

# The Meiji Restoration of 19th-century Japan

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Image 1. Print from 1889 depicting the promulgation of the Meiji Constitution. The Meiji Restoration was the period in which Japan modernized its political structure and set itself to become one of the world's major powers. Image from the public domain

From 1866-69, Japan underwent a major change called the Meiji Restoration. For hundreds of years, Japan was ruled by a shogun — a military ruler who had an army of samurai warriors and troops. His government was called a shogunate. The Meiji Restoration was a revolution that ended the power of the shogunate of the Tokugawa family.

The Restoration returned the emperor to a central position in Japanese politics and culture. Emperor Meiji led the Meiji Restoration.

## **Background To The Meiji Restoration**

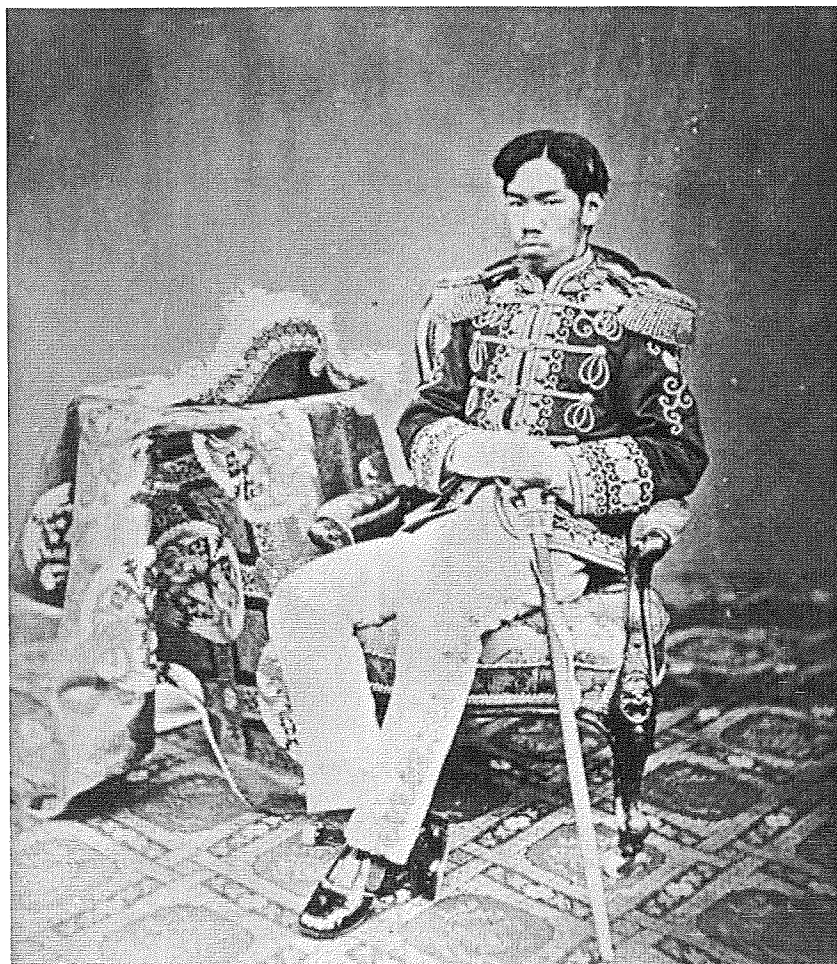
Commander Matthew Perry of the United States Navy steamed into Tokyo Bay in 1853 with four Navy ships. He demanded that the Tokugawa Shogunate open Japan up to allow foreign powers access to trade there. In doing so, he accidentally started a chain of events that led to Japan's rise as a powerful modern empire.

Japan's political elites realized that the United States, Britain and other Western countries were ahead of Japan in their military technology. Japan's elites felt threatened by Western countries' imperialism — in other words, their quest to expand land and power through military force. After all, mighty China ruled by the Qing Dynasty had been crushed by Britain 14 years earlier in the First Opium War. The Chinese would later lose the Second Opium War as well.

Rather than suffer a similar fate, some of Japan's ruling elites sought to close the doors even tighter against foreign influence. The more forward-thinking ones began to plan to make Japan modern. They felt that it was important to have a strong emperor at the center of Japan's political organization. This could project Japanese power and fend off Western imperialism, they thought.

## **The Satsuma/Choshu Alliance**

Since 1603, the Tokugawa Shogunate had ruled from Tokyo in the emperor's name. In 1866, the daimyo, or governors, of two southern Japanese domains – Hisamitsu of Satsuma Domain and Kido Takayoshi of Choshu Domain – formed an alliance against Tokugawa.–



The Satsuma and Choshu leaders sought to overthrow the Tokugawa shogun, or military leader, and place the Emperor Komei into a position of real power. Through him, they felt that they could more effectively meet the foreign threat.

However, Komei died in January 1867. His teenage son Mutsuhito ascended to the throne as Emperor Meiji on February 3, 1867.

On November 19, 1867, Tokugawa Yoshinobu resigned from his role as the 15th Tokugawa shogun. His resignation officially transferred power to the young emperor, but the shogun would not give up actual control of Japan so easily.

Meiji, coached by the Satsuma and Choshu lords, issued an imperial decree that ended the power of the Tokugawa family. After this, the shogun had no choice but to fight. He sent his samurai army and troops toward the imperial city of Kyoto, intending to capture or de-throne the emperor.

## The Boshin War



On January 27, 1868, Yoshinobu's troops clashed with samurai 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, but the emperor's troops with their more modern weaponry, like rifles and cannons, and modern tactics had the advantage from the start.



Tokugawa Yoshinobu surrendered to Saigo Takamori of Satsuma, and handed over Edo Castle on April 11, 1869. Some of the more committed samurai and feudal lords fought on for another month from strongholds in the far north of the country. Still, it was clear that the Meiji Restoration was unstoppable.

## Radical Changes Of The Meiji Era



Once his power was secure, the Meiji Emperor and his team of advisers set about refashioning Japan into a powerful modern nation.

They ended the four-tiered class structure, which had put every citizen into a rigid group. Rich feudal 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. The emperor and his advisers established a modern voluntary army that used Western-style uniforms, weapons and tactics in place of the samurai. They also ordered universal elementary education for boys and girls.

In addition, they set out to improve manufacturing in Japan, which had been based on textiles and other such goods, shifting instead to heavy machinery and weapons manufacturing. In 1889, the emperor issued the Meiji Constitution, which made Japan into a constitutional monarchy modeled on Prussia — the German empire.

Over the course of just a few decades, Japan had changed greatly. It was once a semi-isolated island nation, threatened by foreign imperialism. Now, it was now an imperial power in its own right. Japan seized control of Korea and defeated Qing China in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95. It then shocked the world by defeating the Russian navy and army in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05.

The Meiji Restoration caused much social unrest and pain in Japan. Still, it also enabled the country to join the ranks of world powers in the early 20th century. Japan would go on to ever greater power in East Asia until the tides turned against it in World War II.

Today, however, Japan remains the third-largest economy in the world and a leader in innovation and technology. This is due in large part to the reforms of the Meiji Restoration.