

Boshin War Memorial

This stone monument commemorates the 261 samurai from Matsumoto who fought in the Boshin War (1868–1869), a conflict between the forces of the last Tokugawa shogun and revolutionaries who supported a return to imperial leadership. The Boshin War was the first stage of the Meiji Restoration, which brought about the end of the Tokugawa shogunate, initiated sweeping social and political changes, and ushered in the country's rapid industrialization.

For much of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Tokugawa shogunate had contended with famine, inflation, and peasant revolts. Dissatisfaction with the shogunate was high even among the samurai class, as many low-ranking samurai struggled to feed their families. Although they were nominally still the highest tier of society, samurai of all levels resorted to taking out loans from the thriving merchant class, their supposed social inferiors.

The Tokugawa shogunate was shaken further by the 1853 arrival of Commodore Matthew C. Perry (1794–1858) of the United States Navy, who brought a fleet of warships into Edo Bay and demanded that the shogunate open the country to American trade. In 1854, shogunal officials acceded and signed the first of several highly unequal treaties with foreign powers. Their concessions fueled further criticism of the shogunate.

This disapproval of the Tokugawa leadership, paired with anti-foreign sentiment, catalyzed a faction of discontented daimyos and dispossessed samurai (ronin) to overthrow the shogunate and reinstate the emperor, who for many centuries had held little to no political power. Seeing this growing opposition, the last shogun, Tokugawa Yoshinobu (1837–1913), resigned his position and transferred political authority to the emperor.

Even so, the imperial faction sought to strip the Tokugawa family of its titles and holdings. Samurai from the Satsuma family began a covert campaign of raids, arson, and murder in Edo to sow terror among the populace and undermine support for the shogun. In response, Yoshinobu dispatched soldiers to the imperial court in Kyoto with a letter of protest to the emperor. Yoshinobu's messengers were denied admittance by the revolutionaries, and fighting broke out. This was the start of the Boshin War.

While the imperial loyalists quickly gained support in western Japan, daimyos in central and northern Japan were more divided. The daimyo of Matsumoto was hesitant to choose a side, but on February 29, 1868, he pledged his support for the loyalist faction.

On May 3, 1868, Yoshinobu surrendered Edo Castle, the shogunate's center of administration, without a fight. Despite this, the war continued as the new government pursued the former shogunate's forces to the north and east. In the autumn of 1868, many of the strongest shogunal supporters were forced to yield, and the remnants fled to southern Hokkaido. Ultimately, the Boshin War ended on May 20, 1869, when these holdouts were caught in a surprise attack and compelled to surrender.

The battles fought by the Matsumoto forces in Hokuetsu, Aizu, and Utsunomiya (regions north and northwest of Tokyo) are described on the front of this monument. Inscribed on its back are the names, positions, and fates of the 261 samurai.