



The Meiji Restoration - Causes, Nature and Significance

Parveen Kumar, Department of History

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