



Rachel Hansen
Iowa, USA



WHP AP | Unit 5 Overview | World History Project

By the 20th century, European empires like Russia began recognizing Japan as a major rival. But the answer to how Japan—a decentralized and unindustrialized country run by a military dictator—managed to become a powerful contender to such empires lies within the history of the political and industrial revolutions of the long 19th century.



0:13

Narrator speaking in head bubble; photos of Tsar Nicholas II playing tennis; photo of defeated Japanese fleet

In May of 1905, Tsar Nicholas II of Russia was playing tennis. An aide handed him a telegram informing the tsar that his pacific fleet had been defeated and surrendered to the Japanese. It was a disaster that ended Russia's imperial ambitions in the Pacific Ocean. Without emotion, Nicholas stuck the telegram in his pocket and asked for his racket. Despite the tsar's apathy, this news shook the foundations of global power.

The Russo-Japanese war started in 1904 as both countries competed to expand their empires in Asia.

0:51

Clip of Tsar Nicholas' fleet

Tsar Nicholas had ordered an entire fleet to sail to Japan, a difficult six-month voyage in which they... mistakenly shot British fishing boats, picked up crocodiles and snakes as mascots in Madagascar to become the world's largest floating zoo, blew up one of their own cruisers during a funeral, and... almost ran out of ammunition before they finally found and engaged the Japanese Navy.

Clip of the Battle of Tsushima

What followed is known as the Battle of Tsushima. There, the highly disciplined and modern Japanese fleet won victories over the Russian ships, which were mostly either sunk or surrendered. For the first time in history, an Asian country had defeated an industrialized European empire.

1:38

Illustration of Japanese Navy and war ships; text bubble: Japan in the early 19th century; illustrations of Japan's victory

This turn of events was particularly shocking, given that just 50 years earlier Japan had a feudal government, had isolated itself from most foreign countries, had no standing national army, and Japanese soldiers were more often equipped with swords and spears than modern firearms. Japan's victory sent shockwaves around the world and led many colonized people to question European claims of superiority. It also caused unrest in Russia, contributing to a revolution that would depose and kill Tsar Nicholas 12 years later.

Text bubble: How did Japan become an industrial empire?

So...how did Japan transform from an isolated feudalist country to a great imperial power in just a few decades?

2:24

Text bubble: Meiji Restoration; text bubble: Unit Overview; transitional music

For that answer, we need to examine a stunning period of revolution known as the Meiji Restoration. Now, the Meiji Restoration (I said it twice on purpose) was when Japan capitalized on the revolutions of the long 19th century.

Text bubble: Name tag; text bubble: Unit 5

Hi, I'm Rachel Hansen, and this is Unit 5 Revolutions 1750-1900. You'll remember that the formation of trans-oceanic connections kicked off massive changes as people moved and new empires emerged. In this unit, we're going to explore some of the consequences of those developments: revolutions that would create the modern world.

3:11

Text bubbles: Political and Industrial revolutions

Historians have identified at least two major types of revolutions produced by the long 19th century: political and industrial. They started in only a few places at first, but they were ultimately global revolutions destined to remake human societies in every part of our world. The first type of revolutions were political revolutions.

Illustrations of ruler and subjects

The world in 1750 was a world of empires and of kings, one thing almost all humans shared in 1750 (whether they lived in a small community or a large empire) was an understanding that they were somebody's subjects. They shared a sense of not really having much political authority or standing of their own. Rather, they owed their allegiance to a chief or prince or ruler of some sort. That ruler had the right, or at least the power, to make decisions for their subjects.

4:06

Paintings of revolutionaries

But the world of 1750 was about to become a revolutionary world. A world where, some people in some places, were ready to shrug off the title of subject, first in the Atlantic world and then beyond. Political revolutionaries rejected the authority of kings, emperors, and religious leaders, embracing new ideas about government, people's rights, and more.

Photo of a machine from the Industrial Revolution; text bubble: Industrial Revolution; photo of an industrialized city;

At the same time, the Industrial Revolution began. Centered first in Britain, this revolution happened when people learned to harness a new form of energy: coal. Coal-powered machines quickly came to do much of the work involved in manufacturing and transportation and this had a huge effect on how people lived, worked, ate, and even how they thought. Industrialization, which was happening quickly in some places and more gradually in others, reshaped life everywhere, creating the world we live in today.

5:02

Photo of working class children; photo of enslaved revolutionaries; photo of enslaved people working; illustration of slave ship; text bubble: Thematic Overview; transitional music

These two revolutions combined to create an era of great change. Yet, not everyone shared equally in these revolutions. Even after revolutions created the first nation states in France, Haiti, the United States, and Latin America, the new freedoms spread gradually and unevenly, at first enjoyed only by a privileged few.

It was the labor of the working class, colonized people, and enslaved people that drove the economic engines of industry, but these classes of people rarely shared in the profits. As a result, one of the ways to study this period is through social hierarchies, the ways industrial societies organize themselves unevenly and unequally.

5:52

Text bubble: Enlightenment thinkers; text bubble: National Sovereignty; Text bubble: Nationalism

In Unit 4, you explored some of the new social hierarchies created by trans-oceanic empires. In this unit, you'll see how enlightenment thinkers challenged traditional hierarchies and authority. These ideas provided the ideological basis for many of the revolutions that are discussed in this unit. Two ideas in particular reshaped governance in this period: they are... national sovereignty, the idea that people—together—have the right to make political decisions and exercise leadership, and nationalism, the belief that a people governing themselves have the right to a homeland. These ideas helped create a new form of governance called the nation-state.

Text bubble: Nation-state

A nation is a self-governing group of people. A state is a legal unit and a piece of territory. When a state coincides with a nation—boom. You have a nation-state

6:52

Photos of Enlightenment age works; painting of boats; photo of a polluted city

Government and technology cards; illustration of nations and their rulers; illustration of nation-states at battle; text bubble: Illustrative Examples; transitional music

7:49

Text bubble: Meiji Restoration; painting of Japan's military leader (shogun); illustration of an industrialized Japan; illustrations of the Japanese military

Illustration of an industrialized Japan; illustrations of the Japanese military

8:46

Sketches of an American fleet; illustration of Japanese and American diplomats; text bubble: Meiji Restoration; photo of Japanese people surveying a map; drawing of train and diplomats; Japanese emperor

New ideas also helped propel industrialization. This was an era of innovation in technology. New technologies created new economic ideas about how to organize and use labor and money. The resulting changes in how people lived and worked also helped people move farther and communicate faster, accelerating change. Of course, all of these new technologies also let people change their environments more than ever before, not always with positive results.

Together, these revolutions in politics and technology allowed some countries to become very powerful. Nationalism, and the concept of the nation-state, allowed states to better motivate and mobilize their citizens. Industrialization, meanwhile, helped states control larger and more distant territory and produce new deadlier weapons.

Which brings us back to the Meiji Restoration in Japan, and the reason I keep saying it. The Meiji Restoration is, in many ways, the perfect example of how some states harnessed the power of these two revolutions. In the middle of the long 19th century, Japan was decentralized, unindustrialized, and governed by a military dictator, the Shogun.

By the end of the 19th century, Japan was one of the most industrialized nations on Earth, with an economy and military that could challenge some of the world's greatest empires. This transformation was based on some gradual changes in Japanese society that had been going on for a century, but they were given a kickstart in 1852. In that year, a fleet of American warships sailed into Edo Bay, seeking to sign a treaty and open Japanese ports to American trade.

The site of these industrial modern ships sent a shockwave through Japanese society by highlighting how far behind Japanese technology had lagged compared to that of the western imperialist nations. This realization created discontent and a group of revolutionaries launched the—say it with me—Meiji Restoration. This was aimed at restoring the Japanese emperor to power, industrializing the economy, and reforming the government. Civil war followed, but the supporters of the emperor prevailed, and beginning in 1868, launched a series of reforms intended to modernize Japan's industry and military enough that it could match the European model while still retaining Japanese culture. The leaders of the Meiji Restoration sent representatives abroad to Europe and the United States to learn western methods and create connections.

9:42

Drawing of Japanese diplomats and experts centralizing the government; drawing of Japanese imperial expansion

Clip of Japanese warships

These experts helped the government centralized state power, establish a constitution, institute public education, modernize the military, and industrialize the economy. Industrialization increased Japan's economic production which in turn allowed the nation to emerge as a major military power. Then, in 1895, Japan began an imperial expansion in East Asia and the Pacific. The Japanese Empire engaged in colonization strategies that were just as unequal and exploitative as those practiced by European empires.

That's when many of those empires like Russia began to recognize Japan as a major rival. New political ideas allowed the Japanese revolutionaries to build a powerful nation-state. With that political power, they were able to direct the course of industrialization, channeling national resources into industries that would further empower the state and enrich the economy, including the state-of-the-art warships that sunk Tzar Nicholas's fleet. Game, set, match.



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