

The Meiji Restoration
AP World History
Kienast

In the early nineteenth century Japan was ruled by the Tokugawa Shogunate. Despite the many problems and tensions within the Tokugawa system, it still showed no signs of collapse in the first half of the nineteenth century, and it might have continued for much longer if Japan could have maintained its isolation. But rapid technological advances in the West made this no longer possible. Industrialization and steam powered ships were beginning to bring Western economic and military power around the shores of Japan with a pressure incomparably greater than that exercised by the early seventeenth century Europeans, whom the Tokugawa had driven away.

By the middle of the nineteenth century the European maritime powers had completed the subjugation of the Indian subcontinent, had taken over much of Southeast Asia, and were beating down the doors of China and foisting on it a semi-colonial system of unequal treaties. The Russians had extended their hold over all of Siberia and were pushing southward into the islands north of Japan. American ships sailed past the shores of Japan on their way to the China trade or frequented Japanese coastal waters in search of whales.

Various Western nations had repeatedly tried to persuade the Japanese to open their doors, before the United States in 1853 dispatched about a quarter of its navy, under the command of Commodore Matthew C. Perry, to force the Japanese to give American ships access to their ports. The Japanese had to bow to *force majeure* [the superior force] of Perry's ships with their more modern cannon. These ships could have destroyed Edo and could even more easily have cut off its essential food supplies by blockading the entrance to Edo Bay. The treaty signed in 1854 achieved only a limited success, but Townsend Harris, the American consul permitted by this agreement to reside in Japan, finally managed to negotiate a full trade treaty in 1858, using the threat of British naval power then engaged in war in China to persuade the shogun's government to comply. In both cases, the principal European powers followed suit with similar treaties.

Through these treaties and subsequent agreements, the full unequal treaty system developed in China was applied to Japan. Foreign traders became ensconced at the new port of Yokohama, near Edo, and at other treaty ports, protected by European military forces and the extraterritorial privilege of trial by their own judges under their own laws while treaty limitations of Japanese tariffs left the whole economy open to the machine production of the West. Japan, with its purely preindustrial economy and its archaic feudal system of autonomous domains, seemed as defenseless before Western imperial expansion as the other countries of Asia that had already succumbed.

The Edo government, in the face of Perry's demands, had sought broad national support for its policies but the response, though mixed, was generally negative. Some Japanese had realized from the start that the only defense against the West was to adopt its superior military and economic technology and thus to "expel the barbarians" in the modified sense of achieving security from the West and political equality with it. The leaders of two particularly large "outer" domains, Satsuma, at the southern end of Kyushu, and Choshu, at the western tip of Honshu,

were won over to this view by demonstrations of Western naval might. When Satsuma samurai killed an Englishman near Yokohama, a British fleet in 1863 destroyed Kagoshima, its capital city. Similarly, when Choshu fired on Western ships passing through the Straits of Shimonoseki, an allied fleet in 1864 leveled the Choshu forts. This rebellion led to an overthrow of the shogunate in 1868. The rebels installed the emperor Meiji as the new leader because he promised to pass reforms that would modernize and westernize Japan.

It was a difficult task to wipe out the class divisions of the old system and the special privileges of the samurai. With the disappearance of the domains, the samurai lost their position as a hereditary bureaucratic class, and in 1873 universal military conscription was substituted for the old class basis for military service. In 1876 the samurai were even prohibited from wearing their swords, their badge of distinction. Samurai stipends were also drastically reduced and by 1876 were entirely commuted into relatively small lump-sum payments of cash or government bonds. Thus the samurai in a brief nine-year period were deprived of all their special privileges, and Japan was started on a great change that was to transform its society in a mere generation of two from one in which status was determined primarily by heredity to one in which it depended largely upon the education and achievements of the individual.

Meanwhile the government was being modernized, largely on the model of the nineteenth century West. Ministries like those of Western governments were formed. These included a Ministry of Finance, which was the most powerful because of its control over the purse strings; Army and Navy Ministries, which in 1878 were paralleled by general staffs on the German model; and an Education Ministry, which embarked on an ambitious program of universal education that took some three decades to be put fully into effect. A modern court and legal system, based first on French and then on German models, was laboriously built up but, being closely tied to social realities, was not perfected until 1899. To stabilize revenues and clear up land ownership, fixed monetary taxes were substituted in 1873 for the traditional percentages of agriculture yield, and the payers of the tax, who were the peasants themselves, were confirmed as the outright owners of the land. Modern Japan, unlike post feudal Europe, has had no continuing problem of land ownership by the old feudal classes.

At the same time, efforts were being made to modernize the economy. A modern banking system was created, and the monetary system was reformed with the yen as its unit, worth roughly half an American dollar. Lighthouses were built, and port facilities improved. The country was tied together by a telegraph network. Railroads were constructed, and a line between Tokyo and its port at Yokohama was completed in 1872. Silk production was improved by the mechanical reeling of silk, a simple innovation achieved largely through private capital. Other industries were more costly and took long years to become profitable. The government itself built up strategic industries in the production of weapons and ammunition, developed mining, and pioneered with pilot plants in a variety of other fields. In order to secure the northern island of Hokkaido from Russia penetration, the government also embarked on a costly program of building up the population and agriculture of the island, largely on an American model, complete with silos and herds of cattle.

To carry out all these innovations, the government needed a great deal of Western technical knowledge. It dispatched students abroad to acquire new skills and hired Western experts at great

expense to come to Japan. In these efforts, the Japanese were carefully selective, utilizing the specific national model they felt was best in each field. Since they paid for foreign assistance themselves, they appreciated it more and used it better than have many countries that in more recent times have received aid gratis. But some assistance was free even then. Much of the teaching of English, the necessary language of contact with the West, was provided by Protestant missionaries, largely from the United States.

The restructuring of the government and economy was not accomplished without confusion, much trial and error, serious setbacks, and a great deal of opposition. The most dangerous opposition came from elements of the large samurai class, which had the most to lose. There were several samurai uprisings, culminating in a great revolt in 1877 in Satsuma itself. This was put down only with great difficulty by the new conscript army, but Tokyo's victory in 1877 made it clear that the new government was now safe from military challenge at home.

Told in this brief way, the so-called Meiji Restoration may seem to have been an almost inevitable development. In fact, many scholars make of it simply the expression of supposed laws of history, according to which "absolutist" trends or "bourgeois revolution" automatically followed in the same sequence as in modern Europe. But when the history of Japan from the 1850's to the 1880's is compared with that of other non-Western countries, it stands out as a truly extraordinary experience. No other country responded quickly and successfully to the challenge of superior Western economic and military technology. China, for example, starting a dynastic collapse in the 1840's, did not achieve a unified and stable new political system until a full century later, and it is still to a large extent a pre-industrial country. Most of the other lands of Asia succumbed to colonial rule..

The relatively quick success of the Japanese is not to be attributed mainly to external factors, such as the nature of the impact of the West or the relative size of Japan, for other countries of comparable experience or size reacted quite differently. The reasons should rather be sought to internal characteristics, such as the great homogeneity of the Japanese people and their strong self-identity. Their clear awareness of the possibilities of learning from abroad was also a distinct advantage. Even the social tensions of late Tokugawa times were an asset to a country facing great changes. And it should be remembered that, though preindustrial in economy and feudal in political pattern, Japan's economic and political institutions were highly complex and sophisticated. The country had standards of bureaucratic rule that did not suffer by comparison with the West in either honesty or efficiency. With perhaps 45 percent of its men and 15 percent of its women literate, Japan also had literacy levels not far behind the leading countries of the West. Another important factor was that the whole great change could be justified in Japanese minds, not through newly learned foreign concepts, such as democracy or, later, communism, but by Japan's own ancient system of imperial rule. The utilization of a native ideology undoubtedly smoothed an otherwise wrenching change and made it somewhat less traumatic.

No one can be sure just what combination of traits best explains the extraordinary contrast between Japan and all other non-Western lands on the nineteenth century, but there can be no question of the advantages Japan gained by its early start in modernization.