2004 Teacher Training Institute

Japanese History from 1868 to the Present

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I. Introduction

• This presentation isn’t aimed to give a comprehensive coverage of this period of history. What I will try to do instead is provide a general outline and some leads so that when you come to teach modern Japanese history, you’ll be able to find the information, images, and lesson ideas that can fill in this outline in a way that suits your particular interests and class level. All of the links listed on the left hand side of the page in text bubbles are comprehensive information sources, so you can use them for many other things other than the ones I’ve suggested.

II. Timeline and Lesson Ideas

• The timeline below is one that I’ve cobbled together from various resources both online and in printed books. If you’re interested in comparing it to some other timelines, please take a look at the following links.

i. This timeline is the most complete one I’ve found, from the website for *A Modern History of Japan: from Tokugawa Times to the Present*. 
http://www.oxfordjapan.org/

ii. This page was developed by a high school teacher and has a very good periodization of modern Japanese history.
http://filebox.vt.edu/users/jearnol2/MeijiRestoration/japan.htm

iii. The syllabus on this page was designed for a university course and has a bit more detail, but could be useful for development.
http://ic.ucsc.edu/~naso/hist159b/index.htm
III. Timeline Beginning from the 1830s

1. The End of the Bakufu: 1840s to 1868.

The name of this period, bakumatsu literally means the “end of the bakufu.” The bakufu was the semi-feudal political organization that I think you talked about in the morning session. There are a number of different forces that came together in this period to bring it to its end.

Some of the things that contributed to the downfall of the bakufu were:

a. Internal tensions

i. Revolts in the countryside. Tax assessments were not updated from about the middle of the 17th century. This meant that there was a lot of production in villages that wasn’t being taxed. This allowed for an accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few rich landowners and these were the targets of rebellions.

ii. Revolts in the city. These were also due to perceived disparities in wealth and often found targets in rich merchants, especially rice merchants.

iii. Dissatisfaction of the lower samurai. There was a large samurai class (about 5% of population) who weren’t supposed to produce anything and lived on a stipend. Although samurai were supposed to be on the top of the social ladder, this system kept many of them poorer than the merchants.

iv. Famine and plague. Countrywide famine in the 1830s and a series of epidemics in the late 1850s.
b. External pressures

i. Contact with western nations increases through the first half of the 1800s. News from China alerts the bakufu to the intention of imperial powers.

ii. Commodore Matthew Perry arrives in 1853 and the shogunate is forced to conclude an unequal treaty in 1854. The authority of the shogun is undermined in the eyes of the commoners and the domainal lords and the treaties cause financial stress.

iii. Britain begins to supply the Western domains of Choshu and Satsuma with weapons.

2. What was the Meiji Restoration?

The Meiji Restoration occurs in 1868. The reason it’s called a restoration is that the emperor was restored to power as the head of government. But in 1868 nobody was quite sure what this actually meant or would come to mean. From about the time of Perry’s arrival in 1853, the prestige of the Emperor came to be used as a pawn in the bids for power of the domains of Satsuma and Choshu. When the elite samurai of these domains succeeded in ousting the shogun they had to begin constructing a new kind of government and polity. Although restoration is still the accepted term, coup d’etat and revolution are also words sometimes used to describe it.

3. Making a Nation: 1868 to about 1910

Japan found itself coming onto an international scene that was dominated by nation states vying with each other for colonial power. In order to protect itself it took on the project of building a modern nation state from what had been a fairly decentralized collection of domains.

The process by which Japan constructed itself as a modern nation can be seen as falling into two broad periods. The first is a period of openness to the west, whereas the second was increasingly nationalistic and autocratic.
a. Civilization and Enlightenment: 1868 to about 1890

i. Charter Oath of 1868. This was delivered when the Emperor Meiji assumed power and shows the liberal ideals of the time.

ii. Lots of contact with and learning from the west. Ways to foster learning included sending government missions, sending Japanese students to study in foreign countries, and inviting foreign experts to teach and advise in Japan.

iii. The four tier class system is abolished. Everyone becomes a “commoner.” Universal mandatory education and conscription consolidate this new idea of being a member of a nation.

iv. Media and information create a public. The Emperor Meiji makes a tour of the country. Newspapers spring up. A telegraph system is established.

b. Nationalism and Empire: 1889 to about 1910

i. The Meiji Constitution (1889) and the Imperial Rescript on Education (1890) are two documents that show the shift to a more authoritarian idea of government.

ii. Internationally, the Japanese gain more power. The unequal treaties are renegotiated in 1894. Japan defeats China in 1895 and Russia in 1905. Begins to establish hegemony over Korea and Manchuria.

iii. Especially surrounding the Russo-Japanese War, the public becomes increasingly mobilized towards nationalism.
4. Taisho Democracy: 1912 to about 1930

Through most of the Meiji period, a small group of oligarchs held a lot of power behind the scenes. Made up mostly of samurai from the Satsuma and Choshu regions, they were instrumental in instituting the monumental changes of the Meiji era. By the 1910s many of them were dead or dying and political parties began to have a more substantial role in government. The bureaucracy and the army continued to have an important role in government, however, so it’s a matter of debate how democratic this period actually was.

   a. Universal manhood suffrage was established in 1925 and the first election under this was held in 1928.

   b. At the same time, there was increasing government effort to control socialists and communists. 1925 also saw the passage of the Peace Preservation Law which made it a crime to threaten the “kokutai” or nation.

   c. This period saw increasing urbanization and a flowering of cosmopolitan culture. The urban middle class grows.

   d. At the same time, this is the period when Japan is more tied to the international economy. Boom and bust cycles exacerbate the division between haves and have-nots. Labor and farm unrest grows.

5. Empire and Total War: about 1931 to 1945

Taisho democracy proved to have some structural weaknesses. What turned out to be one of the most significant deficiencies was the inability to reign in the power of the military, which claimed to have authority directly from the Emperor, rather than by dint of democracy.

   a. Japanese imperialism began in 1876 when it first imposed an unequal treaty on Korea. During the 1930s the boundaries of the empire expanded dramatically into China and SE Asia.

   b. This imperial expansion was fiercely anti-western. The Japanese saw themselves as liberators of Asia from the
tyranny of the west, and espoused a kind of Pan-Asian nationalism (with them at the top).

c. Military begins to dominate the country’s destiny. Imperial expansion and war in China is never officially authorized but is rather the result of insubordination on the part of the armed forces.

d. Freedom of expression increasingly imperiled. Strong police surveillance and censorship first puts an end to dissent and then actively mobilizes artists and the mass media for wartime propaganda.

6. **Occupation: 1945 to 1952**

a. Initially the American occupation was focused on making it impossible for Japan to wage war again.

   i. Very liberal constitution, including a clause renouncing the use of military force.

   ii. Socialists and labor organizations are very active.

   iii. Wartime leaders are purged from government and some of them prosecuted for war crimes.

b. In 1947 the occupation changes its policy, a change known as the reverse course. In the face of Soviet intransigence, the US realizes that keeping Japan strong against communism is the most important thing.

   i. Occupation forces crack down on socialist and communist leaders.

   ii. Some previously purged leaders are reinstated.

   iii. Developing big industry becomes a priority in the push to redevelop the Japanese economy. Big industry and government come to work closely together towards common goals.
7. Postwar: to about 1990

a. In 1955, a conservative-center coalition is built when the Liberal Party and the Democratic Party join forces. The newly formed Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) held power until 1993 in what is called the “1955 system.”

b. In 1960 the Prime Minster Hayato announces an “income doubling” plan, but actually growth through the 1960s outstrips even this goal.

i. Growth in GDP and per capita income changes people’s everyday lives very quickly. People in Japan in the ‘60s and ‘70s become familiar with most of the consumer commodities that Americans do in the same time period, but they started from being on par with Sri Lanka and the Philippines.

ii. A very large middle class comes into being. But there are still differences within this: only about 30% of the workforce (which is almost all male) enjoys lifetime employment at big corporations.

iii. Urbanization, especially around Tokyo. More than 1 mil. people a year move into urban areas, coming to live in large apartment complexes. Rural areas become depopulated.

c. Citizen activist groups are active from the early postwar up until the present day. Fighting against things like pollution, nuclear weapons, remilitarization, alliance with the US, sexism and segregation, and forgetting Japan’s wartime atrocities, these groups form dedicated grassroots networks.

8. Postwar: to the present

a. The end of the cold war puts Japan in a different international position. It finds itself having to account for itself beyond its alliance with the US.
b. The economic downturn of that started in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s continues for over a decade, shaking confidence in the Japanese postwar system.

c. The earthquake and subway attacks in 1995 further shake confidence.

IV. Conclusion and Further Leads

- A good book to start with is Andrew Gordon’s *A Modern History of Japan: from Tokugawa Times to the Present*. It has a bibliography for further reading that can be accessed by clicking here.