

The Meiji Restoration of 19th-century Japan

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Image 1. Print from 1889 showing the moment when the Meiji Constitution was declared. The Meiji Restoration was the period in which Japan made its political organization more modern. It soon became one of the world's major powers. Image from the public domain

The Meiji Restoration lasted from 1866 to 1869 in Japan. It caused a major change in Japan. For hundreds of years, Japan was ruled by a shogun — a military ruler who had an army of samurai warriors and troops.

However, Emperor Meiji ended the power of the shoguns from the Tokugawa family. The emperor became the most powerful person in Japanese politics and culture again. Emperor Meiji began to change the country.

Background To The Meiji Restoration

Commander Matthew Perry of the United States Navy arrived in Tokyo Bay in 1853 with four Navy ships. He demanded that the Tokugawa Shogun open Japan to trade with powerful Western countries. The Western countries were the United States and European countries such as Great Britain.

Japan's political leaders realized that the Western countries had better weapons and armies. These leaders felt threatened by imperialism from the West. Imperialism is the desire to expand power and land through force or threats.

Nearby, 14 years earlier, China had been crushed by Britain in the First Opium War. Rather than face that same end, some of Japan's leaders wanted to block the influence of other countries.

Other leaders thought Japan needed to become more modern. They felt that it was important to have a strong emperor in Japan to make Japan powerful. Perhaps this could fight off Western imperialism.

The Satsuma/Choshu Alliance



Since 1603, shoguns from the Tokugawa family had ruled Japan. The emperor was around, but he had no power. In 1866, the governors of the Satsuma Domain and Choshu Domain – two large Japanese regions – agreed to join together. They hoped to replace the Tokugawa shogun with Emperor Komei. Through him, they thought they could better defend against other countries.

However, Komei died in January 1867. His teenage son became Emperor Meiji on February 3, 1867.

On November 19, 1867, Tokugawa Yoshinobu left his role as the 15th Tokugawa shogun. Still, the shogun would not give up control of Japan so easily.

Emperor Meiji, coached by the Satsuma and Choshu lords, announced a ruling to end the Tokugawa family's power. After this, the shogun had no choice but to fight. He sent his samurai and troops toward the emperor's city of Kyoto, hoping to capture or de-throne the emperor.

The Boshin War



On January 27, 1868, Yoshinobu's troops clashed with samurai and troops from the Satsuma/Choshu alliance. The four-day-long Battle of Toba-Fushimi ended in a serious defeat for the shogun. It led to the Boshin War, which means the "Year of the Dragon War." The war lasted until May 1869. The emperor's troops won, because they had newer weapons, like rifles, and new battle methods.

Tokugawa Yoshinobu surrendered to Satsuma on April 11, 1869. Now the Meiji Restoration was unstoppable.

Radical Changes Of The Meiji Era



Soon, the Meiji Emperor and his team of advisers set about making Japan into a powerful modern nation.

They ended the old social class structure, which had put every Japanese person into a rigid group. Also, rich lords were forced to give their land to the emperor. This ended the system of feudalism where peasants had to farm the lord's land in exchange for protection from the samurai. In place of the samurai, the emperor's group established a modern army that used Western-style uniforms and weapons. They ordered elementary education for all boys and girls. In addition, they improved factory production in Japan. In the past, factories were only producing goods such as cloth. They shifted instead to making machinery and weapons.

In 1889, the emperor issued the Meiji Constitution. It made Japan into a constitutional monarchy, modeled after the German empire.

Japan had changed greatly. It was once a semi-isolated island nation, threatened by other countries. Now, it became an empire too. Japan seized control of Korea and defeated China in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95. It then shocked the world by defeating the Russian army in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05.

The Meiji Restoration caused much unrest in Japan. Still, it also allowed the country to become a world power in the early 1900s. Though after World War II, Japan's power would weaken.

Today, however, Japan is one of the most successful countries in the world, with strong businesses. This is due in large part to the reforms of the Meiji Restoration.

Quiz

1 Read the section "Background To The Meiji Restoration."

Which sentence from the section gives a reason WHY Japan feared Western armies?

- (A) Commander Matthew Perry of the United States Navy arrived in Tokyo Bay in 1853 with four Navy ships.
- (B) Nearby, 14 years earlier, China had been crushed by Britain in the First Opium War.
- (C) Other leaders thought Japan needed to become more modern.
- (D) Perhaps this could fight off Western imperialism.

2 Read the section "Radical Changes Of The Meiji Era."

Which detail from the section BEST supports the conclusion that the Meiji Restoration had positive effects on Japan?

- (A) In place of the samurai, the emperor's group established a modern army that used Western-style uniforms and weapons.
- (B) In 1889, the emperor issued the Meiji Constitution. It made Japan into a constitutional monarchy, modeled after the German empire.
- (C) It was once a semi-isolated island nation, threatened by other countries. Now, it became an empire too.
- (D) Today, however, Japan is one of the most successful countries in the world, with strong businesses.

3 What effect did the Boshin War have on Japan?

- (A) It showed Japanese leaders that they were threatened by imperialism from the West.
- (B) It led to the Year of the Dragon War between the new Japanese emperors.
- (C) It created a period of peace between the shogun and the Meiji emperor.
- (D) It allowed Emperor Meiji to take power from the shogun and make major changes in Japan.

- 4 Why did Japan's political leaders decide to overthrow the shogun?
- (A) because they wanted a strong emperor and modern technology to defend against Western countries
 - (B) because they were worried about alliances between the Tokugawa family and Great Britain
 - (C) because Emperor Komei had grown more powerful by gaining the loyalty of the samurai warriors
 - (D) because Japan had already taken control over Korea and defeated China in the Sino-Japanese War