

“The ancient and the modern are fighting for the soul of Japan.”

Emperor Mūtsūhitō (1867-1912)

Meiji means “enlightened peace” and refers to the time in Japanese history when the Emperor Mūtsūhitō (1867-1912) decided it was time to modernize Japan. The *Meiji Restoration* took place over a ten year period 1868-1878 and was characterized by a time of massive modernization in Japan.

Mūtsūhitō realized Japan had to move away from her agrarian, feudal past. The constant fighting the 250 independent and fighting *ūji* (*samurai* clans) had to come to an end. The Emperor wisely understood that the *samurai* nobility was the major obstacle standing in the way of a unified Japan.

Mūtsūhitō knew that to unite Japan into a single strong nation-state was he had to accomplish three goals: first, he had to get control over the *daimyō* warlords and insure their loyalty; second, the *samurai* had to be disarmed and neutralized as the warrior class of Japan; third, he had had to bring in modern technology from the United States and Western Europe. Mūtsūhitō intended to transform Japan from a backward, agricultural state into a modern industrial country.



In a move that was unheard of in 1000 years of Japanese history, Mūtsūhitō decided to end centuries of isolation and to modernize. From 1868-1878, Mūtsūhitō brought in experts from the western world to jump-start the Japanese economy. Military experts were brought in from the United States to train the Japanese Army (think: Nathan Algren in *The Last Samurai*), gun contracts were signed with American and German companies to bring in modern weapons. French industrial experts were brought to Japan to teach the Japanese how to build modern factories. English economists trained Japanese government officials how to run a modern industrial society and how to shift away from a backward, agrarian economy. Dutch architects were hired to teach Japan western architectural techniques. American and German planners completely transformed the Japanese countryside, building railways, modern roads and telegraph lines. Within a single generation Japan changed from a backward farming society into the most modern industrial country in Asia.

Emperor Mūtsūhitō (1867-1912) in *The Last Samurai* (Good information even if you haven't seen the movie)



Between 1870 and 1876 the Emperor passed a number of laws designed to break the back of the *samurai* aristocracy. To unify Japan the *samurai* had to be destroyed as a social class. In 1870 the Emperor outlawed the display of the *sashimōnō* in public. The *sashimōnō* were the physical symbols of Japan's 250 squabbling and fighting *ūji*. In place of the *sashimōnō* the Meiji Emperor decreed the National Flag Law. A sun-disc flag was adopted as the national flag in 1870, an early attempt to unite the entire country under a single symbol. In 1873 the National Draft Law was introduced creating the Imperial Japanese Army. The army was created not from the traditional warrior class-the *samurai*-but from the *ēta/bē*. In 1876 the Emperor outlawed the wearing of the

samurai mōtōdori. That same year (1876) the Emperor outlawed carrying the *katana* in public and two years later (1878) the payment of kōkū and the *han* were outlawed in Japan.

The movie *The Last Samurai* takes place in 1877-1878 during the Meiji Restoration. By 1877 a single *daimyō* and his *ūji* stood in the way of a modern, unified Japan. Daimyō Sagio Takamori (the inspiration and the model for the *daimyō* Katsūmōtō in *The Last Samurai*) led a rebellion known as the Samurai Revolt 1877-1878. For over a year Takamori fought the Japanese Imperial Army to a standstill. The government attempted to assassinate Takamori with deadly *ninja* (remember the scene in the village with the *ninja* in *The Last Samurai*? By the way, *ninja* means, “stealth” in the sense of “sneaky”) but Takamori survived the *ninja* attack. Takamori refused to use modern weapons against the modern western-style Japanese Imperial Army. Instead, he ordered his ferocious and fanatical *samurai* to use traditional weapons, the bow and arrow and the *katana*. Finally in 1877 Takamori’s *samurai* were crushed by the Japanese Imperial Army, armed with modern artillery and deadly Gatling guns (an early version of the machine gun.) Takamori was captured and allowed to commit *seppūkū* to maintain the honor of his *ūji* and the dignity of the *samurai* class.

1876 Gatling gun, stored at Fort Laramie National Historic Site

The Meiji Restoration changed Japan forever. First, Japan was unified into a single nation state under a single ruler. Second, Japan was modernized. Third, the Japanese economy shifted from a land-based agricultural system into a factory based industrial society. Fourth by 1900, Japan was both the strongest military power in Asia but Japan also had the strongest economy. In an event that would have been impossible one hundred years earlier, between 1904 and 1905 Japan defeated Russia in the Russo-Japanese War. That Japan with a population of forty-five million could defeat Russia with a population of 160 million in less than a year was categorical proof of the vision of Emperor Mutsūhitō. The Meiji Restoration thrust Japan into the modern world.



Japanese illustration of the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-1905