

Tondenhei Settlers in Hokkaido

Farmer-soldiers known as *tondenhei* played an important role in the Wajin (ethnic Japanese) settlement of Hokkaido during the Meiji period (1868–1912). Disputes and tensions with the Russian Empire compelled the Meiji government to secure Japan's northern territories in the late nineteenth century. The *tondenhei* program was launched in 1874, and the role of these farmer-soldiers was to protect Japan's northern border and promote the development of Hokkaido.

The majority of *tondenhei* were samurai who had lost their livelihoods following social reforms implemented by the government in the early 1870s. At first, the program was open exclusively to former samurai. It included housing and land grants, tax exemptions, and other incentives provided by the government. In Asahikawa, each *tondenhei* household was given around 5 hectares (12 acres) of land to cultivate.

In exchange, the *tondenhei* were contracted to a total of 20 years of active and reserve military service. The soldiers performed military exercises and helped clear the land and build roads. In the temperate months they also worked on their farms with their families.

From 1890, eligibility restrictions were lifted, opening the program to

applicants of any background. The majority of those who moved to Asahikawa were farmers. They grew crops suited to the cold climate, such as beans, wheat, and potatoes. Soon after settling in Asahikawa, they attempted to cultivate rice, a crop that generally grows in hot, humid regions. After 10 years of developing rice paddies and trial production, rice farming eventually became established. Between 1874 and 1904, when the program ended, some 40,000 settlers arrived in Hokkaido as *tondenhei*.