

# ***The Influence of the Meiji Restoration on the Rise of Militarism in Japan: An Analysis of Internal Reforms and External Influences***

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**Abstract:** Before the Meiji Restoration, Japan was experiencing exploitation and oppression from Western imperialism as China did, and Japan was forced to sign a series of unequal treaties with Western countries. The oppression of imperialism made Japan realize the importance of having a strong army, therefore after the Meiji Restoration, the government decided to enhance Japan's military capability to win the respect of Western countries and revise the unequal treaties that Japan was previously forced to sign. Later, Japan's military power increased significantly due to militarism, which was why Japan defeated China in the First Sino-Japanese War and defeated Russia in the Russo-Japanese War. The victory of these wars made the country gain the respect of Western countries and made the government sure of the importance of a powerful military. The thing that made Japan become a great power was militarism, which was promoted by the Meiji Restoration, and this essay will study how the Meiji Restoration promoted the rise of militarism in Japan. The study has found that the impact of the Meiji Restoration on the rise of militarism in Japan can be divided into two parts. The first part is the internal factors, which are the military reformation exercised by the government and the government's education and publicity towards the people, the second part is the external factor, which is the influence received by the Meiji government from Prussia. These three factors played an important role in the rise of militarism in Japan.

**Keywords:** Militarism, Meiji, Japan, Reformation.

## **1. Introduction**

Before the Meiji Restoration, Japan was ruled by shoguns for hundreds of years and the emperor had no power. The last ruling shogunate before the Meiji Restoration was the Tokugawa family, which was a family that oppressed peasants and isolated the country from Western influences. After the Tokugawa family ruled the country for more than 200 years, the so-called "Black Ships" arrived in Tokyo to force Japan to trade with the United States [1]. Japanese citizens all witnessed China's Opium Wars with the United Kingdom, and they feared that the same thing would happen to Japan if the government opened trade with Western countries, therefore lower-class people, especially lower-ranking samurai, began to think that the Tokugawa family was endangering Japan, so they gathered to try to rebel against the shogunate by supporting the emperor to regain power [1]. The rebels supported a new emperor named Meiji and politically influenced the whole country, which pressured

the Tokugawa shogun and forced him to step down [2]. After the Meiji government took power, the Meiji Emperor and his samurai advisors decided to reinforce the importance of having strong military capabilities and learning from Western powers. Hence the government implemented reforms from many aspects, including political, military, and social [3].

Since the Meiji government emphasized the importance of possessing a powerful army, military affairs always had priority over other political affairs in the administration and armed forces gained the highest position in politics gradually. For Japan, militarism was not just military-centered politics, it also had the feature of patriotism, since the Meiji government required all people to be patriotic and completely loyal to the Meiji emperor and follow his orders [3]. As a result, militarism in Japan began to rise right after the Meiji Emperor regained power and was clearly promoted by the Meiji government's political decisions in terms of reformation.

By conducting research on finding out how the Meiji Restoration promoted the rise of militarism in Japan, the reasons for militarism to rise will be better understood, which means it would be much easier for the rise of militarism to be restrained in the future. Restraining every possibility of militarism restoration is beneficial to humanity since militarism always turns into aggression toward other countries and expansion of the territory as it develops, which will destroy global peace and cause wars to happen. According to the contemporary level of human technology, any world war would be very likely to turn into a nuclear war, which is extremely harmful to not just humans, but the environment and all the creatures on our planet. As a result, it is crucial to find out the factors promoting the rise of militarism and restrain them immediately.

## 2. Internal Factors

The Meiji Restoration included reforms from multiple aspects, and this part will talk about the military aspect because the first internal factor that promoted the rise of militarism in Japan was mainly focusing on military affairs. One part was that the Meiji government implemented a new type of conscription system called universal military conscription, first introduced by Yamagata Aritomo, who used to be the prime minister of Japan [4]. The other part was that the Meiji Emperor issued the Gunjin Chokuyu, also known as the Imperial Rescript to Soldiers and Sailors [5]. The Gunjin Chokuyu issued by the Meiji Emperor had the function of affecting the ideology of soldiers and promoting the rise of militarism, and the implementation of the universal military conscription system was used to create suitable conditions for the Gunjin Chokuyu to come into effect.

### 2.1. Universal Military Conscription and Gunjin Chokuyu

Under the universal military conscription system, people with different social backgrounds and from different social classes were all required to join the army compulsorily [6]. Since the Meiji Emperor issued the Imperial Rescript to Soldiers and Sailors, which required soldiers to be patriotic and follow each order of the emperor, people with different social backgrounds were all instilled with extreme patriotic values and loyalty to the emperor [5]. As a result, the soldiers all believed that strong military capability was the only way to defend the country and protect the emperor, therefore they all possessed an ideology of holding the priority of military.

Due to the fact that all soldiers were entirely loyal to the emperor and believed that a powerful army makes a prosperous country, they would think that military power was superior to everything else in the administration since it was used to protect the emperor, and they would also believe that the armed forces held the highest position in politics due to their importance in national defense. Without people from different social classes joining the army compulsorily, the Meiji Emperor's Gunjin Chokuyu would have had less effects on promoting militarism. However, with the universal military conscription system introduced by Yamagata Arimoto and implemented by the Meiji

government, the Meiji Emperor was offered a valuable opportunity to spread patriotic values and the idea of possessing a strong army to more people in Japan. With the new type of compulsory conscription system and the Imperial Rescript to Soldiers and Sailors, all soldiers were affected by militarism thoughts, therefore the rise of militarism was promoted.

Since the introduction and implementation of universal military conscription and the release of the Gunjin Chokuyu were both parts of the Meiji government's reformation, they both belong to the consequences of the Meiji Restoration. As a result, it was the Meiji Restoration that promoted the rise of militarism by exercising a series of military reforms.

### 3. Social Factors

This part will discuss the Meiji Restoration's reforms from the social aspect, which is because the second internal factor that promoted the rise of militarism in Japan was mainly focusing on Japanese society. The first section was that the Meiji government implemented reforms in the education system and added militarism thoughts into the contents of education [7]. The second section was that the Meiji government expanded the scale of propaganda of militarism in the society [8]. The reforms in education were responsible for influencing the thoughts of the students, and the expansion of the publicity of militarism in society was responsible for spreading militarism thoughts to normal Japanese citizens.

#### 3.1. Education and Publicity

Under the Meiji Emperor's rule, all schools in Japan abandoned the old traditional way of teaching. Instead, they implemented an education system that was similar to the Western countries, such as the United States and Prussia [9]. Besides changing the way of teaching, the government also changed the contents of teaching. The Meiji Emperor issued the Imperial Rescript on Education, which required people to be loyal to the emperor and give their lives for the protection of the country when emergencies happened [7]. However, the Imperial Rescript on Education only aimed at students, who were only one part of the society, rather than the whole society, so the Meiji government also came up with the idea of establishing the Imperial Military Reserve Association. Later, this association became the bridge connecting the army and the civilians of Japan, so the government used it as a tool for spreading and publicizing the idea of having a strong army and loyalty to the emperor to the normal people in Japan [8].

Since the Meiji government used the Imperial Rescript on Education as a tool for instilling extreme patriotism in students, students possessed the idea of sacrificing themselves for the country and the emperor when emergency circumstances happened, which was regarded as a key feature of Japan's militarism. The establishment of the Imperial Military Reserve Association enabled the spread of militarism thoughts to each town and village in the whole country, so the normal citizens in Japan all believed in the importance of strong military power and supported the armed forces to hold the highest position in administration and politics. Since both the students and the civilians in the society were influenced by the ideology of extreme patriotism and the significance of powerful armed forces, thereby the rise of militarism in Japan was promoted.

Due to the fact that the reforms taken in education and the establishment of the Imperial Military Reserve Association were both parts of reformation implemented by the Meiji government, the Meiji Restoration was responsible for promoting the rise of militarism in Japan by introducing reformation from the social aspect.

## 4. External Factors

In this section, the contact between the Meiji government and the outside world will be discussed, since the external factor that promoted the rise of militarism in Japan was involved with a Western country, which was Prussia, a strong European country at that time. The experience of Prussia attracted the Meiji government a lot since Prussia turned itself into a prestigious country that won numerous battles in Europe by emphasizing the importance of having a powerful army, which was what the Meiji Emperor and his advisors were seeking to do [10]. As a result, the Meiji government was affected by Prussia from both the military aspect and the political aspect. The Meiji government even invited a military advisor from Prussia to come to Japan, who was named Jacob Meckel, to reform the country's military system and train Japanese soldiers [11]. The influence brought by Meckel from Prussia had the effect of promoting militarism to rise in Japan.

### 4.1. A Foreign Military Advisor from Prussia

Jacob Meckel, a major general of Prussia, was ordered to go to Japan for three years, where he was responsible for using the Prussian way of training to train the Japanese army and imparting knowledge about tactical ideas to Japan's military leaders [11]. He was also able to integrate his own war experiences into the training, such as the experience of the Franco-Prussian War [12]. His training turned out to be effective and helpful since Japan won battles in Korea and Manchuria with Meckel's schooling [13]. Also, Meckel took the responsibility of reforming Japan's military system and doing ideological work for soldiers, including emphasizing the importance of defending the nation with a strong army and keeping loyalty to the supreme leader [13].

Under Jacob Meckel's military training and reformation, the military capability of Japan increased to a great extent, and the importance of using a strong army to protect the country was emphasized, so the influence of the Japanese army expanded into the administration. Besides, Meckel's ideological work made the soldiers possess the idea of always following the commands of the supreme leader, which was a characteristic of Japan's militarism. With the increased influence of the powerful army in the politics of the country and the extreme patriotism of the soldiers, the rise of militarism was promoted.

Because the arrival of Jacob Meckel in Japan was what the Meiji government asked for, therefore the military improvements and reforms taken by Meckel in Japan can be attributed to the Meiji government's reformation. As a result, the Meiji Restoration promoted militarism to rise in Japan by being influenced by Prussia from both the military aspect and the political aspect.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Meiji Restoration promoted militarism to rise in Japan by implementing the universal conscription system and issuing the Imperial Rescript to Soldiers and Sailors to influence soldiers' ideology; releasing the Imperial Rescript on Education and establishing the Imperial Military Reserve Association to affect the thoughts of citizens; inviting Jacob Meckel from Prussia to come to Japan to improve the military capability of Japan's armed forces. However, different regions in the world might have different factors that cause the rise of militarism, due to the different social and national conditions. As a result, only analyzing the situation in Japan cannot let militarism be fully understood, therefore the rise of militarism should be analyzed in the situation of more countries in order to gain more understanding of militarism. With better understanding being achieved, the prevention of militarism would be more effective. According to history, as militarism developed gradually, it would eventually turn into the invasion of foreign countries and territory expansion, as seen in the instance of Prussia or Japan, which would cause wars and undermine global peace. As a

result, for the sake of the continuation and the prosperity of human civilization, militarism should be strongly boycotted and any possibility of militarism restoration should be curbed as early as possible.

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