

TOKYO AND THE MEIJI RESTORATION

BY DR. PETER DUUS

flotilla—a fleet of ships or boats

shogun—a hereditary commander-in-chief in feudal Japan. Because of the military power concentrated in his hands and the consequent weakness of the nominal head of state (the emperor), the shogun was generally the real ruler of the country until feudalism was abolished in 1867.

barbarian—especially in ancient times, a member of a people whose culture and behavior were considered uncivilized or violent

Tokugawa regime—the last feudal Japanese military government which existed between 1603 and 1867; the final period of traditional Japan, a time of internal peace, political stability, and economic growth under the shogunate (military dictatorship) founded by Tokugawa Ieyasu

samurai—a member of a powerful military caste in feudal Japan, especially a member of the class of military retainers of the daimyo (feudal lords); Japanese warrior-aristocrats of medieval and early modern times

daimyo—in feudal Japan, a great feudal lord who was subordinate only to the shogun; the daimyo were the most powerful feudal rulers from the 10th century until mid-19th century in Japan

imperial—of or relating to an empire

abolish—to formally put an end to (a system, practice, or institution)

precipitously—extremely suddenly or abruptly

When a flotilla of four American warships steamed into Edo Bay in July 1853, the city's population was plunged into panic. It was an eerie sight: How could ships move without sails? In commoner districts on the bay, shore inhabitants anticipating an attack packed their valuables to flee to safer high ground. But the Americans did not come to fight. They only wanted to open the country to regular trade and diplomatic relations with the outside world. In 1858 the shogun agreed to a treaty that permitted Americans to reside and trade in five newly established ports. Similar treaties with European countries soon followed.

The intrusion of Western "barbarians," ending more than two centuries of isolation imposed by the Tokugawa regime, shook confidence in the shogun's rule. After all, his full title was "barbarian-quelling great general" (*sei-i-tai-shogun*). Groups of anti-foreign samurai sprang up in many daimyo domains demanding expulsion of the "barbarians," overthrow of the shogun, and restoration of the emperor to power. The result was a decade of political turmoil marked by assassinations of officials, attacks on foreigners, bombardments by foreign gunboats, and local uprisings. In the end, the last shogun, acknowledging the collapse of his regime's legitimacy, agreed to return governing authority to the emperor.

In early 1868 the 16-year-old Meiji emperor declared the establishment of a new imperial government and abolished the Tokugawa dynasty. In a brief civil war, the new imperial army easily beat the resistance from the shogun's forces, and the shogun's castle in Edo was handed over to the government. Some government leaders wanted to move the imperial court to Osaka, a wealthy merchant city, but in the end they chose Edo, the country's de facto capital since 1603, and renamed it Tokyo, which means "eastern capital."

The city had been devastated economically by the upheavals of the 1850s and 1860s. Its population dropped precipitously from over 1,000,000 to 600,000. Much of the samurai district was deserted. Daimyo and their families were no longer required to live in the city. Their abandoned daimyo mansions were taken over by ruffians and masterless samurai (*ronin*). The commoner districts suffered as well. Servants who worked for the daimyo and samurai lost their jobs, and merchants, shopkeepers, laborers, and entertainers who catered to them lost their customers.

But the return of the emperor to power—usually called the Meiji Restoration—began an era of revolutionary change. Despite earlier anti-foreign sentiments, leaders of the new government dreamed of turning Japan into a "civilized country" like America, England, and the European countries. Many had travelled to Western countries where they saw with their own eyes technology more advanced, economies more prosperous, and naval and military forces more powerful than Japan's. The West

was no longer a menace; it had become a model. To survive in a world dominated by the Westerners, the Japanese had to adopt their ways.

The new government took over all the land occupied by the daimyo estates and shogun's retainers and built government offices, arsenals, and army barracks on it. To open the city up for easier and faster transportation, it also tore old defensive works like neighborhood gates and box bridges. But how was their new capital Tokyo, a segregated city originally built as a military citadel, to become a "civilized" capital like Paris or Berlin with broad boulevards, grand public spaces and gardens, stately public buildings, and magnificent public monuments?

segregated—set apart from the rest or from each other; isolated or divided

In the 1870s the government began to transform Tokyo from a walking city, where pedestrians mingled with occasional horsemen, into a riding city where the streets were filled with carriages, rickshaws, and horse-drawn trolleys as well. It also changed the cityscape by putting up new Western-style government buildings to carry on its business. When fire destroyed much of the downtown Ginza district in 1872, the government also launched a project to rebuild it as a "red brick" district modelled on a London shopping street with broad tree-lined avenues, sidewalks, gaslights, and sturdy brick two-story buildings with board floors, balconies, and glass windows. The rebuilt district was very expensive to build, and at first it failed to attract tenants. Nor did city inhabitants, except for wealthy businessmen and high-ranking officials, decide to build new Western-style houses. They were comfortable with traditional straw mat (*tatami*) floors, paper windows, and sliding room partitions.

rickshaw—a small two-wheeled passenger cart typically pulled by one or two men, used in parts of Asia

The Ginza red brick district remained a showcase for how a "civilized" city ought to look, but it was the last sustained effort of the government to change the cityscape. Instead it slowly began to improve the city's infrastructure during the 1880s and 1890s by broadening and paving its streets, stringing telegraph and eventually electric lines, installing a new water system, and laying tracks for a railroad line around the inner city. Curiously, however, it did not build a modern sewage system.

Since the government had to deal with a host of other problems—from creating a modern army to building a modern school system—plans to turn the city into a capital on the European model never materialized. The main impetus for introducing Western-style urban architecture was left to private business interests that built Western-style business districts like the Nihonbashi financial section or the Marunouchi business center. And in response to changing urban consumption habits, shops selling foreign goods like watches, clocks, top hats, ladies' frocks, and canned goods sprang up in the Ginza district and the old downtown section, along with a few restaurants offering Japanese-style stewed beef (*sukiyaki*) on their menus.

impetus—something that provides motivation to accomplish something

By the turn of the 20th century, Tokyo remained a hybrid city with one foot in the past and one foot in the future. The old samurai neighborhoods, now called the Yamanote ("uptown") section had changed the most, and the commoner section, now called Shitamachi

tenement—a room or set of rooms forming a separate residence within a house or block of apartments

calamity—an event causing great and often sudden damage or distress; a disaster

(“downtown”) section had changed the least. Pockets of poverty left over from Edo, where manual laborers, peddlers, rickshaw pullers, and street peddlers lived in cramped tenements, also survived. When the city’s population began to grow in the 1880s and 1890s, newcomers seeking work as industrialization of the city accelerated, settled in tenements on the east side of the Sumida River in areas plagued by floods and poor sanitation. These neighborhoods were also vulnerable to the calamities that eventually wiped away all traces of not only Edo but also of Meiji Tokyo in the new century.

Questions

Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. Why did the Americans arrive in Edo (Tokyo) Bay in 1853?
2. What was the result of the 1853 visit?
3. How did the Japanese respond to the intrusion of Westerners?
4. What were the goals of the new Japanese government? Why was it important for Japan to achieve these goals?
5. What changes took place to the city of Tokyo during the Meiji era?