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The Meiji Restoration and Its Effects on Society, Government, and the Military

For Japanese society, the Meiji Restoration has become a dramatic chain of events that caused great changes in Japan's political, military, and social lives. Indeed, the movement has influenced all spheres of human activity, allowing the country to become one of the most influential within the world arena. The establishment of the monarchy and parliament, powerful army, constitution, including its citizens' rights and freedoms, effective educational system, and many other elements has become an essential step on the road to success to contemporary Japan.

If to review the Meiji Restoration superficially, its idea itself says a lot about the changes occurring in the country during those times. The revolutionaries set up and promoted the concepts of "National Wealth and Military Strength" and "Flourishing Industries and Start Up Businesses" ("Meiji Restoration"). To fulfill these objectives, effective governance was obligatory. In this context, the word "effective" conveyed the meaning of the need to establish a centralized administrative power instead of decentralized one, which had been taking place in Japan before the Restoration. After the declaration of the Restoration of Imperial Reign, upper and lower legislative bodies were established ("Meiji Restoration"). As a result, the new regime created a powerful government which was an effective tool for creating national unity, whether

between the local and central government or between government and citizens. Soon, this government became able to adopt an essential document, the Meiji Constitution of 1889.

Simultaneously with improvements in terms of governance, the other pivot of the Restoration referred to the military. To improve this sphere, the government instituted a nationwide conscription in 1873, requiring every male to serve in the armed forces for three years upon turning 21 of age (“Meiji Restoration”). All in all, the military was the first and highly significant area of major structural change. Interestingly, the army’s demand for resources appeared as a critical stimulus in the development of other systems, from the zaibatsu industries to the universal compulsory education (Sumikawa 7). Even today, it is possible to witness such famous companies as Mitsubishi and Mitsui, which were founded in response to the initiatives aimed at strengthening the army and meeting its needs.

While the spheres of the government and the military experienced a significant impact in the Meiji Restoration, the society itself was both the driver of progress as well as the major actor reaping the benefits. As it is precisely highlighted in the work produced by Columbia University, while the Meiji Restoration necessarily produced powerful reverberations from below, awakening the expectations of peasants and urban laborers of a better and freer life (“The Meiji Restoration: A Bourgeois”). In fact, their expectations had a solid basis. Namely, the new government endeavored to abolish the divisions of society and the samurai class (“Meiji Restoration”). As a result, the new ruling class was comprised of an urban-based upper middle class, which was usually composed of bureaucrats and industrial managers (Sumikawa 14). As a result, the structure of society had experienced a dramatic change as well.

Also, Japanese society was highly influenced by economic processes launched by the Meiji Restoration. Although the economy was still dependent on agriculture, the government focused its attention on the development of strategic industries, transportation, and communication (“Meiji Restoration”). Moreover, the government started to provide financial support to private companies and designed and implemented a European-style banking system in 1882 (“Meiji Restoration”). All in all, during the time of the Meiji Restoration, Japan adopted a wide range of western traditions, including both those referring to its industries and citizen’s lifestyle as a whole.

Separate attention should be paid to the effects of the Meiji Restoration in terms of education. At the time when the constitution was adopted, the government also introduced a new educational system in order to establish the appropriate environment for national development to win the respect of westerners and to ensure support for the modern state (“The Meiji Restoration and Modernization”). The Education Order of 1872 rejected the monopoly of the upper class or male population in terms of education (Sumikawa 12). The success of these strivings was clear since the literacy rate of the total population on the eve of the Meiji period was near 40%, but by the end of the Meiji period, the literacy rate had almost doubled (Sumikawa 12). Moreover, the Meiji Restoration was also influential in terms of women’s rights. This period became the first time when women rebelled against their traditional subservience and demanded democratic rights (“The Meiji Restoration: A Bourgeois”). As a result, women started to hold offices as well as serve as militants, which was an unimaginable practice previously.

As a result, it is possible to state that the Meiji Restoration brought Japan to a new and progressive era of development, which has ensured its critical role within the contemporary world arena. The range of contributions includes an improved centralized government,

constitution, elected parliament, developed transportation and communication, improved education system, rapidly growing industrial sector, strong army, and many others. Politically, the newly-established monarchy contributed to the sustainability of the country, while socially, Japanese society, possibly, for the first time, faced equality and the possibility to use rights and freedoms.

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