

# Part I

## History

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# Restoration and Reform in Meiji Japan

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Discussion about Japanese politics in the twentieth century has often focused on the topic of continuity and change. Did defeat in 1945 set Japan on a completely new trajectory? Or did important parts of the political infrastructure survive through into the 1950s? There is less disagreement about the revolutionary nature of the changes made in Japan's political, economic and social structures during the 1870s and 1880s following the Meiji restoration of 1868. Most of these changes were a clean break with the past, as statesmen consciously sought to create a nation-state capable of resisting the threats facing Japan. Both the structures created by these reforms and the ideas that supported them had acquired an air of permanency by the start of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, political practices and political theory evolved rapidly over succeeding decades – the theme of chapter 2. The American occupation of 1945–52 purported to have as its main aim the injection of democratic practice into Japanese life, and we will discuss that in some detail in chapter 3. However, in order to evaluate the extent of the changes experienced by the state in the twentieth century, it is necessary to begin with a description of the circumstances which surrounded and conditioned the re-creation of the Japanese state in the late nineteenth century. What follows in this chapter seeks to locate this process in the context of Japanese political tradition and developments in the wider world. In the next chapter we will consider how these structures and actors reacted to the economic and political storms of the early twentieth century.

Japan in the middle of the nineteenth century was facing a series of crises generated both from within the country and from outside. Ultimately unable to devise effective policies to deal with its problems, the decentralized government structured around the Tokugawa family was replaced by a new government led, in theory at least, by the sixteen-year-old emperor Mutsuhito whose reign in 1868 was designated Meiji, 'enlightened rule'. This process,

which put the emperor back at the centre of the political system, is known as the Meiji restoration.

Throughout the rest of the nineteenth century, the main task of government was the very basic one of all states: to protect the country from foreign invasion. This was not straightforward. As the leaders of the new Meiji state well understood, ensuring independence required social, political and economic reform if the country was to resist the menace posed by the imperialist powers encircling Japan. However, let us begin by describing the problems that these reforms sought to solve.

### *Japan and the western world up to the mid-nineteenth century*

After 1640 Japan had a government that barely pursued foreign relations at all. During the previous eighty years, first Portuguese, then Spanish, Dutch and British missionaries and merchants had arrived and managed quite successfully to convert some Japanese to Christianity and to establish trade. Meanwhile, Japanese traders spread throughout Southeast Asia, and Japan seemed to be on the point of becoming a major trading power in the region. There was no opposition to this from government until the 1590s. By this time, the military leader Toyotomi Hideyoshi had established himself as pre-eminent among the warlords in an age of almost continuous warfare. As he imposed his rule on Japan's southernmost island of Kyushu, several of whose rulers had converted to Christianity, he made clear his opposition to the foreign faith. Adherence to Christianity implied a loyalty to a structure that was controlled from outside Japan. This could all too easily become a means through which foreigners might intervene in Japanese affairs either directly or by giving their support to those critical of Hideyoshi and his successors. Moreover, trade created the opportunity for local lords to build up resources that they could use to purchase arms and build up a fighting force able to resist the central authority.

Hideyoshi died in 1598 and after some jostling for power Tokugawa Ieyasu emerged as a successor after defeating his main rivals at the battle of Sekigahara in 1600. This made him the leader of the hegemonic bloc that controlled most of the 240 feudal domains. He had the emperor designate him and his successors Shogun in recognition of his family's pre-eminent military power. Over the next twenty years a system of governing was devised which isolated those elements most likely to disturb the balance of forces and put them under close control, while the more reliable elements were given a degree of autonomy. In this way, the Tokugawa family was placed unchallengeably at the peak of the political structure.

Previously issued restrictions on the activities of Christian missionaries were strengthened. Trade too was restricted until, by the end of the 1630s, only Dutch and Chinese traders were permitted to remain, and they were confined to a small island in Nagasaki bay. Japanese were forbidden to travel or trade abroad and those still overseas were forbidden to return home. A small trading mission was maintained in Pusan, and over the next 250 years

occasional Korean missions were permitted into the country under close supervision. These were the only exceptions to a seclusion policy which cut Japan off from the outside world. Christianity was outlawed.

The Tokugawa Shogun in Edo (modern Tokyo) ruled on the basis of the authority granted to him by the emperor, who lived in Kyoto. However, the imperial family was wholly subordinate to the Shogun's control and for most of the Tokugawa era the reigning emperor was largely confined to the grounds of his Kyoto residence. The house of Tokugawa governed all the productive land in the Kantō plain surrounding Edo, its economic and political base. It also created directly controlled power bases in strategic locations in other regions so that it could keep a close watch on the activities of any lords whose loyalty was suspect. Those who were particularly inept or disloyal could be replaced, but for the most part the Shogun interfered very little with regional government. For their part, the lords controlled their fiefs from castle towns through a local government system composed of their samurai retainers. Most of the population, around 80 per cent, worked on the land, and peasant villages were allowed a degree of autonomy, largely being left alone as long as they paid their taxes and showed no sign of rebellion. Peasants had been deprived of arms in 1588 and forbidden to use surnames, clearly distinguishing them from the samurai who were the only ones permitted to carry swords. During the course of the seventeenth century a series of decrees elaborated status distinctions to separate four main classes: samurai, peasant, artisan and merchant, in descending order of status. Rules defined their dress, restricted their economic activity and forbade inter-marriage. Those who fell outside this system were regarded as outcast, not permitted to have normal relations with other members of society and, as far as possible, ignored by it. This system evolved over the 250 years of Tokugawa rule but its basic parameters – strict social divisions, a structure of indirect rule and isolation from the rest of the world – became regarded as immutable elements of Japanese life.

It was only possible for the Tokugawa regime, which had virtually no standing army and no naval power, to sustain a foreign policy based on isolation as long as the rest of the world remained uninterested in Japan. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, western ships began to arrive in the seas around Japan. In the 1790s Russian ships exploring the coast of Hokkaido demanded that the government enter into negotiations. They were instructed to go to Nagasaki. In 1812 British ships arrived in Nagasaki bay and demanded that the Japanese discuss the opening of its ports. The governor of Nagasaki could not prevent the British from landing (and later killed himself in shame), but this was not the start of a sustained attempt by the British, or anyone else, to insist that the Japanese 'open up'. For the time being there were more than enough profits to be made and diplomatic challenges to be resolved elsewhere in Asia.

Meanwhile, domestic crises were becoming increasingly intractable. Despite the low prestige accorded to the activities of the merchant class by the neo-Confucian theories on which Tokugawan rule was based, commerce developed in particular, though not exclusively, between the cities of Edo,

Kyoto and Osaka. It was becoming difficult to maintain the clear distinction between samurai and merchant, and, sumptuary regulations notwithstanding, merchant families tried to improve their social status by marrying into samurai households, often in return for the commutation of loans. Meanwhile, peasant uprisings were becoming more frequent, at times seeming endemic. Central government had no solution to these problems. Certainly, the simple reinforcement of neo-Confucian orthodoxy could no longer be relied on to generate solutions.

Nevertheless, it is possible that the Tokugawa regime could have survived staggering from one crisis to another had there been no external challenge to its rule. Moreover, in some parts of Japan the local regime did manage to reform its administrative and taxation structures to create robust local government. Significantly, these were in areas peripheral to Tokugawa rule, in Satsuma to the south of Kyushu, and Chōshū in the extreme west of Honshu. It was the lords of these areas who would be most critical of the ways the Tokugawa regime dealt with the foreigners and its attempts at reforming central government.

Since the late eighteenth century American ships had been crossing the Pacific to trade in China or in search of whales but hitherto they had sailed from ports in New England on the Atlantic coast. Following the development of the west coast of the United States, the 'manifest destiny' of that country to extend its frontiers across the American continent was reinterpreted to justify the expansion of its influence into the Pacific Ocean and beyond. More concretely, as whalers and traders were more often present in the seas around Japan, so storms forced more American shipwrecked sailors to land there in breach of the isolation policy. Americans also began to realize how useful it would be if their ships could obtain supplies at Japanese ports.

On 8 July 1853 Commodore Matthew Perry, accompanied by four warships, arrived in Edo bay to deliver a letter from US President Fillmore in which he called for 'friendly commercial intercourse' between the two countries. Rejecting the demands that he take his missive to Nagasaki, Perry withdrew to the coast of China only to return in the following February to conclude an agreement which opened two ports to American ships, guaranteed just treatment for shipwrecked sailors and promised future development of commerce. Soon after, albeit in slightly different circumstances, similar treaties were signed with Britain and Russia.

Although the Tokugawa government had maintained a policy of isolation, it was not unaware of developments elsewhere in the world, particularly in Asia. Almost every year the chief of the Dutch traders based in Nagasaki travelled to Edo to present to the Shogun a summary of world news. Thanks to this, the government was well aware, for example, of the devastating impact western powers were having on China. The arrival of Perry's delegation caused panic in Edo. The Shogun consulted his supporters on how he should respond. Some suggested unification of the country, others favoured continuing with the decentralized regime. Having been forced to enter into treaty relations with the USA and, later, Britain and Russia, the Tokugawa govern-

ment and several of the feudal lords started to establish a defence capacity, building fortresses and acquiring military technology, but this could only be done by either imposing forced loans on the merchants or increasing taxes paid by the peasants, generating more discontent in both these sectors. Meanwhile, there was criticism of the Tokugawa government from within the samurai class and the imperial court for having allowed foreigners to pollute the islands of Japan by their presence. These critics rallied round the slogan of 'honour the emperor, expel the barbarian' – *sonnō jōi*.

Up to this point, the foreigners had dealt mainly with the Shogun, but they realized that as the imperial court supported the anti-foreigner policy it was important to involve the emperor in negotiations. So, from 1865 they insisted that he ratify the treaties too. It was becoming clear to all that expelling the foreigners was not a real policy option, but the slogan 'honour the emperor' continued to imply criticism of the Shogun's regime which had failed to protect the country from external aggression. Two options emerged, one reformist, one revolutionary: either to create a strong, unified country under the control of a revived Shogunal administration, or for the Shogun to return all his authority to the emperor and an assembly of *daimyō* to be convened to debate policy under the control of the emperor. This latter option would give the *daimyō*, particularly those from Satsuma and Chōshū, most influence. Hurriedly, the Tokugawa regime tried to modernize its army with advice from the French and create a navy with the help of the British. In 1866 the Satsuma and Chōshū clans were joined by the Tosa leader Sakamoto Ryōma, and their combined forces were sufficient to defeat the Tokugawa army. That same year Tokugawa Yoshinobu became Shogun, and in 1867 emperor Kōmei, a strong supporter of the anti-foreigner policy, died and was succeeded by a sixteen-year-old, Mutsuhito.

In October 1867 Yoshinobu offered to return power to the emperor. The offer was accepted but he was asked to remain in post until the necessary arrangements could be made. There followed a period of confusion in which there was some fighting between the Satsuma and Chōshū troops and those defending the old regime; however, this was less in defence of Tokugawa rule than in opposition to the growing power of the leaders from the south. Yoshinobu himself vacated Edo castle in February 1868. Quite quickly thereafter the pockets of armed opposition were eliminated and the way was open for the creation of a state structure that would be better able to resist foreign encroachment on Japanese sovereignty.

Most credit for the success of the Meiji government in creating a strong state structure must go to those who guided the reform of Japan in the late nineteenth century, but we should note Japan's good fortune in being granted an interlude of comparative international calm. Not long after gaining access to Japan by treaty, Britain, Russia and many other European nations became involved in the Crimean War (1854–6). Moreover, in 1861 the American Civil War broke out, diverting American attention away from Asia. Thus Japan was able to reform itself at a time when there was relatively little threat of intervention.

### *The Meiji restoration*

The aims of the reformers were later summarized in the phrase ‘Prosperous Country, Strong Army’ – *Fukoku Kyōhei*. These were the minimum requirements for the successful avoidance of control by one or more of the imperialist nations. However, there was nothing obviously revolutionary in the events of 1867–8; for the time being they seemed no more than a change ‘from an old feudal order to a new feudal order’ (Toyama, quoted in Tsuzuki 2000: 59). The basic motif of the changes during the next few years was to restore the emperor to a position of political centrality, a position he had supposedly held in the seventh and eighth centuries when government had been modelled on that of China, even though then, as in the nineteenth century, ‘imperial power was always less than imperial pretensions’ (Beasley 1989: 620). In April 1868 the emperor issued a Charter Oath in which he promised to consult widely in the formation of policy, to abandon ‘base customs of former times’ and to seek out knowledge from throughout the world. The estates formerly belonging to the Tokugawa were taken over by the new government, becoming its main source of revenue. In March 1869 the four leading han – Satsuma, Chōshū, Tosa and Hizen – offered to surrender their lands to the emperor, and the other lords were expected to follow suit. They gave up their hereditary right to rule but they were reappointed as governors of their fiefs by the emperor, for the time being at least. There was some resistance to this policy and further centralization was introduced. In 1871, after hardly any debate, a decree was issued abolishing the feudal domains and creating in their place seventy-two units of local government, later consolidated to forty-three in the 1888 local government reforms. The existing local militias were disbanded and the castle town headquarters of the lords were confiscated and in some cases destroyed.

The class system was simplified to consist of the nobility (*kazoku*), former samurai (*shizoku*) and commoners (*heimin*). In 1870 all commoners were permitted to take surnames and the principle of freedom of association was established. The following year all restrictions on marriage between classes were removed, the wearing of swords by former samurai became optional and the special restrictions imposed on outcast groups were rescinded. Samurai who had lost their hereditary positions were granted pensions to minimize their opposition to the changes. These were commuted to lump sum payments in 1876 when they were forbidden to wear swords.

Meanwhile, plans to create a conscript army were implemented by a law of January 1873. Men were to report for three years’ service at the age of twenty, which was followed by four years in the military reserve. The aim was to create a combined army and naval strength of 31,000 men. There were objections to the scheme from both peasants who did not want to serve and former samurai who felt their status was being undermined. These were ignored, and a modern military force was quickly created, trained on western lines. It was able to deal with domestic opponents of the regime and was capable of service overseas. Its first test came in 1877 when a largely conscript army put down a wholly samurai rebellion in Kyushu.

Right from the start, conscription was conceived only in part as a way to create a standing army. It was anticipated that military training would expose men to nationalist ideas that would continue to inform their everyday lives even after they returned to their villages. Similarly, the introduction of compulsory primary education was at least as much about breaking down class and regional identities and imparting such virtues as obedience and loyalty to the emperor as it was about ensuring minimal levels of literacy and numeracy among the population. By the end of the nineteenth century practically all children in Japan were experiencing four years of schooling.

The third major task was to put government on a sound financial basis, and this meant establishing a national taxation system. In 1869 government income from the former Tokugawa estates only met one half of government expenditure. Income increased somewhat following the abolition of the feudal estates but at the same time the state took on the burden of some of their debt as well as the payments of pensions to former lords and samurai. The first stage of the reform was to standardize the currency and create a banking system based on the US model. Short-term stability of the financial system was assured by a loan from Britain of £2.4 million, but it was reform of the land tax that created the basis for the stability of state finances. Between 1873 and 1881 all land was reassessed for tax purposes, a process that brought some areas of land into the tax system for the first time. Reforms included making the registered landowner responsible for paying the tax, not the village as a unit, fixing taxes on the basis of a percentage of the value of the land (at first, 3 per cent), not the crop in that year, and having the tax paid directly to central, not local, government. The process of reassessment effectively guaranteed possession of their holdings to the large landowners and dispossessed many small-scale farmers, either forcing them off the land entirely or into tenant relations with the big landlords. By 1900 around 40 per cent of those working the land were tenants, sharecroppers who paid for their right to work the land by handing over half of their crop to the landlord. Land tax revenue was the biggest single source of government income throughout the nineteenth century; even in 1900 it was still around 50 per cent of the total.

### *The structure of government and the new legal system*

In September 1868 Edo, the capital of the Tokugawa shoguns and the largest city in Japan, was renamed Tokyo, eastern capital. In November the emperor visited the city for the first time and the following April he returned to make his permanent residence in the castle formerly inhabited by the Shogun. This was the first time a Japanese city had been named by its location, though the practice was common in China. This was not only an indication that Japan's imperial capital had moved from west to east; it also signalled the Japanese assertion that leadership in Asia had shifted from the southern or northern capitals of China (Nanking or Beijing) to the eastern capital of Japan.

China was the source of inspiration for many of the early innovations of the Meiji regime. The new monetary unit, the yen, was at first equivalent to

the Mexican dollar, the international currency in East Asia which the Chinese called the *yuan*. The departments of state established in February 1868 had eighth-century (Chinese) names but modern functions – civil affairs, foreign affairs, military affairs, finance, justice and imperial household. The first criminal legal system was based on the Chinese (Ming) code. However, although the Chinese trappings were important, those who were the driving force within the new government were most impressed by the military and economic achievements of the western nations which had, amongst other things, subjected China to a series of humiliating defeats. Throughout the Meiji era, men from the four feudal domains of Satsuma, Chōshū, Tosa and Hizen dominated the political hierarchy. These were individuals who had risen through the reformed administrative structures created in the early decades of the century and who had had direct contact with the western powers. Both Satsuma and Chōshū had not only suffered from attacks by the westerners but had also illegally sent followers to study in Europe.

The Shogunal government had sent missions to the USA and Europe in the 1860s mainly to engage in diplomatic negotiations, but these parties also included individuals such as Fukuzawa Yukichi, who paid close attention to fashion, politics, education, military systems and social structures and wrote illustrated books about them when they returned home. This not only brought an awareness of the developments in the west to the attention of the ruling elite but also to the wider reading public. In 1871 the new government sent the Iwakura mission, a group of senior statesmen, to the USA and European countries. The ostensible purpose was to revise the ‘unequal treaties’ Japan had been forced to accept in the 1850s and 1860s, but at least as important was to assess conditions in the west in order to work out how best to reform Japan. They spent more than 600 days, following a schedule that included trips to many of the world’s major industrial cities where they would visit factories and mines, parliaments and theatres. A record was kept of their travels which was later published. They came to two overall conclusions. First, that the revision of the unequal treaties would require Japan’s wholesale restructure, in particular the reform of domestic laws and legal institutions. Secondly, but of equal importance, that the current wealth and strength of Europe originated mostly after 1800 and was pronounced only in the preceding forty years. There was a gap between Japan and the west but it was one that could be bridged.

An important strategy which was adopted to bridge this gap was to employ foreign experts to guide the initial stage of reform while instructing their Japanese subordinates until they could take over. In this way a modern mint was established, a lighthouse system created and a wide range of western industrial techniques were transplanted into Japanese within the relatively short span of fifteen to twenty years.

In a similar fashion measures were taken to revise and modernize Japanese law. Two French scholars were employed and, as a result of their advice, from 1875 all criminal and civil trials were made open to the public and in 1876 torture was abandoned as a routine way of obtaining evidence.

In 1882 a new penal code based on French concepts was introduced, but the civil code proved more problematic. A draft was approved and scheduled to go into effect in 1890 but its implementation was postponed. Following a period of more or less uncritical enthusiasm for western ideas and values in the 1870s, by the late 1880s there was an increased self-confidence among the Japanese elite, who began to worry that a civil code based on 'extreme individualism' would destroy the family-centred traditions basic to Japanese society. Moreover, there was criticism of the universalistic ideas central to French juristic notions of natural law coming from those who drew their arguments from the historical legal tradition in Germany. Somewhat ironically, the Japanese conservatives found support for their neo-Confucian ideas in the writings of German nationalists. The result was the Civil Code of 1898, which purported to protect traditional Japanese family values. At which point we might pause to ask: whose Japanese family values? A survey carried out in the mid-1890s found that 90 per cent of commoners practised 'unorthodox' forms of marriage or household formation (Smith 1996: 168). Thus the new civil code was less a matter of protecting traditional and commonly accepted values and more one of an attempt to impose the 'house system' of the elite on to the whole of Japanese society.

The structure of government evolved from the late 1860s to the late 1880s strongly influenced by the debate on political values which had also influenced the agenda for law reform. On the one hand there were the liberals, influenced by the French and American political ideas, who argued the case for democratic reforms based on notions of rights. Meanwhile, the conservatives sought to protect what they presented as traditional values, supporting their case by reference to German ideas. What is important here is that both sides in this debate were convinced of the need for change, the need to re-create the state in order to be better able to resist western imperialism. The only disagreement was about *how* a strong state capable of standing up to the west could be established and sustained.

The restoration of power to the Meiji emperor created a contradiction at the centre of government in that the revolutionary changes had been led by provincial samurai but their efforts had placed the imperial court, the emperor and court nobles at the apex of political power. Major restructuring of government in August 1869 created an executive body called the Dajōkan, with, at its head, a court noble and two samurai, below whom were four counsellors, one each from Satsuma, Chōshū, Tosa and Hizen. This group advised the emperor and their decisions were carried out through one of the six ministries. As new policies were launched, so new ministries were created. In September 1871 a Ministry of Education was created to train officials and to prepare for the introduction of compulsory primary education. A Home Ministry (Naimushō) was set up in 1873 to supervise the functions formerly carried out by the feudal regime and new ones required by central government such as maintaining a reliable family register system on which to base the conscription process, land surveys on which to base the taxation system and some infrastructural policies such as the creation of a postal system, a

road network and a police service. Most of this newly created bureaucracy was manned by samurai, the majority in most ministries coming from the four leading domains.

A western-style peerage was created in 1884, with five titles: prince, marquis, count, viscount and baron. Most of the five hundred names put forward were 'descendants of illustrious ancestors', i.e. former court nobles, but thirty-two were appointed because of their 'distinguished contributions' from the four areas which had engineered the restoration. This created the basis for a House of Peers, but it did nothing to resolve the difficulties at the centre of government. The Dajōkan system worked as long as the complex system of loyalties between those who belonged to the victorious coalition of 1868 could be maintained, but by the 1880s most of the first generation of restoration leaders were dead. As governing became routinized, there was a need for a more coherent government system.

A new structure was announced in December 1885, at the centre of which there was to be a cabinet of ministers – to be called *daijin* – whose activities were to be coordinated by a prime minister – *sōri daijin* – who with the appropriate minister would sign all laws and ordinances issued by the government. The prime minister would also be responsible for major matters of public policy. At an early stage of planning it had been envisaged that the emperor would participate personally in the meetings of the cabinet, but this was later dropped. Thus the emperor was removed from active involvement in politics even though ministers and the prime minister continued in theory to be directly responsible to him.

Over the next few years further reforms were introduced to enforce secrecy, regularize record-keeping and try to eliminate bribery and nepotism. Three grades of civil servant were created, of which the topmost – the *chokunin* (vice-ministers) and prefectural governors – were nominated by the government, nominally the emperor. All other recruits into the bureaucracy had to pass examinations. This could be presented as the implementation of a Chinese, Confucian tradition, but in fact the examinations tested skills that were entirely western in both origin and methodology (Muramatsu 1994: 12). The full implementation of this system completed the move away from inherited status as the prime qualification for government office – and was opposed by the conservatives for this very reason. Nevertheless, for several decades a samurai background continued to be an advantage to those seeking a career in government as patronage continued to be important.

Many of the features of a modern political system had been put into place by the 1880s, but Japan still lacked a constitution. The Meiji Charter Oath had stated that, 'An assembly widely convoked shall be established and all matters of state shall be decided by public discussion', which seemed to amount to a promise to establish some form of representative government. That, at least, is how it was interpreted by the liberals who sought a constitution which would ensure democratic government and guarantees for such rights as freedom of speech, publication and assembly. A Liberal Party was formed and interest in liberal ideas spread rapidly across the country even into rural areas. By the end of 1880 sixty petitions demanding a liberal

constitution had been signed by more than 250,000 people. Opposed to them were the mainstream political leaders who sought to develop a system which would keep power in their hands in the guise of exercising it on behalf of the emperor.

Opposition was defused by a combination of concession and repression. The main concession was the announcement in 1881 that the emperor would graciously grant a constitution and convene a national assembly before the end of the decade. Repression came in the form of laws which restricted freedom of press and freedom of assembly. Dissident journalists were arrested – 300 in 1880 – and fined or jailed. An ordinance of April 1880 gave the police powers to supervise the activities of political groups. They attended all rallies and had power to intervene and disband them if people at them made statements ‘prejudicial to public tranquillity’. Soldiers, policemen, teachers, students and women were forbidden to attend political meetings or join political parties. Some journalists were expelled from Tokyo and Osaka and were forced to use their skills in regional newspapers they joined or established. The promise to introduce a constitution was crucial in weakening the movement as it robbed the liberals of an aim that all could rally round. After 1881 they split into four groups, none of which survived the 1880s.

This did not, however, mean the eradication of liberal ideas, rather that they went underground. Liberal journalists continued to ply their trade in regional newspapers and keep alive interest in critical ideas. At times when the state relaxed or was forced back, as in the first years of the twentieth century or immediately after the Great War (1914–18), liberal and socialist ideas would reappear and spread rapidly.

At the centre of the new constitution, finally handed down to his people on 11 February 1889, was an emperor, ‘sacred and inviolable’, who ultimately controlled all the legislative as well as executive powers of state. This was not a constitutional monarch who ruled with the consent of the people by virtue of some kind of social contract; rather, he ruled because he was descended from ‘a line of emperors unbroken for ages eternal’. Some concession was made to the rights of citizens, but they were only guaranteed ‘within the limits of the law’. There were no rights of the kind that are constitutionally protected in the US political system. A bicameral assembly was created consisting of the House of Peers and an elected House of Representatives. Ministers had the right to speak in both houses but were not responsible to them. The only financial power that the assemblies had at their disposal was to oppose increases; if the government’s budget was not passed, that of the previous year would stand.

The conservatives had done all they could to create a constitutional framework that would protect their power with some minimal concessions to the demands from both inside and outside Japan that it include an element of representative government. In the first election held in 1890 just over 1 per cent of the population was eligible to vote, but they did not always vote for the government candidates. The House of Representatives did not have much power, but it refused to be a docile debating chamber and became the focus for democratic activity in the early twentieth century.

### *Japan and the world in the early twentieth century*

In the early 1870s Japan's position had seemed rather precarious. The new leadership was by no means assured of a monopoly of political power, its control over the country as a whole was weak and there was no guarantee that the coalition of samurai and nobility that had orchestrated the restoration would hold together. Externally, the foreigners seemed likely to intervene, perhaps not politically, but economically as their control spread from their footholds in the treaty ports.

Less than thirty years later Japan was a member of the imperialist club, albeit a junior member. Internal revolts had been suppressed and political dissent placed under control. A modern legal system was operating within a constitutional structure that was at least as liberal and democratic as many of those in Europe. Japan had defeated China in the Sino-Japanese war in 1894–5 and made its first imperial acquisition in gaining control of Taiwan. Japan took part in the international expedition in 1900–1 to fight the 'Boxers', sending 10,000 troops, as many as all the other foreign powers combined. This entitled Japan to station troops in Peking and to a share of the massive indemnity that the imperialist powers insisted China pay. Moreover, in 1902 the Anglo-Japanese treaty of friendship not only gave formal recognition to the status of the regime but also gave the necessary guarantees of security to the Japanese generals that would encourage them to make war with Russia in 1904–5. Victory here enabled the Japanese to acquire their second formal colony, Korea, in 1910. Thus equipped, Japan entered the twentieth century with full recognition as a world power.

### *Conclusion*

Much had been achieved in less than fifty years. The constitutional and legal framework had been revised, transforming Japan from a fragmented feudal state into a unitary state with a strong standing army, modern education system and emerging capitalist economy. Foreign expertise had been acquired without allowing the foreigners to gain control of any important aspect of the political or economic structures. This had, however, been a top-down revolution. Liberal ideas, both social and political, spread rapidly throughout the country, in part due to the high level of literacy. Conservatives in government harassed those who joined these groups and prevented criticism of their policies. However, although they had been forced to concede an element of representative government in the constitutional apparatus described in the Meiji constitution of 1889, they were confident that they could keep its influence to a minimum.