

The Meiji Restoration and the Influence of the Armed Forces

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Abstract. “Knowledge shall be sought for worldwide and thus be strengthened the foundation of the imperial polity.” These worlds from Emperor Meiji personify the efforts of the Japanese government to transform their nation from a feudal society to a modern state capable of defending itself and its interests. In it, the armed forces would have, since their inception, a vital role in the development of Early Meiji Japan and its positions abroad, possessing a hold on the halls of power that would give it an opening to take control decades later. This study aims to determine how the military influenced the decisions of the new establishment in this period, generating consequences that would define Japanese international policy toward its goals and neighbors. Among the topics that explain how Japan’s journey through the Meiji Restoration was affected by the armed forces’ involvement were the reasons it was needed and the problems faced at the time, internally and externally, during its modernization process. In the coming years, it would fulfill its purpose, be it as an offensive or defensive force, with potential issues to Japan’s security abroad, allowing the armed forces the momentum to advance its interests, such as how it assisted in the creation of a Western-style government while at the same time preventing it from possessing the capacity of extensive interference in their affairs, creating a situation where the military could in certain times circumnavigate edicts from the civilian government and, which would occur decades later, assume political power to the point of taking total control. After analyzing books and articles of several renowned authors that worked in this area, the hypothesis that answers this debacle is that the reason why the armed forces were able to influence the government’s foreign policy was that the process of the Meiji Restoration created a system under which it could assert its interests and views on what it constituted as of significant importance to the security of Japan.

Keywords. Meiji Restoration, security, modernization, foreign pressure, army.

1. Introduction

The period of the Meiji Restoration was one of the most important in Japan’s history, as it transformed Japan from a feudal society under the Tokugawa Shogunate into a modern state capable of fulfilling its goals and defending its sovereignty. In this context, the new government created the armed forces following their victory over the Tokugawa loyalists during the Boshin War. They introduced a new organization that would serve a myriad of objectives, with the protection of the Home Islands as their main priority. Now facing the same problems as its predecessor, this new establishment decided to move swiftly to modernize and industrialize, as they

were vulnerable. The military would serve as a deterrence to anyone setting its eyes on Japan.

In this period of socio-political change and experimentation, the newly created armed forces would assume a distinct position as the guarantor of its will against any opposition within the country over the plans of the Meiji government, as many were opposed to the path the nation was taking to catch up with the western powers, bringing values and ideals that would change the land and its people forever. They were ending the system in vigor since the end of the Warring States Period in the XVII century. As it fulfilled its purpose, the military would slowly influence the government’s decisions, as many

within the new leadership fought in the civil war and had previous military experience, giving the new institution influence. It grew in power and accumulated more and more weight as it became a political actor with its interests, goals, and views, becoming an essential player in Japanese politics.

After introducing the background, with the armed forces in a position of extreme importance to the Meiji government, serving as a barrier to Japan's defense, the question that left many wondering, was how the military was able to achieve such power during the Early Meiji Era in such a quick and decisive manner, capable of affecting how it viewed its neighbors, how it considered the question of Japan's security towards its internal and foreign enemies, and which path it should take to fulfill its goals. Compared to the other nations, where the military's subservience to the civilian government was set in stone, in the case of Japan, the situation was more fluid, opening a door for future military empowerment.

To explain in detail this entire situation, which for the most part remains unknown to the broader public, is the aim of this remote publication, as this period illustrates the path Japan took from the XX century onwards. The mentality that existed at the time has its roots in the Meiji Era, and the military was a crucial factor to comprehend why it did so.

2. Research Methods

To explain the research methods utilized in this publication, it is first necessary to describe the main objective of this work, which is to introduce to the reader the topic and analyze in detail how did the military affect Japan's development during the Early Meiji Era, as it is impossible to understand Japan's History from the XIX century onwards without explaining its role inside it. Extensive exploration through secondary research data was necessary to begin this project, utilizing essential sites such as Google Scholar, Library Genesis, and JSTOR to discover material about this period. In these databases, it was possible to find works of professionals specialized in the Meiji Restoration. Some, such as Hyman Kublin, born in the 1910s, saw Japan's path following the Meiji Era. Others, such as Kurimoto Eisei, Shinichi Kitaoka, and Stewart Lone, examined in more recent years how this period was transformative in all aspects of Japan's society, and the military was no different.

The materials utilized in this publication were, for the most part, articles published in journals such as 'The Journal of Military History', 'The Far Eastern Quarterly' and 'The Journal of Economic History', with one from the National Museum of Ethnology Repository and two others were books written by Stewart Lone and Gabriela Esposito. The reasons why these materials were chosen is because they condense well aspects of the Meiji Revolution that, when put together, are part of the whole, with some such as Hyman Kublin relating the

origins of the army at the beginning of this period, Gabriela Esposito portraying the Meiji military in its first decade, explaining the conflicts that served as a trial of their effectiveness such as the Satsuma Rebellion and the Boshin War. On the other hand, Stewart Lone utilized the figure of Katsura Tarō, one of the main protagonists of the Meiji Restoration and beyond, to detail this period and explained it thoroughly.

As the research progressed, utilizing qualitative and secondary data through a literature review, the main problems faced were the difficulty to find material in databases with enormous variety, such as Google Academic. When found, it was not complete, being forced to consult other databases to see if they contained the material.

3. Results

To understand the way the armed forces influenced the path Japan took during this period of transformation and instability, the first aspect that needs to be brought up is the international situation in its surroundings, with Japan being forced to open itself to foreign nations in 1853, initiating the process that would bring the end of the Tokugawa Shogunate and the return of the imperial court to power. To the future leaders of Japan, those from the provinces that led the assault on the Shogun loyalists and were now filling the ranks of the new establishment, especially the military ones such as Yamagata Aritomo and his protégée Katsura Tarō, needed something to assure the security of the country. To these men, who were born during this period and saw firsthand how Japan was defenseless and incapable of asserting its position against powerful nations such as the United States, this period would mark them for the rest of their lives as all attempts by the Japanese to resist were easily crushed such as the case of the Bombardment of Kagoshima in 1863 by the United Kingdom.

After the Shogun was overthrown, the creation of a military force for the new central government was of immense importance for several reasons: Firstly, the Meiji government didn't have a soldiery of its own to enforce its authority over the entire country, as the armies that waged war against the Tokugawa loyalists were those from daimyos that fought in the name of the Emperor, which means that if they weren't fast enough, one of these feudal lords might have ideas above their station and ruin their plans. Secondly, to catch up with the Western Powers, new policies needed to be implemented in all sectors of Japanese society, such as socio-political, economic, and demographic, as it is through change that would transform Japan from a feudal society with strict social stratification to one heavily modernized, utilizing aspects of a western-style government and implementing it with Japanese characteristics.

As with any reforms in Meiji Japan, there existed the fear of revolts against the government. One aspect of these reforms that can be directly seen in the military and would influence the nation's development is the end of the caste system that divided the society. To

have a good army, it needed to be a national one, where the members of the former castes could be conscripted, were instructed to be loyal to the state and the Emperor, faithful to their security, moving away from the samurai class that for centuries fulfilled the same role (Kurimoto 2000).

Furthermore, as this new army needed to be built from the ground up, the new government utilized the already existing agreements with nations Japan traded with, such as France and the United Kingdom, to send military missions filled with military officials to Japan to develop the armed forces while at the same time sending officers such as Katsura Tarō to Europe to learn firsthand the ways of warfare from the West and learn the best path Japan should take, with the words of Emperor Meiji simplifying their aims: "Knowledge shall be sought for all over the world and thus shall be strengthened the foundation of the imperial polity." These missions would also influence how Japan saw its situation with its neighbors, as they impacted diplomacy, warfare, and trade.

In the beginning, the French and British missions were highly beneficial for the creation and development of the armed forces, as the French system, considered one of the best in Europe, was implemented during the Satsuma Rebellion, a revolt of samurai led by General Saigo Takamori against the reforms of the central government regarding the destiny of the samurai class. As for the British, the mission would serve as a basis for the future alliance between Japan and the United Kingdom, a relationship that Japan saw with good eyes as it complemented Japan's foreign policy. While both were important, the one that would mark as the most important would be the German mission of a few officers to Japan after their victory over the French in the Franco-Prussian War, influencing strategy, industry, patriotism, logistics, and tactics, instilling on the Japanese military the ideals that would define its decisions affecting their security and the search for materials required for further prosperity of the country.

After analyzing how the development of the armed forces was only achieved through consistent efforts to reach the gap between Japan and the other nations and prevent any foreign intervention on Japanese soil, the influence it had on the apparel of power of Japan can be easily seen in how the development on the new government, which sought to emulate a western style of government, needed the existence of the armed forces for the implementation of its will and how the military leaders of the time, with their ideas for the protection of Japan, sought to protect its interests against what they viewed as suspicious agents, establishing their reforms before the civilian government could affect their decisions. Most of the leadership that was part of the Meiji leadership had a military past, with some fighting in the civil war, with Yamagata Aritomo and his protégée Katsura Tarō serving as Prime Ministers of Japan. Subsequently, debates occurred about the path the armed forces should take regarding the defense of

Japan between the option of a defensive force to protect the Home Islands, small but experienced and modern, giving more funds for industrial development, or an offensive expeditionary force that could spread the nation's influence and be proactive against external threats would affirm Japan's direction towards establishing dominion in their surroundings. The decision to adopt the second one was instrumental for how the apparel of state and Japanese society subsequently emerged after the Meiji Restoration, as widespread ideals during the XX century began during this period.

The military, during this period, achieved an immense degree of importance due to their strategic position for the continued existence of the nation, showcasing how it was closely connected to Japan's imperialism, as the acquisition of colonies was associated with further security against enemies such as Qing China, and the Russian Empire. All the factors shown in this publication show how this institution was able during the Meiji Restoration to affect its objectives concerning the problems faced internally and externally, illustrating that the created system opened doors for it to implement its designs.

The topics presented showcase a situation that forces the government to rely on the services of the armed forces to maintain their independence, with the ever-growing need for natural resources to feed the industry making their necessity more and more apparent. During the creation of a western-style government, the recently created military, which had won wars and crushed revolts, saw to extend their aid in this process, to have a say in it, and keep it in check in case the civilians were against what they viewed as necessary to protect their nation, people, and Emperor.

4. Discussion

This analysis supports the theory that the reason why the armed forces were able to acquire influence and power over the Meiji government swiftly was being able to affect its guidelines in their relations with other countries and their objectives for the future was because the process of the Meiji Restoration created a system under which it could assert its interests regarding the security and continuing stability of Japan. The situation the country faced internally and externally were critical factors to this development, being arguments used by the military to justify their actions and opened doors for it to rise in the political system. By pointing out these elements that made its emergence during the Early Meiji Era possible, the objective of this publication is to explain the beginning of Japan's militarism and how it affected its path in the XIX and XX centuries.

The importance of this period to understanding Japan and why it developed the way it did is immense, with these decades being the starting point of modern Japan, with all its intricacies and values. The path that was taken to unveiling this segment was through the careful research of renowned

authors that specialize in Japanese history, with particular attention to Professor Stewart Lone, who, in his works about the enigmatic figure of Katsura Tarō, demonstrates in precise detail his life and how he was one of the key figures of the period, in turn displaying the context of this publication. The reason this work was imagined and fulfilled was because of the question of how the military was able in a few years to affect so massively the path Japan took to catch up to the western powers, as in comparison to topics such as the first and the second world wars, which show Japan as an aggressive and expansionist nation, it wasn't always that way, and we generally don't know the motive it developed that way. Introducing this fascinating aspect of Japanese society is one of this paper's main objectives: to broaden the readers' horizons and give them a basis to continue their studies.

5. Conclusion

The influence of the armed forces in the Meiji Era and beyond is undeniable; the power it showcased in these decades affected the society of Japan and its society and how it developed. The process of the Meiji Restoration and the challenges faced by the Meiji government was essential for the situation presented in this publication to occur, as there were reasons that explain why the creation, maintenance, and expansion of the military were necessary for the success of their mission, which was to prevent foreign intervention in Japan, protect its interests and establish its presence in Asia.

Among the points that demonstrate how it achieved power so quickly was the international situation with Japan's neighbors, such as China and Russia, the need to catch up militarily and economically with the western powers, the fear of rebellion of those that were unhappy with the reforms implemented, the involvement of military leaders in the process of modernization and creation of a western-style government, the need for natural resources to continue the industrialization of Japan and international recognition and prestige to stave off incursions on their territory were all pivotal to comprehend this debacle. This debacle should receive its proper attention, as many of the questions that prevail in regards to Japan and its history have an explanation in this transformative period.

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