

Tabaruzaka Seinan Civil War Museum

This small museum stands on the site of the Battle of Tabaruzaka, the largest battle of the 1877 Satsuma Rebellion. The battle lasted for 17 days, from March 4 to March 20, with the army of the central government emerging victorious. The battlefield, which spans two hillsides and the valley in between, has been turned into a park planted with cherry trees and azalea bushes.

The rebellion broke out when the samurai of the Satsuma domain (modern-day Kagoshima), feeling their status threatened by the reforms adopted by the Meiji government installed in 1868, decided to march on Tokyo. On their way north, they stopped to lay siege to Kumamoto Castle, which was garrisoned by forces loyal to the Meiji government. Since the loss of the castle would have sent a clear message of weakness and possibly even transformed a local uprising into a national civil war, the government was determined to prevail, and sent imperial troops to break the siege. The government forces heavily outnumbered the rebels and had superior weapons for distance fighting (including imported British firearms), though the rebels, being skilled with swords, were at an advantage in close combat.

The Causes of War

The first room in the museum explores the causes of the war. The second presents a video reenactment of the Battle of Tabaruzaka, complete with a diorama, dramatic lighting, and sound effects. The scenes in the reenactment are based on battlefield excavations that revealed where the fighting was most intense. This is followed by exhibits showing the clothing and weapons of the two sides. The samurai rebels wore their own clothes, while the government forces were composed of conscripts who had been issued uniforms. The main firearm used in this conflict was the fairly up-to-date breech-loading Snider–Enfield rifle, which could be loaded much faster than older muzzle-loading guns. The comparative weakness of the rebels can be seen by the fact that they had to melt down used bullets and cast them for reuse. They were even driven to print a special local Satsuma currency when they ran out of funds.

Just outside the main museum building is a battle-scarred storehouse, a reconstruction of an actual warehouse that once stood nearby. This is used to explain how the high casualties of the Satsuma Rebellion inspired Count Sano Tsunetami (1822–1902) to set

up the Hakuaisha Philanthropic Society, which later evolved into the Japanese Red Cross.