

The History of Samurai

Background Notes for Teachers

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This resource was developed by The Japan Society with support from Professor Oleg Benesch of the University of York and the Asia Department at the British Museum.

The information in this document provides context and more detail about the samurai warrior class – an iconic and important group of people that existed in Japanese history for hundreds of years. Before teaching this lesson, you might find it useful to read through these background notes to better understand exactly who the samurai were and what roles they played in society within the context of Japanese history.

An introduction to samurai

Samurai is the name for the **warriors** who existed in **pre-modern Japan**, and their origins can be traced back to the **Heian Period**. They were a **powerful group of people**, and for a large proportion of Japanese history, the **samurai had complete control over Japan**. Previously, Japan had been ruled by its emperor, who led the imperial court (government). However, after a major battle between two large clans, the **chief military leader** of Japan, otherwise known as **shogun**, led the samurai and **ruled over Japan for nearly 700 years**. It is hard to ignore the significance and impact that samurai have left on Japan and its history.

Japan's imperial court and capital cities

In Japan, **the capital city is determined by where the imperial court is located**. The capital city moved around numerous times in early Japanese history, mainly for practical and political reasons. In 794, at the start of the Heian Period, it was established in **Kyoto** (then called **Heian-kyo**) and the imperial family remained there up until 1868 (the Meiji Restoration). In contrast, shoguns sometimes set up their own **military capitals** away from Kyoto, such as **Kamakura** from 1192-1333 and Edo (now Tokyo) from 1603-1868. The **Meiji Restoration** led to the **imperial court moving to the city of Edo and the emperor taking over the shogun's castle** – now known as Tokyo. The word Tokyo 東京 actually means “eastern capital”, and Kyoto 京都 means “capital city”.

Timeline of Japanese History

Below, you will see a simplified timeline that outlines key points in Japanese history for samurai. The lesson itself will mainly cover aspects from the Heian, Kamakura, and Edo

Periods, as well as the Meiji Restoration (these have been marked with a ★ symbol); however this timeline will provide you with context for understanding the rise and fall of the samurai warrior class throughout Japanese history.

★ Heian Period (794 – 1185) – Origins of samurai and the warrior class

In this period, samurai first emerged as a group of **warriors**, who were initially hired by rich landowners, to help **protect their land** from bandits. In 1180, there was a major national civil war known as **The Genpei War**, between two powerful **samurai clans** – the **Minamoto clan** and the **Taira clan**. They fought over the dominance of the imperial court and to ultimately take control of the country.

★ Kamakura Period (1185 – 1333) – Japan's feudal system

In 1185, the **Minamoto clan emerged victorious** and in 1192, **Minamoto Yoritomo became the shogun of Japan – the chief military leader**. Yoritomo established a new **military government (shogunate)** at Kamakura in the east of the country, far away from Kyoto. The emperor and the imperial court took on an increasingly ceremonious and symbolic role, as the **military government gradually accumulated more and more power**. Whilst Kyoto remained the imperial capital, **Kamakura became the new de facto capital city**.

The following section covers periods of Japanese history that are not covered in the lesson. However, this could be useful to read to help provide better understanding about the samurai and why, following these periods, there was a relatively peaceful period for Japan.

- **Muromachi Period (1336-1573)**

The Kamakura government was overthrown by the Ashikaga family in the 1330s, with a brief return to imperial rule for two years until Ashikaga Takauji seized power in 1336 and became shogun. The Ashikaga set up their government in the Muromachi area of Kyoto, and although emperors continued to exist, they would not return to power for over 500 years. In the early 16th century, Ashikaga rule was increasingly challenged by samurai from other parts of Japan, and the country plunged into civil war between warlords with ever-larger armies.

- **Azuchi-Momoyama Period (1568-1600)**

Following decades of conflict, Japan was gradually unified in the late sixteenth century by a succession of three powerful warlords: Oda Nobunaga (1534-1588), Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537-1598), and finally Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616). This period saw the arrival of significant numbers of European missionaries, and the spread of firearms throughout Japan. Armies became much larger, and the division between samurai and commoners was not always clear, as peasants would often be conscripted into armies. This period ended when Tokugawa Ieyasu defeated his remaining challengers at the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600, and took the title of shogun in 1603.

★ Edo Period (1603 – 1868) – A peaceful period

The Edo Period (1603 – 1868), was a relatively **peaceful time** in history for Japan, and the samurai formally became the **ruling class** within society, with their status becoming **hereditary**. Although they continued to wear two swords as symbols of their class identity, the samurai **took on and fulfilled new roles and positions appropriate to a period of peace**. Many samurai were bureaucrats, but some became teachers, scholars, artists, and even masters of tea ceremonies. At the same time, popular stories, plays, and art was inspired by ancient warriors and battles, and samurai commissioned beautiful armours, helmets, and swords for display rather than practical use. **It was during this period that the idealised samurai warrior – who no longer existed in reality – truly became an icon.**

By the end of the Edo Period, **the shogunate were starting to become unpopular** amongst the people of Japan. Japan was closed off from the rest of the world for many years, but towards the end of the Edo Period, the shogunate were pressured into signing trade treaties with countries such as the US, Britain, Russia, and the Netherlands. This signalled to many across Japan the **weakness of the military government** in their inability to defend Japan from foreign threats, after being pressured into signing these treaties.

★ Meiji Restoration (1868) – The end of the samurai class

The weakening Edo shogunate was overthrown by two powerful clans (Satsuma and Choshu), who placed the **emperor Meiji in power** and claimed that **authority was to be restored to the imperial court**. The new imperial government moved the capital city from Kyoto to Edo – which they renamed Tokyo. Japan underwent a rapid process of modernisation in the late nineteenth century, introducing new technologies and forms of politics and organisation from the West. There was no longer any need or purpose for samurai in this modern society, and **the samurai were abolished in the 1870s**.

Bushido and misconceptions about samurai

As samurai are such an iconic group of people, due to their distinctive appearance and significance throughout Japanese history, there have been **many depictions of samurai in popular culture** such as in film, TV, and manga – and not only in Japan, but across the world. However, these depictions are often not factual and tend to present a version of samurai that is **historically inaccurate**.

Perhaps one reason for the misrepresentation of samurai in popular media is due to the concept of **bushido**. This was supposedly a code of honour that samurai warriors developed and lived by, to ensure they always acted and fought honourably. This idea of bushido has spread across the world and many people believe that samurai genuinely did act according to

this code of honour – that they would willingly risk their lives in combat to be able to die honourably on the battlefield and would always be unconditionally loyal to the lords that they served.

However, the **very concept of bushido has been debunked by historians**, who note that it was for the most part fabricated in the 1890s in order to foster patriotism and create a new national identity for the Japanese people. The most famous book on the subject is *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*, written in English in 1899 by a man named Inazo Nitobe. Bushido – and Nitobe's book – became very popular around the world after Japan defeated Russia in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, and people looking for reasons for Japan's military strength believed to find them in the samurai. Although Nitobe's book is still widely sold today, historians are very critical of it and do not see it as a historically reliable nor accurate source to refer to. Perhaps some of the points outlined in Nitobe's book are partially true in terms of how samurai may have acted, but they never lived by a strict code as such.
