

## The Meiji Restoration

### Overthrowing the Shogunate

During Japan's Tokugawa shogunate (1600–1868), Asia underwent major changes. Before the shogunate was established, European trade and colonization had begun in several port cities. These open trade and colonization policies changed, however, when the ruling shoguns resisted Western influence, issuing edicts that limited Japan's contact with the outside world. Foreign missionaries and traders were expelled. **The Act of Seclusion of 1636** prohibited trade with Western nations. Aside from a small Dutch outpost at Nagasaki, Japan remained closed to Western traders for two hundred years. Even though trade with Western countries was banned, commerce within the country grew. New cities were constructed, and merchants thrived. But the strict feudal structures of the shogunate kept power firmly centered with the Tokugawa lords and their vassals.

Although the shoguns tried to exclude foreign influences, Westerners were not content to leave Japan in isolation. Britain's victory over China in the First Opium War (1839–1842) showed the growing ascendancy of the Western powers in the region. In 1853 Commodore Matthew C. Perry (1794–1858) came to Japan to ask the Japanese government to allow U.S. merchants to do business in the country. After his request was denied, he returned in 1854 with a large military force. The shogun was forced to sign the **Treaty of Kanagawa**, opening Japan to trade with the United States, ending the country's isolation and setting off a chain of events that would lead to the downfall of the shogunate.

After the Treaty of Kanagawa, Japan signed similar agreements with Britain and Russia. This influx of Western trade increased inflation, poor harvests increased discontent, and protests broke out among the peasantry. The shogunate's tight control on positions of power had caused disaffection among many of the daimyo and the samurai. They began to call for a restoration of the emperor's power, using the slogan *Sonno, joi*, meaning "Revere the emperor; expel the barbarian."

In 1866 the Chōshū and Satsuma domains joined together to defeat the Tokugawa in battle. On January 3, 1868, they took the imperial palace in Kyoto and proclaimed the **restoration of imperial rule**. Fighting continued until October 1868, but the shogunate's loyalists were outnumbered. The sixteen-year-old emperor, **Mutsuhito** (1852–1912), took the name of **Meiji**, meaning "enlightened." This event marked the beginning of the Meiji period (1868–1912). Real power, however, rested with the Chōshū and Satsuma leaders who had overthrown the shoguns.

### A New Path for Japan

The Charter Oath of April 1868 outlined the path that the Meiji government would take. The purpose of this imperial declaration was to reassure both the feudal domains and the Western powers of the aims of the new government. The emperor and his ministers promised to establish deliberative assemblies, allow social mobility, and **search for knowledge throughout the world**. In fulfilling these aims, the Meiji government would turn Japan from a feudal lordship into a modern nation-state.

The Meiji government moved quickly to overturn Japan's feudal structure. In 1871 the emperor proclaimed the end of the daimyo's control of the land. These domains were turned into prefectures, which were governed by appointees of the Meiji. The armies of the domains were to be disbanded, and a new national army was to take their place. In 1873 a new system of military conscription was established. All Japanese men, from every social class, had to serve in the army for three years. The institution of conscription marked the end of the power and privileges of the samurai warriors, who had previously been the only military force in Japan. In 1876 the samurai were forbidden from wearing their traditional swords. The last effort of the samurai to maintain their previous role in society came with the Satsuma Rebellion in 1877, led by the samurai warrior Saigō Takamori (1828–1877). The

samurai were greatly outnumbered by the national army, which also had the advantage of training in modern methods of warfare and access to modern weaponry and artillery. The army defeated the samurai rebellion, putting an end to the samurai as an important social force in Japan.

To fund the government, the Meiji leaders reformed the system of taxing agriculture. They created the yen, Japan's first national currency, and instructed people to pay their taxes in money rather than in rice, which had been the previous method of payment. They started to modernize industry, creating mines, shipyards, and factories. They built railroads and introduced the telegraph. They gave special privileges to some private industries, on the understanding that these industries would help to accomplish government goals. They also introduced compulsory education for all, building schools all over the country, as well as a new university in the capital city.

In 1889 the emperor announced the completion of the Meiji constitution. It established a new parliament, called the Diet, which met for the first time in 1890. At first only the richest people in Japan could vote, but in 1925 all men gained the right to vote in elections. The Diet met in the new imperial capital, Edo, which the Meiji renamed Tokyo.

### **Resistance to Change**

Although these changes were made in the name of the emperor and national defense, the loss of privileges brought some resentment and rebellion. When the top leadership left to travel in Europe and the United States to study Western ways in 1872, conservative groups argued that Japan should reply to Korea's refusal to revise a centuries old treaty with an invasion. This would help patriotic samurai to regain their importance. But the new leaders quickly returned from Europe and reestablished their control, arguing that Japan should concentrate on its own modernization and not engage in such foreign adventures.

For the next twenty years, in the 1870s and 1880s, the top priority remained domestic reform aimed at changing Japan's social and economic institutions along the lines of the model provided by the powerful Western nations. The final blow to conservative samurai came in the 1877 **Satsuma rebellion**, when the government's newly drafted army, trained in European infantry techniques and armed with modern Western guns, defeated the last resistance of the traditional samurai warriors. With the exception of these few samurai outbreaks, Japan's domestic transformation proceeded with remarkable speed, energy, and the cooperation of the people. This phenomenon is one of the major characteristics of Japan's modern history.

### **Meiji Ideology**

In an effort to unite the Japanese nation in response to the Western challenge, the Meiji leaders created a civic ideology centered around the emperor. Although the emperor wielded no political power, he had long been viewed as a symbol of Japanese culture and historical continuity. He was the head of the **Shintô religion**, Japan's native religion. Among other beliefs, Shintô holds that the emperor is descended from the sun goddess and the gods who created Japan and therefore is semi-divine. Westerners of that time knew him primarily as a ceremonial figure. The Meiji reformers brought the emperor and Shintô to national prominence, replacing Buddhism as the national religion, for political and ideological reasons. By associating Shintô with the imperial line, which reached back into legendary times, Japan had not only the oldest ruling house in the world, but a powerful symbol of age-old national unity. The people seldom saw the emperor, yet they were to carry out his orders without question, in honor to him and to the unity of the Japanese people, which he represented. In fact, the emperor did not rule. It was his "advisers," the small group of men who exercised political control, that devised and carried out the reform program in the name of the emperor.

### **Social and Economic Changes**

The abolition of feudalism made possible tremendous social and political changes. Millions of people were suddenly free to choose their occupation and move about without restrictions. By providing a new environment of political and financial security, the government made possible investment in new industries and technologies.

The government led the way in this, building railway and shipping lines, telegraph and telephone systems, three shipyards, ten mines, five munitions works, and fifty-three consumer industries (making sugar, glass, textiles, cement, chemicals, and other important products). This was very expensive, however, and strained government finances, so in 1880 the government decided to sell most of these industries to private investors, thereafter encouraging such activity through subsidies and other incentives. Some of the samurai and merchants who built these industries established major corporate conglomerates called zaibatsu, which controlled much of Japan's modern industrial sector.

The government also introduced a national educational system and a constitution, creating an elected parliament called the Diet. They did this to provide a good environment for national growth, win the respect of the Westerners, and build support for the modern state. In the Tokugawa period, popular education had spread rapidly, and in 1872 the government established a national system to educate the entire population. By the end of the Meiji period, almost everyone attended the free public schools for at least six years. The government closely controlled the schools, making sure that in addition to skills like mathematics and reading, all students studied "moral training," which stressed the importance of their duty to the emperor, the country and their families.

The 1889 constitution was "given" to the people by the emperor, and only he (or his advisers) could change it. A parliament was elected beginning in 1890, but only the wealthiest one percent of the population could vote in elections. In 1925 this was changed to allow all men (but not yet women) to vote.

### **The International Climate: Colonialism and Expansion**

In 1894 Japan fought a war against China over its interest in Korea, which China claimed as a vassal state. The Korean peninsula is the closest part of Asia to Japan, less than 100 miles by sea, and the Japanese were worried that the Russians might gain control of that weak nation. Japan won the war and gained control over Korea and gained Taiwan as a colony. Japan's sudden, decisive victory over China surprised the world and worried some European powers.

At this time the European nations were beginning to claim special rights in China — the French, with their colony in Indochina (today's Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia), were involved in South China; the British also claimed special rights in South China, near Hong Kong, and later the whole Yangtze valley; and the Russians, who were building a railway through Siberia and Manchuria, were interested in North China. After Japan's victory over China, Japan signed a treaty with China which gave Japan special rights on China's Liaotung peninsula, in addition to the control of Taiwan. But Japan's victory was short lived. Within a week, France, Russia, and Germany combined to pressure Japan to give up rights on the Liaotung peninsula. Each of these nations then began to force China to give it ports, naval bases, and special economic rights, with Russia taking the same Liaotung peninsula that Japan had been forced to return.

The Japanese government was angered by this incident and drew the lesson that for Japan to maintain its independence and receive equal treatment in international affairs, it was necessary to strengthen its military even further. By 1904, when the Russians were again threatening to establish control over Korea, Japan was much stronger. It declared war on Russia and, using all its strength, won victory in 1905

(beginning with a surprise naval attack on Port Arthur, which gained for Japan the control of the China Sea). Japan thus achieved dominance over Korea and established itself a colonial power in East Asia.

### **The Period 1912-1941**

The Meiji reforms brought great changes both within Japan and in Japan's place in world affairs. Japan strengthened itself enough to remain a sovereign nation in the face of Western colonizing powers and indeed became a colonizing power itself. During the Taishô period (1912-1926), Japanese citizens began to ask for more voice in the government and for more social freedoms. During this time, Japanese society and the Japanese political system were significantly more open than they were either before or after. The period has often been called the period of "Taishô democracy." One explanation is that, until World War I, Japan enjoyed record breaking economic prosperity. The Japanese people had more money to spend, more leisure, and better education, supplemented by the development of mass media. Increasingly they lived in cities where they came into contact with influences from abroad and where the traditional authority of the extended family was less influential. Industrialization in itself undermined traditional values, emphasizing instead efficiency, independence, materialism, and individualism. During these years Japan saw the emergence of a "mass society" very similar to the "Roaring 20s" in the United States. During these years also, the Japanese people began to demand universal manhood suffrage which they won in 1925. Political parties increased their influence, becoming powerful enough to appoint their own prime ministers between 1918 and 1931.

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