

Shimonoseki, Moji, and Japan at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

Late Edo to Early Meiji Eras (1853–1868)

Japan had a long history of seclusion before it opened to the world in the late nineteenth century. In the 1630s, the ruling Tokugawa regime had enacted policies to tightly restrict foreign trade and stop citizens from leaving the country. This policy of exclusion was intended to prevent external influences (in particular, Christian missionaries) that could lead to upheaval or even colonization, and it became known as the “closed country” (*sakoku*) policy. Japan remained largely isolated until 1854, when the US envoy Commodore Matthew C. Perry (1794–1858) arrived with a contingent of the navy and compelled Japan to open its ports.

The use of naval force to gain a diplomatic agreement (termed “gunboat diplomacy”) was duplicated by other Western nations. In 1858, the United States, the Netherlands, Russia, Britain, and France each forced Japan to sign unequal treaties that gave favorable trade and diplomatic rights to the foreign aggressors. These lopsided terms caused financial and social instability in the country. They allowed foreign traders to cheaply purchase gold, silver, and other assets to take out of Japan, which weakened its currency, and protected non-Japanese from punishment under local laws.

Attitudes about foreign encroachment were mixed, and even the factions that supported modernization were resentful of the unequal treaties. Revolutionary and anti-foreign sentiment was strongest in the domains of Chōshū and Satsuma (now part of Yamaguchi and Kagoshima Prefectures, respectively), whose leaders had historically been isolated from national politics. They wanted to topple the Tokugawa shogunate, restore power to the emperor, and resist the colonial powers that were sweeping through Asia.

Amid these international tensions, pro-imperial activists rallied under the slogan of “revere the emperor, expel the barbarians” (*sonnō jōi*). The anti-foreign sentiment needed only the approval of Emperor Kōmei (1831–1867) to become action, and an imperial edict was issued in 1863. Chōshū forces responded by firing upon US and European ships that passed through the Kanmon Strait. This attack ignited a series of clashes, both with Western forces and between the Tokugawa armies and a Chōshū-Satsuma alliance. These battles culminated in the resignation of the last Tokugawa shogun in 1867 and the formation of a new government under Emperor Meiji (1852–1912).

Meiji-Period Modernization (1868–1889)

In pursuing modernization, the new Meiji government looked to the West for models for its governance, military, and economy. It sponsored trips such as the Iwakura Mission (1871–1873), in which delegates were sent abroad to study foreign culture and technology. The government also invited foreign experts to come to Japan to teach and oversee the development of infrastructure. These efforts brought about a cultural and industrial revolution as Western technology, military science, literature, music, food, and even fashion flooded into the country.

Even the structure of society changed in this period, altered by a series of radical reforms. The government dismantled the rigid social hierarchy of the Edo period (1603–1867) and replaced it with a new system of three classes: former nobility, former bureaucrats (samurai), and former commoners. For the first time in centuries, the lower classes were free to seek their own professions and livelihoods. But far from being satisfied with this newfound social mobility, they demanded greater rights and a voice in government. Opposing them were the former samurai classes, who resented their lost status and income. Revolts and protests erupted on both sides throughout the country.

The Meiji government dealt with the unrest using its new, centralized military, and it tried to shore up support by creating a constitutional system. Former Chōshū samurai Itō Hirobumi (1841–1909), who was then serving as an imperial adviser, led an overseas mission to study Western constitutional systems. The Meiji Constitution, which was modeled largely on the Prussian system, was enacted in 1889, establishing a limited democracy.

Technological Expansion and Military Conquest (1877–1945)

Japan's first National Industrial Exhibition was held in 1877, followed by another just four years later. Industrialization began in earnest in the 1880s, with an initial focus on light industries such as textiles, followed a decade later by heavy industries such as shipbuilding, coal mining, and steel working.

Many such projects were initially government owned, but they did not compete well with private companies. The government sold its Nagasaki shipyards to Mitsubishi in 1887 and sold the Miike Coal Mine to Mitsui in 1889 as part of a large-scale privatization project. This marked the development of the hugely important private

shipbuilding and coal industries in Japan. Those industries were key in the development of the Kanmon Strait region, which served as a vital coal depot and trading center for ships stopping at the Japanese archipelago.

In addition to art, science, and technology, overseas expansion was another feature of Western culture that Japan incorporated into its national identity. Foreign advisers had assisted with military reform since the 1850s, but the Meiji government enacted widespread changes and began military training in schools from the 1880s. Japan's military soon rivaled that of its neighbors. In the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), Japan tested its modern army and navy, defeating two of the strongest nations in Asia. The Kanmon Strait became the departure point for soldiers crossing the Sea of Japan to the Asian mainland.

These victories put Japan on a path of military conquest and imperialism throughout East and Southeast Asia. As the military grew bolder from its successes abroad, it gained more influence and power at home, instigating political assassinations and even an attempted coup d'état in 1936. The unchecked power and influence of military leaders led the country to expand its borders ever farther, leading to the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) and, soon after, to World War II.