**1. Meiji Restoration: end of feudal Japan, industrialization and modernization  
Background to the Meiji Restoration**  
By the middle of the nineteenth century, Japan's ruling Shogunate was a weak, feudal order, unable to control all its own domains, much less defend the nation against a threat from the Western powers. This threat materialized in 1853 with the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry and a squadron of the U.S. Navy demanding that Japan open commerce with the West. The result was a series of "unequal" treaties in which Japan was forced to concede special economic and legal privileges to the Western powers. Beside Japan lay China — weak and humiliated, an example of what could befall a great Asian nation unable to defend itself against Western imperialism. Determined that Japan should not share China's fate, and convinced that modernization depended on abolishing the feudal order, a group of middle-ranking samurai overthrew the military government of the Shôgun in 1868 and set Japan peaceably on a course of radical modernization perhaps unparalleled in history. Carried out in the name of restoring rule to the emperor, who then took the reign name "Meiji" meaning "enlightened rule," the Meiji Restoration was in many ways a profound revolution.

**The Meiji Restoration and Modernization (1868-1890)**  
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 was promulgated which established a parliamentary government but left it accountable to the emperor rather than to the people. 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.

The enthusiastic adoption of new Western technologies caused an explosion of industrial productivity and diversification. A national military and universal conscription were established. Compulsory public education was introduced both to teach the skills needed for the new nation and to inculcate values of citizenship in all Japanese.

**2. Japanese imperialism: occupation of Korea, invasion of Manchuria  
Imperial Japan: Industrialization and Expansion (1890-1930)**  
This period was a time of social and economic change within the constitutional monarchy established in 1890. As the original architects of the Restoration died, the various branches of the government began competing for power - all vying for the ear of the Emperor in whose name they administered the government.

Japanese industry expanded, both in light export industries like textiles, which were necessary to pay for the raw materials needed from abroad, and also in heavy industries like steel and shipbuilding. Cities grew, as more Japanese moved from farming into jobs in factories and offices. In the countryside larger landlords came to own more and more land, and the number of poor tenants increased. Always dependent on foreign trade, Japan was hard hit by the world depression that began in 1929. The farmers who had grown the silk that was exported to the United States found no market for their product once the roaring twenties and the craze for silk stockings collapsed with the stock market crash. Japan's dramatic economic growth slowed, and social problems increased, especially in the countryside.

At the same time that the leaders of imperial Japan pursued modernization and economic growth, they continued to address the issue of Japan's unequal status in the international order. In 1894, more than forty years after Commodore Perry pried Japan open to the outside world, Japan finally succeeded in revising the unequal treaties so that it regained its legal parity with the Western powers. Japan fought a war against China in 1894-95 over the control of Korea and gained Taiwan, Japan's first colony. In 1902, Japan signed an alliance with Great Britain, which signified a dramatic increase in international status, and in 1904-5, Japan won a war against Russia, one of the major Western powers. In the process Japan expanded its empire, annexing Korea in 1910. Japan was allied with the United States and Britain in World War I, and expected territorial gains at the Versailles peace conference in 1919. Instead Japan met with strong opposition from the United States, and again learned the lesson that the West regarded imperialism very differently if it was the imperialism of an Asian rather than a European power. The failure of the Japanese to get a clause on racial equality inserted into the covenant of the League of Nations was an insult that was compounded in 1924 when the United States barred all Japanese from immigration. The setbacks and insults from abroad, against a background of economic depression, sowed public frustration with the political leadership at home. Even more, military units under the field commands in Manchuria grew impatient with the politicians' apparent inability to translate any of their military victories into political gains. Increasingly, Japanese were persuaded by the militarists' contention that Japan's security lay in consolidating her access to markets and resources in Asia.

**Japan's Quest for Power and World War II in Asia**  
The impatience of field commanders in Manchuria finally showed in 1931, when they used a local provocation as an excuse to put all the Japanese territory in Manchuria under control of the military. The military went into high gear, pulling Japan out of its depression as it continued to expand Japanese colonialism. As Holland, France, and Germany were enveloped in turmoil in Europe, Japan looked to replace them in Asia. Japanese troops invaded China in 1937, and French Indochina in 1940, setting up puppet governments to administer areas too vast to be controlled by the Japanese armies.

Alarmed by Japan's increasing usurpation of Western prerogatives in the Far East, the United States delivered an ultimatum to Japan: steel and oil exports to Japan would be cut off unless Japan got out of China. In the context of rapidly worsening relations, Japan decided to make a daring surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, where 90 percent of the U.S. Navy was deployed. The preemptive strike bought Japan time — it took the United States, many times its superior in industrial strength, a full year to gain the offensive on Japan. Japan's string of early successes — the Philippines, Hong Kong, British Malaya and Singapore, and the Dutch East Indies — left its navy scattered across the Pacific while its army was bogged down in China. When the United States recovered its forces lost in Pearl Harbor, its navy and army were able to conduct an "island-hopping strategy" of cutting off the Japanese commands one by one from their supply routes. **3. Rape of Nanking (1937-1938) 300,000 deaths**In December of 1937, the Japanese Imperial Army marched into China's (former) capital city of Nanking and proceeded to murder 300,000 out of 600,000 civilians and soldiers in the city. The six weeks of carnage would become known as the Rape of Nanking and represented the single worst atrocity during the World War II era in either the European or Pacific theaters of war.

The actual military invasion of Nanking was preceded by a tough battle at Shanghai that began in the summer of 1937. Chinese forces there put up surprisingly stiff resistance against the Japanese Army which had expected an easy victory in China. The Japanese had even bragged they would conquer all of China in just three months. The stubborn resistance by the Chinese troops upset that timetable, with the battle dragging on through the summer into late fall. This infuriated the Japanese and whetted their appetite for the revenge that was to follow at Nanking.

After finally defeating the Chinese at Shanghai in November, 50,000 Japanese soldiers then marched on toward Nanking. Unlike the troops at Shanghai, Chinese soldiers at Nanking were poorly led and loosely organized. Although they greatly outnumbered the Japanese and had plenty of ammunition, they withered under the ferocity of the Japanese attack, then engaged in a chaotic retreat. After just four days of fighting, Japanese troops smashed into the city on December 13, 1937, with orders issued to "kill all captives." Their first concern was to eliminate any threat from the 90,000 Chinese soldiers who surrendered. To the Japanese, surrender was an unthinkable act of cowardice and the ultimate violation of the rigid code of military honor drilled into them from childhood onward. Thus they looked upon Chinese POWs with utter contempt, viewing them as less than human, unworthy of life.

The elimination of the Chinese POWs began after they were transported by trucks to remote locations on the outskirts of Nanking. As soon as they were assembled, the savagery began, with young Japanese soldiers encouraged by their superiors to inflict maximum pain and suffering upon individual POWs as a way of toughening themselves up for future battles, and also to eradicate any civilized notions of mercy. Filmed footage and still photographs taken by the Japanese documented it. After the destruction of the POWs, the soldiers turned their attention to the women of Nanking. More than 20,000 females (with some estimates as high as 80,000) were raped by Japanese soldiers, then killed.

Throughout the city of Nanking, random acts of murder occurred as soldiers frequently fired their rifles into panicked crowds of civilians, killing indiscriminately. Other soldiers killed shopkeepers, looted their stores, then set the buildings on fire after locking people of all ages inside. The incredible carnage - citywide burnings, stabbings, drownings, strangulations, rapes, thefts, and massive property destruction - continued unabated for about six weeks, from mid-December 1937 through the beginning of February 1938. Young or old, male or female, anyone could be shot on a whim by any Japanese soldier for any reason.

After this period of unprecedented violence, the Japanese eased off somewhat and settled in for the duration of the war. To pacify the population during the long occupation, highly addictive narcotics, including opium and heroin, were distributed by Japanese soldiers to the people of Nanking, regardless of age. An estimated 50,000 persons became addicted to heroin while many others lost themselves in the city's opium dens. Overall, most Americans had only a passing knowledge or little interest in Asia. Political leaders in both America and Britain remained overwhelmingly focused on the situation in Europe where Adolf Hitler was rapidly re-arming Germany. However, all was not lost. A group of about 20 Americans and Europeans remaining in the city, and established a Safety Zone. About 300,000 Chinese civilians took refuge inside their Safety Zone. Almost all of the people who did not make it into the Zone during the Rape of Nanking ultimately perished. **4. Japanese-Soviet neutrality treaty**April 13, 1941 USSR and Japan sign non-aggression pact (This is just months before Germany breaks pact with USSR)  
During [World War II](http://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii), representatives from the Soviet Union and Japan sign a five-year neutrality agreement. Although traditional enemies, the nonaggression pact allowed both nations to free up large numbers of troops occupying disputed territory in Manchuria and Outer Mongolia to be used for more pressing purposes.  
  
The Russo-Japanese Neutrality Pact of April 1941 proved a boon for both countries. It encouraged Japan in its plans for southern expansion by assuring Soviet neutrality in case of war with the United States, and it gave Russia similar assurances in the event of a German attack.

The Soviet-Japanese pact came nearly two years after the Soviet Union signed a similar agreement with [Nazi Germany](http://www.history.com/topics/nazi-party), dividing much of Eastern Europe between the two countries. The Hitler/Stalin Nonaggression Pact allowed Nazi leader [Adolf Hitler](http://www.history.com/topics/adolf-hitler) to move German forces to the West for his major offensives of 1939 to 1941 and bought Soviet leader [Joseph Stalin](http://www.history.com/topics/joseph-stalin) time to prepare the empire for what he saw as its inevitable involvement in World War II.

However, on June 22, 1941, just two months after the Soviet-Japanese nonaggression pact was signed, Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa, the German invasion of the USSR. Stalin was caught by surprise, and the German troopspenetrated deep into the Soviet Union, killing millions of Russians and reaching the outskirts of Moscow before the Red Army was able to begin a successful counteroffensive. Although Japanese offensives into the eastern USSR during this time might have resulted in the defeat of the Soviet Union, Japan was forced to concentrate all its resources in a resistance against the massive U.S. counteroffensive in the Pacific, underway by fall 1942.