



## The Meiji Restoration - Causes, Nature and Significance

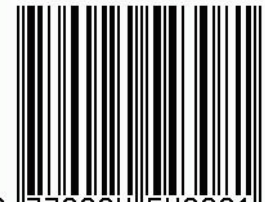
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**Abstract :** Since 1603 to 1868 Japan was a feudal society with a hierarchy of lords, samurai, and peasants. A military dictator, or shogun, ruled over everyone. The shogun was a member of the Tokugawa clan, so this time was known as the Tokugawa shogunate. Although Japan also had an emperor hanging around, the emperor had little to no power.

The nation was closed off to foreigners. But in 1867, the 15th

Tokugawa shogun resigned, and by 1868, the Meiji Restoration had begun. It was led by young samurai who saw the need for change. The emperor was reinstated as sovereign, and he took the name Meiji. 'Restoration' sounds like you're going back, making things look how they used to look. You know, like old cars polished and souped-up to look like new again. However, the Meiji Restoration was a total reinvention of Japan.

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### The Major Causes

There were three main causes of the Meiji Restoration:

- First, internal problems in Japan made ruling the country too difficult. The feudal system was decaying, and factions were growing. Reinstating the emperor legitimized the movement by connecting it to an old tradition that encouraged everyone to unify.
- Second, outside pressure from foreigners convinced the Japanese that they needed to modernize quickly. Japan watched China get pummeled and humiliated by the British for trying to prevent the Brits from selling opium. Then, in 1853, United States commodore Matthew Perry sailed into Tokyo Bay with four war ships and massive guns. He demanded that Japan open itself up for international trade. The Japanese had no weapons to match the American firepower, so they had to agree with Perry's demand. Japan and its people did not like this feeling of helplessness. They saw that they needed to strengthen themselves to stand up to the Western powers - and with China humiliated, there was an opportunity to become the new big dog in Asia.
- Third, Japan started building kokutai, which means national essence. The idea of nationalism and the nation-state was growing. A nation-state is a country where the



population shares a common national and cultural identity. It's easy to assume that nation-states have always existed, but they didn't really until the 19th century.

### **Major Achievements**

The Meiji Restoration completely transformed Japan by modernizing the country. First, the capital was moved from Kyoto to Edo, which became known as Tokyo. Then, the leaders of the restoration really went to work.

They were able to create a centralized and bureaucratic government that created the Meiji Constitution in 1889. The constitution was presented as a gift from the emperor, and it created a two-house parliament called the Imperial Diet. Eligible Japanese voters elected the members of the Diet. This made the Japanese government look a little bit like a Western-style government. The feudal system was swept away, along with its strict class system. At the same time, universal education was introduced to Japan. Schooling combined Western ideas with Japanese culture. So all of a sudden, Japan had a highly educated population with more social mobility.

Japan had regained complete control of its foreign trade and legal system, and, by fighting and winning two wars (one of them against a major European power, Russia), it had established full independence and equality in international affairs. In a little more than a generation, Japan had exceeded its goals, and in the process had changed its whole society. Japan's success in modernization has created great interest in why and how it was able to adopt Western political, social, and economic institutions in so short a time.

This political revolution "restored" the emperor to power, but he did not rule directly. He was expected to accept the advice of the group that had overthrown the shōgun, and it was from this group that a small number of ambitious, able, and patriotic young men from the lower ranks of the samurai emerged to take control and establish the new political system. At first, their only strength was that the emperor accepted their advice and several powerful feudal domains provided military support. They moved quickly, however, to build their own military and economic control. By July 1869 the feudal lords had been requested to give up their domains,



and in 1871 these domains were abolished and transformed into prefectures of a unified central state.

The feudal lords and the samurai class were offered a yearly stipend, which was later changed to a one-time payment in government bonds. The samurai lost their class privileges, when the government declared all classes to be equal. By 1876 the government banned the wearing of the samurai's swords; the former samurai cut off their top knots in favor of Western-style haircuts and took up jobs in business and the professions.

The armies of each domain were disbanded, and a national army based on universal conscription was created in 1872, requiring three years' military service from all men, samurai and commoner alike. A national land tax system was established that required payment in money instead of rice, which allowed the government to stabilize the national budget. This gave the government money to spend to build up the strength of the nation.

### **Summary**

The most important feature of the Meiji period was Japan's struggle for recognition of its considerable achievement and for equality with Western nations. Japan was highly successful in organizing an industrial, capitalist state on Western models. But when Japan also began to apply the lessons it learned from European imperialism, the West reacted negatively. In a sense Japan's chief handicap was that it entered into the Western dominated world order at a late stage. Colonialism and the racist ideology that accompanied it, were too entrenched in Western countries to allow an "upstart," nonwhite nation to enter the race for natural resources and markets as an equal. Many of the misunderstandings between the West and Japan stemmed from Japan's sense of alienation from the West, which seemed to use a different standard in dealing with European nations than it did with a rising Asian power like Japan.

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