

Meiji Restoration

In 1868 after the coup d'état ousted the Tokugawa Shogunate to put the emperor back on the throne in Japan, a new era in Japan was born. The 15-year-old emperor began the Meiji Restoration and ruled from 1868-1912. Meiji means “enlightened rule”, the emperor thought the only way to compete with the western powers was to become like the western powers. The Meiji reformers wanted to make Japan strong enough to compete with the west, which supports their motto, “A rich country, and a strong military.”

The Meiji set out to study western ways and to adapt them to Japanese needs. These reformers traveled abroad to learn about western government, economies, technology and customs to help modify Japanese society. These reformers also brought western experts to Japan, and sent samurai to study in European and American universities. The Meiji reformers set out to change all outdated Japanese customs. To start they wanted to replace the old feudal order with a new social and political order that followed western rules. The reforms made in government were very significant. They strengthened the central government by modeling theirs after Germany's government. They changed laws now stating that all citizens are equal under the law and created a two house legislature. They also created a western style bureaucracy, which was an administrative policy-making group that was broken up into departments to supervise separate offices to supervise the army, navy, finance and education.

On the political sector, Japan received its first European style constitution in 1889. A parliament, the Diet was established while the emperor kept sovereignty: he stood at the top of the army, navy, executive and legislative power. The ruling clique, however, kept on holding the actual power, and the able and intelligent emperor Meiji agreed with most of their actions. Political parties did not yet gain real power due to the lack of unity among their members.

The economy too was affected by western ideas. Japan's business class began to adopt western ideas. They set up a banking system, and built railroads, improved ports, created a postal system and industrialized. Socially they also set up a constitution, and built schools and a university. Women's rights even improved under the Meiji Restoration.

Japan modernized with amazing speed and by the 1890's they were able to force out all western influences and began to strengthen themselves for their own imperialist needs. Conflicts of interests in Korea between China and Japan led to the **Sino-Japanese War** in 1894-95. Japan defeated China, received Taiwan, but was forced by Russia, France and Germany to return other territories. The so called Triple Intervention caused the Japanese army and navy to intensify their rearmament.

New conflicts of interests in Korea and Manchuria, this time between Russia and Japan, led to the **Russo-Japanese War** in 1904-05. The Japanese army also won this war gaining territory and finally some international respect. Japan further increased her influence on Korea and annexed her completely in 1910. In Japan, the war successes caused nationalism to increase even more. In 1912 emperor Meiji died, and the era of the ruling clique of elder statesmen was about to end.

1. How was Japan going to learn about western ways, what are some things they did?
2. What are some reforms that were made to change the government?
3. How did the Meiji restoration reform Japan's economy? Socially?
4. What happened when Japan modernized?

Lt. Tadayoshi Sakurai: The Attack upon Port Arthur, 1905

The Japanese and the Russian fought a devastating war in 1905. Japan was eventually victorious and after this became a very dominant country economically and imperialistically. This is an account of one of the Lieutenant's of the Japanese army at a major battle during the war.

"As soon as we were gathered together the colonel rose and gave us a final word of exhortation, saying: "This battle is our great chance of serving our country. Tonight we must strike at the vitals of Port Arthur. Our brave assaulting column must be not simply a forlorn-hope, but a "sure-death" detachment. I as your father am more grateful than I can express for your gallant fighting. Do your best, all of you."

Yes, we were all ready for death when leaving Japan. Men going to battle of course cannot expect to come back alive. But in this particular battle to be ready for death was not enough; what was required of us was a determination not to fail to die. Indeed, we were "sure-death" men. Also a telegram that had come from the Minister of War in Tokyo was read by the aide-de-camp, which said, "I pray for your success."

Let me now recount the sublimity and horror of this general assault. The men of the "sure-death" detachment rose to their part. Fearlessly they stepped forward to the place of death. They went over and made their way through the piled-up bodies of the dead, groups of five or six soldiers reaching the barricaded slope one after another. I said to the colonel, "Good-bye, then!" With this farewell I started, and my first step was on the head of a corpse.

There was a fight with bombs at the enemy's skirmish-trenches. The bombs sent from our side exploded finely, and the place became at once a conflagration, boards were flung about, sand-bags burst, heads flew around, legs were torn off. The flames mingled with the smoke, lighted up our faces weirdly, with a red glare, and all at once the battle-line became confused. Then the enemy, thinking it hopeless, left the place and began to flee. "Forward! Forward! Now is the time to go forward! Forward! Pursue! Capture it with one bound!" And, proud of our victory, we went forward courageously.

Captain Kawakami, raising his sword, cried, "Forward!" and then I, standing close by him, cried, "Sakurai's company, forward!" Thus shouting I left the captain's side, and I called the Twelfth Company. "Lieutenant Sakurai!" a voice called out repeatedly in answer. Returning in the direction of the sound, I found Corporal Ito weeping loudly. "What are you crying for? What has happened?" The corporal, weeping bitterly, gripped my arm tightly. "Lieutenant Sakurai, you have become an important person." "What is there to weep about? I say, what is the matter?" He whispered in my ear, "Our captain is dead." Hearing this, I too wept. Was it not only a moment ago that he had given the order "Forward!?" Was it not even now that I had separated from him? And yet our captain was one of the dead. In one moment our tender, pitying Captain Kawakami and I had become beings of two separate worlds. Was it a dream or a reality, I wondered?

From henceforward I command the Twelfth Company." And I ordered that some one of the wounded should carry back the captain's corpse. A wounded soldier was just about to raise it up when he was struck on a vital spot and died leaning on the captain. One after another of the soldiers who took his place was struck and fell. "The Twelfth Company forward!" I turned to the right and went forward as in a dream. I remember nothing clearly of the time. "Keep the line together!" This was my one command.

All at once, as if struck by a club, I fell down sprawling on the ground. I was wounded, struck in my right hand. I raised my wounded hand and looked at it. It was broken at the wrist; the hand hung down and was bleeding profusely. I slowly rubbed my legs, and, seeing that they were unhurt, I again rose.

The long and enormously heavy guns were towering before me, and how few of my men were left alive now! I shouted and told the survivors to follow me, but few answered my call.

When I thought that the other detachments must also have been reduced to a similar condition, my heart began to fail me. No reinforcement was to be hoped for, so I ordered a soldier to climb the rampart and plant the sun flag overhead, but alas! he was shot and killed, without even a sound or cry. All of a sudden a stupendous sound as from another world rose around about me.

"Counter-assault!" A detachment of the enemy appeared on the rampart, looking like a dark wooden barricade. They surrounded us in the twinkling of an eye and raised a cry of triumph. Our disadvantageous position would not allow us to offer any resistance, and our party was too small to fight them. We had to fall back down the steep hill. Looking back, I saw the Russians shooting at us as they pursued. When we reached the earthworks before mentioned, we made a stand and faced the enemy. Great confusion and infernal butchery followed. Bayonets clashed against bayonets; the enemy brought out machine-guns and poured shot upon us pell-mell; the men on both sides fell like grass. But I cannot give you a detailed account of the scene, because I was then in a dazed condition. I only remember that I was brandishing my sword in fury. I also felt myself occasionally cutting down the enemy. I remember a confused fight of white blade against white blade, the rain and hail of shell, a desperate fight here and a confused scuffle there. At last I grew so hoarse that I could not shout any more. Suddenly my sword broke with a clash, my left arm was pierced. I fell, and before I could rise a shell came and shattered my right leg. I gathered all my strength and tried to stand up, but I felt as if I were crumbling and fell to the ground perfectly powerless. A soldier who saw me fall cried, "Lieutenant Sakurai, let us die together!"

I embraced him with my left arm and, gnashing my teeth with regret and sorrow, I could only watch the hand-to-hand fight going on about me. My mind worked like that of a madman, but my body would not move an inch."

Source: From: Eva March Tappan, ed., *The World's Story: A History of the World in Story, Song and Art*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), Vol. I: *China, Japan, and the Islands of the Pacific*, pp. 452-457.

1. What does this say about the Japanese soldier?
2. What else can we learn about war from this document?