed into a gale which whipped the water into the faces of the warriors. The roads became morasses. Late at night, Sekigahara was reached, and the opposing armies established contact, although the commanders held back.

Day broke. The mist was so heavy that one could not see further than a few steps. But the troops had guides who knew the terrain. The map shows that the Westerners had taken up such excellent positions that, according to all human calculations, Ieyasu should have been grasped by the pincers and crushed. He was faced by Mitsunari, by Mitsunari's close ally Konishi Yukinaga, by the valiant Otani

Yoshitsuge, by the Tosa Daimyo Shimazu Koreaki, and by Ukita (under heavy obligation to Hideyoshi). Threatening Ieyasu's flank from the south stood Kobayakawa Hideaki with a large contingent, as well as various others. The gravest menace to Ieyasu, however, was the threat to his rear: the great Daimyo Mori Hidemoto with an imposing force, Kikkawa Hiroie, and others, occupying Mount Nangu and its eastern slopes.

## 9.

A battle can only be understood properly at the battlefield itself. The Japanese often have a specialist living right at such a battlefield. Fuji Izaemon is Japan's well-known specialist of Sekigahara. In the following we quote from Mr. Fuji's short documentary report on the battle.

"The positions of the Eastern army were as follows :

Heading the left column: Fukushima Masanori's troops

Heading the right wing: Kuroda Nagamasa's troops

Bulk of the army: Matsudaira Tadayoshi's troops

Headquarters: Tokugawa Ieyasu

Between the bulk and the left wing: Todo Takatora's and Kyogoku Takatomo's contingents

"Toward eight o'clock the mist lifted a little and visibility improved. At that moment, several columns of the bulk of the Eastern army began to advance westward. In doing so they met with Shimazu's units, and hostilities began. When Fukushima Masanori noticed this, he precipitately attacked Ukita's formation from the south in order to snatch for himself the honor of having begun the battle. This was the signal for the entire right wing of the Eastern army to move forward in a bloc toward the west and to attack Mitsunari's as well as Konishi's positions. Todo and Kyogoku now also advanced



Ishida Mitsunari

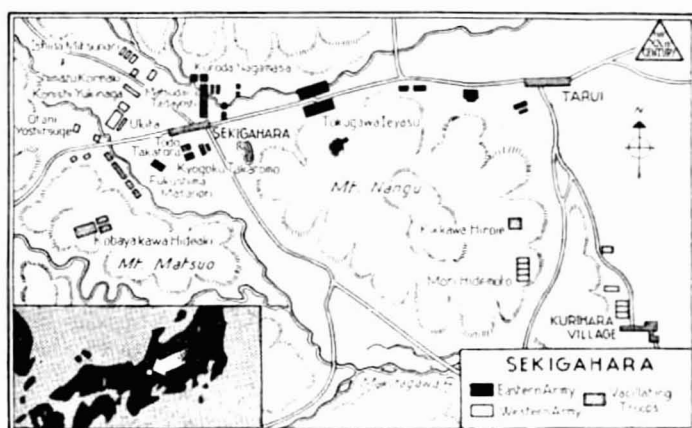
westward and crossed swords in bitter fighting with Otani."

The headquarters of Ieyasu, the commander in chief, lay far back. Fog still hindered visibility and—so Fuji Iizaemon explained—one of the most modern defensive strategems, namely, camouflage in the form of a smoke screen, was employed, a fact of great interest to military history. Ieyasu, who during the fifty-eight years of his life had fought in fifty-seven battles, took the decisive step: at eleven a.m. he moved his headquarters to the foremost lines. As a matter of fact, by midday the position was extremely unfavorable for the Eastern army and became more and more desperate. Had Mori and the other commanders on Mount Nangu been as active as Ieyasu and attacked him from the rear, that would have been the end of Ieyasu. Ieyasu was playing a bold game: he knew his men, and he knew the weak points of his opponents.

# 11.

We have said that Mitsunari was the driving force in the Western army. Mitsunari had one mortal enemy: Hideaki, and Ieyasu had established contact with him although he stood on the side of the Westerners.

Let us turn for a moment to this Hideaki, for the entire battle now hinged on this wavering point. When Hideyoshi was still young and unknown, he had been given the sister of a small Daimyo called Kinoshita in marriage. Moreover, he had thereupon also received the name of Kinoshita as a family name—which may have meant even more to him than the bride. In gratitude, he adopted the fifth son of this Daimyo and brought him up. Later, however, he had to give him to a grandee in order to make peace by hook or by crook. This grandee, one of the Mori clan, had been taken into the Kobayakawa family, while his brother



had been adopted into the Kikkawa family. *Kobayakawa* means "small, swift stream," and *Kikkawa* "stream of good luck." The two Kawa brothers, the "stream" brothers, who fought in countless battles, were famous throughout Japan and still are so.

This adopted son Hideaki was appointed commander in chief of the Korean expedition in 1597 although he was only twenty years old at that time. The campaign was a failure, the real reason being the discord and jealousy among the various generals. Hideaki was denounced as incompetent by Ishida Mitsunari. Hideyoshi had ordered Hideaki to yield his command to someone else; but Hideaki had not obeyed. Relations between Hideyoshi and Hideaki had become extremely strained, and Ieyasu had intervened. Hideaki and Mitsunari, however, remained enemies.

If we look into the soul of this twenty-three-year-old youth, we see it seething like the undercurrents of a stream. Mystics have compared the feelings and passions of man with the formless aggregate of water: at any moment its shape can be changed. We find hatred for Mitsunari in Hideaki; we find loyalty toward Hideyoshi and his clan and yet sullen anger toward him; we find cold reserve for Ieyasu and yet a certain gratitude. For or against Hideyoshi, for or against Ieyasu: only the moment itself will decide. He had already given promises to Ieyasu, but they were only promises, words; they did not necessarily



mean anything yet. Only the moment would decide for Hideaki, whether left or right, West or East. The fate of tens of thousands of warriors, of millions of people, depended in the battle of Sekigahara on this wavering point Hideaki, the son of one of the Kawas.

## 12.

Now let us turn to the son of the other Kawa: Kikkawa Hiroie (1561-1625). His father had fought long, hard campaigns against Hideyoshi in which the sons had also taken part. The assassination of Oda Nobunaga had forced Hideyoshi to make peace with them. Hideyoshi tried to form close ties with Hiroda the son (who had inherited the great Daimyonate), by giving him his adopted daughter in marriage. Looking into the soul of this man, we also find vacillation. He did not know the meaning of loyalty, he would follow the moment, the greater power. He, too, had begun overtures with Ieyasu before the battle of Sekigahara. One might say that he had felt instinctively where the true power lay.

It does not seem as if he had gone over entirely to Ieyasu. He was waiting, active in his very inactivity. When he was sure that Ieyasu was succumbing, he would attack him suddenly in the rear; and Mori and the others behind him would follow. This Kikkawa held the fatal position at the head of the large contingents occupying the slopes of Mount Nangu. He covered up the vision of those behind him, literally as well as metaphorically speaking.

## 13.

As yet, everything was vague, undecided. For a moment there was almost a vacuum. How would the dice fall? Historians usually see history retrospectively. They tell us that everything was bound to happen the way it did. At the instant of happening, however, everything fluctuates and can turn out this way or that. But even at that instant there are people with an intuition, an instinctive feeling for how matters stand and how they will turn out. High officers who have taken part in many battles know

this feeling; some have this gift in abundance, others do not have it at all.

Ieyasu had this instinct. Now, at this moment at Sekigahara, he acted. "I shall force his decision! That wavering Hideaki must show his true colors. Either for me, as he has already secretly promised, or against me, and then I will smash him!" Ieyasu had sent messenger after messenger to Hideaki with urgent summonses. Hideaki made no move; he only seemed to grow more and more reserved, even hostile. Then at noon, when Ieyasu's position was so desperate, he let loose a hail of missiles on Hideaki.

At this overwhelming turn of events, the vacillating Hideaki made up his mind: Ieyasu had snatched him over to his side. There were several other minor formations which had, for various reasons, become adherents of Hideaki or placed themselves under his command. Hideaki now stormed down the slope on which his units were standing and attacked Otani. Otani fought like a tiger, having been circumspect enough to have built entrenchments facing that slope. After three vain attacks, Hideaki was forced to withdraw. Thereupon, under pressure from Ieyasu, other small traitor formations on the northern slope of Mount Matsuo attacked Otani from the front and from the south.

Hideaki renewed his attacks on Otani's rear. Under this triple attack, Otani was the first commander of the Western army to succumb. Although he was seriously ill, he had come from far off, from the north coast. He was bound by loyalty and fulfilled his duty to the last. In accordance with *bushi* tradition, he committed suicide on the battlefield.

Had Mori and the others at Mount Nangu, on the other side of the battlefield, been active; had they advanced and seen for themselves how matters stood; and had they then thrust at the rear of the Eastern Army, the latter would have suffered a debacle. But these allies of the West lacked unity and the desire to do their utmost for Hideyoshi's side. They waited. And to the one Kawa

(Hideaki), who had gone over to Ieyasu, was added here the other—Kikkawa. He did nothing, and believed that he would serve his own purposes best in this way. Ieyasu later rewarded him as he deserved: he took everything from him and condemned him to a life of poverty.

## 14.

In circumstances such as these, the battle became more and more hopeless for the people of the West. The troops of the great Daimyo Ukita of Okayama and those of Konishi Yukinaga were routed, as were those of Mitsunari (who hid himself in the mountains). Entirely surrounded by the enemy, the bold Daimyo Shimazu, a true Satsuma man, made the daring decision to thrust his way right through the center of the main enemy forces. Mr. Fuji's report goes on to say:

"Straight ahead, a few hundred meters away, he could see Ieyasu's headquarters. In order to bring about a final decision, he assembled what was left of his forces, a little over two hundred men, and formed a phalanx with which he now stormed in a straight line toward Ieyasu's headquarters. Passing the front of these headquarters, he valiantly fought his way along the highway which leads to the towns of Taru and Toki and managed to get back to his native district of Satsuma in Kyushu."

Compared with modern figures, this break-through was a very small one. Seen from the point of view of military history, however, it is one of the most outstanding achievements in war strategy. And more than that: the Satsuma clan which had thus been saved was, together with the Tosa clan, for two and a half centuries the

most indefatigable enemy of the Tokugawa regime. The Meiji Restoration is largely the work of the Satsumas and the Tosas.

## 15.

Visitors to old battlefields often enjoy finding relics there. At Sekigahara they will find nothing. Ieyasu took everything, even the most insignificant objects. The battle had hardly been fought and the decapitated heads of the enemies inspected according to old custom, when Ieyasu ordered his troops to march against Mitsunari and his castle of Sawayama. The castle fell, and Mitsunari was decapitated together with Konishi and others. Hideaki the traitor was rewarded with a large fief. He plunged into a frenzy of worldly pleasures, and his own vassals fled from him to the four winds. Suffering from a heart disease, he died at the age of twenty-five without an heir. His estates fell to the Tokugawas.

Ieyasu's final goal was naturally the conquest of Osaka Castle. The great Osaka struggle ensued. The moving spirit in the defense of Osaka Castle was Hideyoshi's widow Yodogimi. In Okamoto Kido's play, *Osaka Castle*, the magnificent drama unrolls before our eyes. At the end of the battle, when the defeated knights are ready one and all to commit suicide and to kill the women, Yodogimi stands erect in almost superhuman stature and prophesies Ieyasu's imminent death: "Within a year we shall beckon to you from that other world! Within a year, Ieyasu will be dead." And so it happened. Nikko, Ieyasu's world-famous memorial, represents in the narrow sense the end of these struggles. In a wider sense, however, the reply was Meiji and the new Japan.

