Japan

Important Concepts of Pre-Industrial Japan

- Feudal class structure with lords, peasants, samurai (military)
- Constant power struggles between groups
  - Different regions have different views and rivalries
- Government structure
  - Emperor is believed to be a God, serves as head of state but…
  - Most of the work is done by a group of military rulers called the Shogun or Shogunate

Japan’s foreign policy was ISOLATIONIST.

How can this impact a nation?

End of Isolation

In 1853, Commodore Matthew Perry, representing the U.S. government, sailed into Tokyo Bay, Japan, with a squadron of four vessels. For a time, Japanese officials refused to speak with Perry, but under threat of attack by the superior American ships they accepted letters from President Millard Fillmore, making the United States the first Western nation to establish relations with Japan since it had been declared closed to foreigners two centuries before. Only the Dutch and the Chinese were allowed to continue trade with Japan after 1639, but this trade was restricted to only one small island.

After giving Japan time to consider the establishment of external relations, Commodore Perry returned to Tokyo with nine ships in March 1854. On March 31, he signed the Treaty of Kanagawa with the Japanese government, opening some port cities to American trade and permitting the establishment of a U.S. consulate in Japan. In April 1860, the first Japanese diplomats to visit a foreign power in over 200 years reached Washington, D.C., and remained in the U.S. capital for several weeks, discussing expansion of trade with the United States. Treaties with the United States and soon other Western powers followed led to low taxes and special treatment. Japan was humiliated by these unequal treaties and discontent with the shogunate leaders spread.

In addition to the international trade issues with other nations, agricultural production decreased. Because of this, the samurai and feudal lords did not fare as well as the merchant class, the traditional way of life was disrupted. Despite efforts at economic reform, mounting opposition seriously weakened the Tokugawa shogunate from the mid-18th to the mid-19th century, when years of famine led to increased peasant uprisings. In 1867, two powerful Anti-Tokugawa clans combined forces to topple the shogunate, and the following year declared an “imperial restoration” in the name of the young Emperor Meiji, who was just 14 years old at the time. The Meiji Restoration re-established the Emperor as the head of state and led Japan into an era of reform to change their nation in many ways.

Why was Japan displeased with its relationship with the United States?

What sort of issues did Japan experience after ending isolationism?
Modernization of Japan

The new leaders studied the political, economic, and social institutions of the Western powers and selectively adopted those suited to their purpose. In 1889 a constitution created a parliamentary government under the emperor. Administrative power was centralized in a national bureaucracy which also ruled in the name of the emperor. The classes were declared equal, so that samurai and their lords lost their feudal privileges, while the role of merchants — formerly despised as profit hungry — began to be respected and encouraged.

The enthusiastic adoption of new Western technologies caused an explosion of industrial productivity and diversification. This became the main national focus as Japan believed that competing with the West had to begin with their economic strength. Japan industrialized in a frantic pace, achieving in a few decades what other nations had taken a century to accomplish.

A national military and conscription were established. Mandatory public education was introduced both to teach the skills needed for the new nation and to indoctrinate values of citizenship in all Japanese. By the 1890s, Japan had become strong enough to revise unequal treaties with foreign nations and establish its place firmly.

What changes did Japan experience during its modernization?

Critical Thinking: What are the positive and negative aspects of prioritizing competition with other nations?

During the era of a weak Emperor from 1912-26, the political power shifted from a small number of leaders to a more westernized parliament and democratic parties. Japan's march toward militarism started with their national focus on modernizing and industrializing.

Initially, Meiji leaders showed apprehension toward militarism and imperialism, but this does not mean they disagreed with the goals of foreign expansion and military build-up, but rather they first focused more on modernization and economic growth to catch up with Western industrial powers before they took significant steps to expand Japan's influence in foreign matters. In one case where they decided to not invade Korea in the late 19th century, they decided against the invasion because of its excessive cost, the need to focus investments on economic modernization, and the expected negative reaction from Western powers.

Why did the leaders of Japan decide to delay their imperialistic ambitions?
During the 1930s, the military established almost complete control over the government. Many political enemies were persecuted and assassinated. Indoctrination and censorship in education and media were further intensified. Navy and army officers soon occupied most of the important offices, including the prime minister. As the military leaders gained control over the Japanese government, the ambition for overseas expansion of their empire dramatically increased.

Why did the attitude towards Japanese Imperialism change over time?

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**FINAL ANALYSIS:**

Look back at your summaries and answers to the reading questions, write a detailed explanation below on how and why Japan changed from an isolationist nation to a modernized, industrial power.