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British Trade at Hakodate during the Boshin War

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ABSTRACT

The Boshin War (1868-69) fought between loyalists to the Tokugawa Shogunate and an alliance of domains rallying around the Japanese emperor was a major turning point in Japanese history. Though foreign powers, Britain included, remained officially neutral during the larger part of this civil conflict, several foreign actors contradicted this position. Existing literature and popular histories assume that British actors were no exception and they are suspected to have favored the Imperial forces against the Tokugawa Shogunate despite official neutrality. Utilizing the British consular reports from Hakodate, I examine the activities of British merchants during the later stages of the Boshin War. Hakodate, an open port which switched hands several times during the conflict, was occupied for seven months by the so-called 'Ezo Republic' which offered the final resistance to new Meiji regime. During this occupation, the British consulate and British traders continued to operate and the sources they produced provide an on-the-ground insight into the reality of British trade and neutrality. I argue that British were actively involved in the conflict by the sales of weapons and other key military supplies, as well as in conveying troops for both sides. These risky business activities contradicted the official policy of neutrality but were tolerated by the consular authorities. This marked the peak in Hakodate's foreign trade, at least for British merchants.

Keywords: Boshin War, Anglo-Japanese Trade, Meiji Restoration, Hokkaido.

1. BRITISH NEUTRALITY AND THE BOSHIN WAR

The Boshin War (1868-9) was the culmination of a more than decade long political struggle between the Tokugawa Shogunate and rival domains. The political positions of those involved shifted several times during the more than decade-long manoeuvrings that took place in the wake of the conclusion of treaties with several powers which had served to undermine Tokugawa legitimacy. By 1867 the rival domains of southwestern Japan, principally Satsuma and Chōshū, but also including Tosa and Hizen, had covertly agreed to unite forces and rally round the person of the Emperor so as to bring an end to Tokugawa rule. This took place in a two-step process with the last Tokugawa Shogun, Yoshinobu, resigning his position (*taisei hōkan*) in November 1867 without blood being spilt. However, as the Tokugawa were still by far the largest landholders they maintained considerable power and looked likely to dominate whatever political settlement emerged. This was unacceptable to the southwestern domains and thus the second step involved armed conflict. The southwestern domains sought to provoke the Tokugawa into war by effectively seizing the Emperor and declaring the restoration of Imperial rule in January 1868 (widely known as the Meiji Restoration). This prompted a Tokugawa force stationed in Osaka to march on the Imperial capital, Kyoto. Clashes began at Toba-Fushimi, south of Kyoto, on 27 January 1868 and within a few days these clashes concluded with a resounding victory for the "Imperial" side. Over the following months of 1868 the Imperial side

marched eastwards and secured Edo (Tokyo) by the end of June before a campaign was launched against northeastern domains who were loyal to the Tokugawa or questioned the legitimacy of the southwestern domains behind the restoration of Imperial rule. By the end of November, following intense fighting, the Imperial forces had quashed the resistance in the northeast, but the remnants of the Tokugawa navy and some of the northeastern domains' forces rallied at Hakodate, an open or "treaty" port located on the southern tip of Ezo (today's Hokkaidō), and forced the expeditionary force sent by the Imperial side to flee. This resistance was able to hold out until June 1869 when after fierce fighting on land and at sea the Imperial forces recaptured Hakodate and in so doing brought an end to the Boshin War (Hōya 2007).

The foreign powers with a presence in Japan took a keen interest in the conflict though they did not intervene militarily. For the most part they were concerned about the protection of their interests and thus they, Britain included, remained officially neutral during the larger part of what was an internal conflict though it is often argued that the British Minister to Japan, Harry Parkes, and some of his officers favoured the Imperial side (Cortazzi 2004, 46-47). Whatever the case behind the scenes, the official policy of neutrality was communicated to British subjects in Japan via local consuls in each of the treaty ports. The first was a notification issued by Harry Parkes on 18 February 1868 which stressed that "a strict and impartial neutrality should be observed by all British subjects" who were to "abstain from taking part in any operations of war against either of the contending parties, or in aiding or abetting any person in carrying on war for or against either of the said parties." The lengthy notification went on to prohibit "fitting out, arming, or equipping any ship or vessel to be employed as a ship of war or transport by either of the said contending parties" and "carrying officers, soldiers, despatches, arms, military stores, or materials, or any articles considered or deemed to be contraband of war," which were deemed as acts "liable to several penalties and penal consequences." Indeed, any British subject engaging in such acts, it continued, "may forfeit all claim to Her Majesty's protection and to the rights and privileges of the Treaty concluded between Great Britain and Japan" (FO 796/40, 1869).

In the months that followed Parkes continued to insist on British neutrality and issued a notification in September 1868 warning British subjects not to travel to the port of Niigata which had been due to be opened to trade in 1868 but was at the frontline of the conflict. Anyone who travelled there, he stated, would be doing so "at his own risk" (Ibid.). Nevertheless, as the Imperial sides' victory in the northeast became clear Parkes and indeed the other powers recognized the Imperial side as the legitimate government of Japan, officially removing their neutrality in December 1868. This left the final Tokugawa resistance led by Enomoto Takeaki, which stormed Hakodate in the same month, isolated diplomatically. They were soon labelled "pirates" by the British authorities. In response to the Tokugawa forces regrouping at Hakodate, Parkes issued another notification to British subjects in Japan on 15 January 1869 urging that they "not take part in these internal disturbances." More specifically the notification prohibited British subjects from any efforts to "land or embark, at Hakodate, troops, arms or munitions of war," actions which potentially carried three months imprisonment, hard labour, and/or a fine of five-hundred silver dollars (Ibid.).

In this brief paper I show that despite this policy of neutrality and eventual recognition of the Imperial side, several British (and other foreign merchants) went against this position by selling armaments and conveying troops. In practice the enforcement of neutrality was lax at best, and it might be said that British policy was more rhetoric than reality. Utilizing the British consular reports from Hakodate, a port which changed hands several times during the Boshin War, I demonstrate the reality of British neutrality. Despite the conflict, or rather because of it, British trade peaked in 1869 as British merchants scrambled to supply the war needs of both sides of the conflict.

2. IMPERIAL TAKEOVER

Though the effect of the conflict would be felt later at Hakodate than elsewhere, the northern treaty port was essentially cut off from regular communications for much of the Boshin War. This meant that the British consul, Richard Eusden, often had to act according to his own initiative. At times unsure of how to act in the British interest, Eusden made sure to keep a detailed record of what was transpiring

in the northern part of Japan. As the balance of power shift several times, he was open to dialogue with both parties in the conflict until, that is, he received clear instructions on Britain's position.

News of the conflict breaking out only reached Hakodate in March 1868 and up until that point the situation in the port had been calm. Despite signs of unease on the part of the Tokugawa authorities, it was not until mid-June, around the time of the surrender of the Shogun's capital, that the conflict became visible in Hakodate itself. With the locus of the conflict shifting towards the northeast, some of the northeastern domains who continued to resist the Imperial takeover called on Hakodate before returning to their domains. Eusden recorded the arrival in Hakodate, for example, of approximately 1,000 troops from the Aizu domain who were transported "in foreign vessels chartered by their Prince" (BCH 1868, 22). The Aizu domain had a presence in Hakodate and most likely called to collect the remainder of their forces there and bring them back to Aizu before the Imperial forces reached their domain. Eusden also noted a similar case in which another northeastern domain, Shōnai, hastily sold off their property in Hakodate and withdrew their garrison to their home province again chartering a foreign ship for the purpose. As British shipping tended to dominate among the foreign powers in Japan, it is likely that at least some of these charters were with British parties.

Days after these withdrawals, an expeditionary force from the Imperial side took Hakodate, the Tokugawa Governor handing over authority without a fight. Relations between the foreign consuls, now cut off from regular communications, and the Imperial force got off to a frosty start as official contacts with the new Governor were much delayed. The news of the conflict that did filter in to Hakodate was often brought by foreign vessels carrying troops. Charters were also made by the Imperial forces, with the British steamship "Osaca" conveying "five hundred Imperial troops from Edo to join the fighting at Niigata and also to attack Aizu" (Ibid., 33). Yet, despite the Imperial side capturing Hakodate, foreign vessels continued to transport troops for the resistance despite the objections of the newly established Imperial Governor of Hakodate. Even after the foreign consuls had warmed to the Imperial authorities established at Hakodate, an American steamer "Augusta" was chartered with the assistance of Thomas Blakiston, a British merchant based at Hakodate, in order to convey troops to Akita to fight against the Imperial side. Blakiston would also later, together with Japanese merchant Yanagida Tōkichi, convey troops and secure arms and other military supplies for the Imperial side (Okuda 2008, 66-75). Upon returning to Hakodate, the "Augusta" carried news of Imperial victories in the northeast but also of the presence of the Tokugawa fleet in the area.

3. TOKUGAWA RETURN AND DEFEAT

On 4 December 1868, Eusden reported the presence of the Tokugawa fleet around Hakodate and the landing of 600 men nearby (BCH 1868, 80). Though the Imperial authorities at Hakodate were bolstered by the landing of 800 troops brought over from Akita in a foreign vessel, they soon had no choice but to flee again in chartered foreign vessels. On 8 December 1868 Eusden sent a despatched to Parkes which reported that Hakodate had been taken by a Tokugawa force which had restored order and promised to protect foreign property and permit trade (Ibid., 93).

By this point Britain had recognised the Imperial forces as the legitimate government of Japan, however, this information had not yet reached Eusden. As the occupying Tokugawa forces rapidly established official contacts with the foreign consuls in port and displayed their capability of maintaining order and protecting foreign interests, Eusden tentatively recognized them as the de facto authorities, just as he had done the Imperial side when they occupied the port. The Tokugawa force numbered approximately 3,500 men and included several warships and was thus boasted considerable military capabilities. Nevertheless, cut off from the rest of the country it would be impossible to sustain such a force from Hakodate given the sparsely populated and agriculturally underdeveloped hinterland of Ezo. This force thus required the help of foreign merchants to supply military armaments and other supplies, transport coal and also to import food. Exacting a heavy tax burden on Hakodate's Japanese merchants via temporary taxes and loans, the Tokugawa forces attempted to hold out whilst negotiating a settlement with the Imperial side.

In order to finance their forces or in lieu of payment for military supplies, the Tokugawa also sold off assets and leases to members of the foreign community. In February 1869, Eusden reported that "there are foreigners here who are availing themselves of the present unsettled state of affairs to obtain land." The names he mentioned included French subjects and even the US Consul. Though British subjects were also involved, Eusden refrained from mentioning them in any of his despatches (BCH 1869, 24). At this point British and other foreign merchants were engaging in supplying weapons to the desperate Tokugawa forces. In truth as the Boshin War had proceeded so swiftly in the favour of the Imperial side, foreign merchants who had made orders for firearms and ammunition suddenly faced a drastic fall in demand (Fuess 2020). As such they were also desperate to find buyers and the Tokugawa forces at Hakodate represented a risky but willing buyer. Dealers at the other ports such as Yokohama and Nagasaki utilized contacts with agents at Hakodate to reach out to the Tokugawa forces. Given that these deals contravened British policy and could carry sanction the records of such transactions are only fragmentary.

The Tokugawa resistance's efforts to reach out to the Imperial forces came to nothing in the end. Instead the Imperial side decided to wait for the winter had passed before launching their campaign to retake Ezo. This was done with the aim of diminishing the Tokugawa force's supplies and morale before an attack. In the spring, the Imperial forces began to organize their attack force at Aomori, across the Tsugaru Straits from Hakodate, and British merchants began to provide them with supplies and intelligence. Some also made money by smuggling people out of Hakodate (Lensen 1968, 49). Soon the Imperial side began landing forces on Ezo and these would march on Hakodate by mid-May where a naval battle also ensued. By the end of June 1869, the Tokugawa forces had surrendered after fierce resistance and the Boshin War ended.

Though Eusden's record is far from perfect on the final weeks of the conflict—he fled Hakodate to the safety of a British warship as the battle of Hakodate, though he could still observe the conflict from a distance—it gives some indication of the risky attempts by British and other foreign merchants to profit from the conflict. During this final phase of the conflict, a British barque, "Runnymede", for example, was reported by Eusden as having brought twenty Japanese, a French Military Officer, and a Dutchman to join the Tokugawa forces. Other British barques, "Gaucho" and "Albion", were reported as having conveyed coal to the Tokugawa forces for use in their naval ships, though these acts were clearly against the British position. These vessels also likely carried firearms and ammunition. British vessels were also active in conveying troops for the Imperial side, with the British vessel "Osaca", for example, transporting about fifty Imperial soldiers to the coal mines at Iwanai in order to cut off the supply of coal to the Tokugawa forces (BCH 1869, 63). These acts supporting the Imperial side were no longer a contravention of British policy as Parkes had declared Britain's recognition of the Imperial government. However, the fact that both sides were able to utilize the shipping and supply services of British actors, and that those engaging in them went unpunished, demonstrates that British policy was routinely ignored by its subjects in an effort to profit from the conflict.

4. A SNAPSHOT OF BRITISH TRADE AT HAKODATE IN 1869

Prior to and following the Boshin War Hakodate's foreign trade had been dominated by the export of Ezo marine products—in particular kelp, abalone and iriko—which were exported to China where the enjoyed a healthy demand from Chinese consumers (Ivings and Qiu 2019). In most years, imports were limited as Hakodate and its hinterland were sparsely populated, making for little demand. In most years exports typically accounted for anything between three-quarters and nine-tenths of the port's trade. British firms, in collaboration with Chinese merchants, were dominant in the shipping of these exports to China, though it must be said that Hakodate's foreign trade was dwarfed by the scale of its domestic trade with other Japanese ports (Ivings 2017). Prior to the Boshin War, Hakodate's foreign trade had not exceeded a million silver dollars (hereafter $) and in 1868 with the war raging in central Japan, remote Hakodate's trade was negatively affected, falling from $857,418 to $655,188.

In 1869, however, the presence of the Tokugawa forces in Hakodate provided a boon to the port's trade which rose to $1,780,035. For the first time the port's trade was almost balanced between exports and imports, the later accounting for a record 44% of the port's total trade (Ibid., 123).

Eusden's trade report for 1869 listed cotton and woollen manufactures, coal, rice and arms as the main imports that year, all of which he attributed to the presence of the Tokugawa forces. Silk and silkworm eggs, "brought up here by the Tokugawa squadron," and the regular exports of marine products were given as the main exports (CRJ 1870, 72-79). Though Eusden recognized the importance of the conflict moving north on Hakodate's trade, these figures represent an underestimation of the extent of the trade and profiteering engaged in by foreign merchants. Eusden acknowledged in his reports the difficulties he had in compiling accurate records in such a tumultuous year. Given that much of the activity was technically illegal and involved providing services such as shipping, it went unrecorded in trade figures. Naturally, it was also in the interest of those conducting trade in items such as armaments and ammunition or with parties with whom it was prohibited to transact to act covertly, whilst it is also possible that Eusden decided to overlook such digressions on the part of British subjects. With this in mind it must be concluded that the Boshin boom of 1869 was far bigger than that recorded by foreign consuls such as Eusden.

5. FINAL REMARKS

In his summary report on British trade in 1869, Eusden confirmed that arms and other military supplies had been important imports during the year. Though Eusden stated that these items "were imported for the Tokugawas, and were brought up in other ships but British and French," his detailed consular reports in 1868 and 1869 contradict this (CRJ 1870, 72). Instead, as shown above, they reveal that British merchants were actively involved in the conflict selling weapons and other key military supplies, as well as in conveying troops for both sides. Indeed, only a few months into 1870 Eusden found himself chasing up claims for and against British merchants on broken contracts for military supplies. In one such case, the Hakodate-based British merchant Alexander Porter and Nagasaki-based British firm Glover & Co. were involved in supplying the Tsugaru domain, then resisting the Imperial forces, with Enfield rifles and ammunition (BCH 1870, 157-171).

The involvement of Glover & Co. in this case is interesting as the firm's head, Thomas B. Glover, has long been thought to have favoured the Imperial side (Checkland 1989, 8-9; Sugiyama 1993). As the Boshin War turned out to be unexpectedly short-lived, British merchants who had ordered arms to sell in Japan found the demand for their imports plummet. As Hakodate was the only open port where ready buyers could be found, it naturally became the focus of the attempts of British firms to dispose of their excess supply of rifles and ammunition, etc. Thus, right until the very end of the conflict British merchants, even those based at other ports, sought to profit from the continuing conflict in the northeast. This is suggestive of a greater involvement of foreign actors in the Boshin War then has hitherto been assumed. The potential for windfall profits prompted foreign commercial interests, British included, to offer their logistical and commercial services to both parties of Japan's civil conflict.

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