Your notes

GCSE History: revision notes

Japan in transformation, 1853–1945

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Opening up and the fall of the Tokugawa, 1853–67

- For more than 200 years Japan, ruled by the Tokugawa **shoguns** in the Emperor's name, had kept almost all foreigners out. In 1853 the US Commodore Perry arrived with steam-powered warships, the "black ships", and demanded trade.
- The Treaty of Kanagawa (1854) opened ports to American ships, and later "**unequal treaties**" gave Western countries low tariffs and the right to try their own citizens in their own courts.
- The **shogun**'s weakness against the foreigners, and corruption and incompetence in his government, turned many **samurai** against him, especially in the domains of Choshu and Satsuma, whose slogan was to revere the Emperor and expel the foreigners.

The Meiji transformation, 1867–95

- In 1867–68 the last **shogun** gave up power and the young Emperor Meiji was restored: the **Meiji Restoration**. Its leaders decided Japan must copy the West to stay independent.
- They abolished the old domains and the **samurai**'s privileges, brought in conscription, a land tax and schools for all, and built railways and the telegraph. "Civilisation and Enlightenment" spread Western ideas, dress and technology, and the ban on Christianity was lifted.
- The leaders split in 1873 over whether to invade Korea, and **samurai** who lost out rebelled, as in the Satsuma Rebellion (1877), which the new conscript army crushed.
- The Meiji Constitution (1889) made the Emperor sovereign but set up a parliament, the Diet, with an elected lower house, though only about 1 in 100 people could vote.

An emerging power, 1895–1919

- Industry grew fast, especially textiles, shipbuilding and steel, led by big family companies (**zaibatsu**) such as Mitsubishi and Mitsui.
- Japan beat China in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–95) and gained Taiwan. It made an alliance with Britain (1902), beat Russia in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05), the first defeat of a European power by an Asian one, and took over Korea in 1910.
- Under Emperor Taisho (from 1912), political parties gained power: "**Taisho Democracy**". Cities, women's work and youth culture changed. Japan joined the Allies in the First World War and gained Germany's Pacific islands at Versailles (1919), but its call for racial equality was rejected.

Political change and the road to war, 1919–45

- All men over 25 got the vote in 1925, but the Peace Preservation Law of the same year was used to crush communists and other critics. A labour movement grew. The Great Kanto Earthquake (1923) and then the Depression, which hit silk exports, brought hardship.
- Army officers and nationalists blamed the politicians. In 1931 the army seized Manchuria, and Japan left the League of Nations in 1933. Politicians were assassinated, and the military gained control.
- War with China began in 1937. Japan allied with Germany and Italy (1940), attacked Pearl Harbor (1941) and conquered much of South-East Asia, but was defeated. After the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, Japan surrendered.

Key terms

Shogun	The military ruler of Japan, who governed in the Emperor's name.
Meiji Restoration	The return of power to the Emperor in 1868, and the modernisation that followed.
Samurai	Japan's hereditary warrior class.
Unequal treaties	Treaties that gave Western powers special rights in Japan.
Zaibatsu	Large family-run business groups that dominated Japanese industry.
Taisho Democracy	The period of stronger political parties in Japan from about 1912 to the 1920s.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. Who arrived in Japan with the "black ships" in 1853?
2. What did the Treaty of Kanagawa (1854) do?

Your notes

3. Which two domains led the opposition to the shogun?
4. What was the Meiji Restoration?
5. Which group lost its privileges under the Meiji reforms?
6. Whom did Japan defeat in 1904–05, shocking Europe?
7. What were the zaibatsu?
8. What did Japan gain at Versailles in 1919?

Answers

1. Commodore Perry
2. Opened Japanese ports to American ships
3. Choshu and Satsuma
4. The return of power to the Emperor in 1868
5. The samurai
6. Russia
7. Large family-run business groups
8. Germany's Pacific islands

What to do next

Practise 10 questions on this topic

Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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