Like all the great revolutions of the modern era, the Meiji Restoration generated intense opposition from groups and classes displaced and disadvantaged by revolutionary change. What sets the Meiji Restoration apart, however, is the apparent ease with which opposition to the revolutionary regime was defeated or co-opted. Peasant riots over the new conscription law, village protests against the land tax revision, revolts by disaffected samurai, early campaigns for representative government, and uprisings by dispossessed farmers all were contained or suppressed. The original leadership group stayed in charge and did not change its basic policies. Viewed positively, Japan enjoyed extraordinary continuity and stability in government; viewed negatively, conservative and bureaucratic politics prevailed.

Japanese and Western historians disagree sharply when explaining the failure of opposition movements to oust the ruling oligarchy or force changes in its agenda. Scholars in America and Great Britain influenced by modernization theory have generally viewed Japan as a model of peaceful transition from feudalism to modernity, a transformation in which core values of consensus and loyalty to emperor kept dissent within manageable bounds. On the other hand, most Japanese and some Western historians credit the failure of the opposition movements to the authoritarian character of the Meiji state, emphasizing the incorporation of oppressive semifeudal structures into the Meiji polity and the oligarchy’s control of the new state’s efficient state security apparatus.

Although there is some truth to both interpretations, neither of which is as simple as this summary might suggest, neither adequately explains the complex interaction between modernizing reforms and

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2 E. Herbert Norman, Japan’s Emergence As a Modern State (New York: Institute of Pacific Affairs, 1940); and Roger W. Bowen, Rebellion and Democracy in Meiji Japan (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980).
class interests, and neither takes into account the diverse nature of the social forces represented within the various opposition movements. The following analysis focuses on the social factors involved in political mobilization and the structures and conditions that restricted mass collective action.

EARLY RURAL PROTESTS

If the number of village protests and disturbances is a meaningful indicator of the degree of social unrest, rural Japan was anything but peaceful in the aftermath of the Meiji Restoration. According to Aoki Kōji’s data, there were 343 incidents between 1868 and 1872. Peasant protests, which had increased steadily at the end of Tokugawa, reached a historical peak of 110 in 1869. Beginning in 1870, however, the number of incidents declined rapidly, and in 1872 only 30 incidents were recorded.

What does this large number of rural disturbances signify? To put the data into perspective, nearly half of the incidents were local conflicts engendered by the malfeasance of village headmen, landlord-tenant relations, hoarding of rice, foreclosure of loans, and other issues that affected the popular welfare but did not directly involve the central government. Of the remainder, the most frequent cause was the land tax. It can be argued that in these protests, the peasants expressed their frustration that the overthrow of the Tokugawa bakufu had not brought relief from feudal levels of taxation. Shortly after the imperial coup d’état of January 1868, the new government, at the urging of Saigo Takamori, issued an edict promising tax reductions of up to 50 percent in territories belonging to the shogun. Subsequent edicts promised that the emperor would “alleviate the suffering of the people,” and commoners were invited to petition the proper authorities in order to rectify the “evil practices” of the Tokugawa bakufu. These early expressions of benevolent concern for the farmers’ welfare were commendably Confucian and reflected a degree of genuine concern for the plight of poor peasants. The promise of tax reduction, however, was a deliberate strategy to foment rebellion in the shogun’s home provinces and thereby weaken the bakufu’s capacity to wage war. After the Tokugawa family and most vassal daimyo surrendered in the spring of 1868 without fighting a single battle, no more was said on the subject, for with victory assured, the new govern-

4 Ibid., pp. 15–16.
ment’s most urgent need was to pay its bills. Meiji officials temporarily lowered taxes in districts where extraordinary conditions made relief unavoidable. In Aizu, for example, the war had disrupted farming and devastated crops, and farmers were granted reductions of 50 percent in that year’s taxes. Moreover, in areas that had experienced climate-related crop loss, officials accepted petitions for tax relief. Thus, the policy initially adopted by the Meiji government with respect to the land tax was to leave the feudal fiscal structure in place and permit traditional appeals for temporary aid.

If early Meiji tax officials were in fact behaving very much like their feudal predecessors, did protests over the land tax signify the farmers’ discontent that things had not changed for the better? In some petitions, the villagers respectfully but forthrightly reproached the government for unfulfilled promises. A January 1869 petition from villages in the Chichibu district began by citing two years of destructive floods in requesting tax reductions and also commented on the government’s failure to carry out a general tax reduction: “A benevolent order was issued at the time of the Restoration that the [tax] rate be made lower than last year’s, but it was not carried out; in the end nothing more was heard of it.” However, the language, content, form, and sentiments of these petitions were identical to those of the peasant appeals of the Tokugawa era that asked for tax reductions when forces beyond their control drastically reduced harvests. Because of generally high rates of taxation under the kokudaka system, peasants farming small, subsistence-size holdings depended on daimyo benevolence to mitigate the effects of natural disasters, for without tax reductions and loans, many small farmers would be forced to mortgage their land or leave farming altogether. Realizing the daimyo’s interest in retaining population and thereby protecting his tax base, the peasants frequently organized illegal “direct appeals” (osso) and staged large and raucous demonstrations (gōso) before the castle in the expectation that public embarrassment and fear of greater disorder would move the authorities to grant concessions. Economic conditions in fact explain the large number of land tax–related protests in early Meiji. Beginning in 1867, Japan experienced three consecutive years of crop failure; by 1869, the peak year for disturbances, many rural districts were eco-

6 Aoki, Meiji nōmin sōjō, p. 17.
7 Especially in the early Tokugawa period when new land was being brought into cultivation, it was in the interest of the daimyo to provide sufficient aid and tax relief to keep peasants on the land. Stephen Vlastos, Peasant Protests and Uprisings in Tokugawa Japan (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986).
nomically exhausted, although famine was rare. We find the greatest concentration of protests in the districts of western Japan that had suffered the most severe crop losses, and in general the incidence of rural protests in early Meiji correlates with the timing and extent of crop failures. Indistinguishable from the Tokugawa peasant movements in most respects, these protests did not indicate opposition to the Meiji Restoration.

Beginning in 1870, agriculture revived, and the number of protests and disturbances declined dramatically. However, during the first years of Meiji, farmers gained little from the change in government. Indeed, in some districts administered directly by the new regime, taxes had actually increased. When the government abolished feudal domains in 1871 and appointed governors to replace the daimyo, farmers sometimes protested. For example, in August 1871 villagers in Hiroshima tried to prevent the daimyo’s entourage from leaving the domain. In September there were demonstrations in Takamatsu and Fukuyama, and in November over three thousand people gathered in Okayama to demand both the reinstatement of the former daimyo and lower taxes. However, in these and other demonstrations, the villagers linked their appeals for the return of their daimyo to the issue of taxation, much like the Tokugawa peasants who protested when the appointment of a new daimyo presaged higher taxes. But their actions did not signify a preference for feudal administration as such.

The Conscription Act of January 10, 1873, gave rise to the most violent rural disturbances of this period. The law decreed compulsory military service of three years in the regular army and four in the reserves for commoners, thereby ending the long tradition of a hereditary (and privileged) warrior class. Many samurai were naturally displeased by the loss of an ancient birthright. But why did the farmers protest?

Most of the sixteen antidraft protests occurred in the spring and summer of 1873, soon after the law was made public. Although the circumstances of each disturbance differed, the uprising in Misaka district illustrates their salient features. First, the villagers misunderstood the meaning of a passage in the edict and charge that “Western people call this a blood tax. This is because one protects his country verily with blood.” The intended meaning of the wording of the edict, of course, was that the citizen soldier should be prepared to die in

battle to defend his country. As one of the leaders of the Misaka riots testified, however, many believed that the army drained the blood of conscripts for sale to foreign countries. Even before publication of the conscription law, villagers in Misaka had become greatly agitated by recent edicts that either imposed additional financial burdens or offended local custom. They objected to the cost of compulsory education, the slaughtering of cows, the liberation of the outcaste communities, and new hair styles. When they first learned of the Conscription Act, the villagers discussed the possibility of voicing their concerns through traditional grievance procedures but concluded that petitions to officials in Tokyo would surely go unanswered. Suddenly rumors abounded that men dressed in white were coming to round up conscripts. Anxious farmers met and resolved to organize a demonstration. A few days later, amid new rumors of the imminent arrival of the “blood tax man,” they convened a mass meeting at a local shrine at which the villagers also complained vociferously of the outrageously presumptuous behavior of former outcastes and demanded a return to old customs. According to a prearranged plan, someone reported having seen a man walking in the nearby mountains dressed in white and carrying a large glass bottle. Great commotion ensued, and those assembled were easily persuaded to march to the district magistrate’s office. On the way, they attacked the homes and shops of wealthy farmers, moneylenders, and merchants; entering the town of Tsuyama, they surrounded the prefectural office. When officers appeared and attempted to quiet the crowd, farmers armed with hunting rifles and bamboo spears attacked, killing one official and injuring a second. As soon as the police fired back, the crowd scattered, but subsequently disturbances spread to every district in the prefecture, as crowds attacked schools, slaughterhouses, village headmen, outcaste communities, and government buildings.11

Ignorance and prejudice contributed to the Misaka “blood tax” riots and violent “antimodernization” protests triggered by laws that offended local customs and beliefs. If we look only at the immediate causes, we can dismiss such incidents as irrational reactions to modernization. Examined more closely, however, the demonstrations reveal a complexity of motivations and objectives. In Ikuno and Harima villages near the present-day city of Kobe, farmers first protested laws relating to outcastes but went on to demand tax reductions; next they drew up an eight-point list of grievances and vented their anger at the

government by destroying machinery at nearby state mines. Finally, they destroyed the property of wealthy commoners, especially money-
lenders, merchants, and village officials. Thus one finds in these inci-
dents a mingling of political and social grievances, for to some degree 
ordinary farmers harbored suspicions, which were not entirely ground-
less, that the new laws benefited the rich. Although the draft law 
contained a provision for hardship cases, poor farmers realized that 
the burden of conscription would fall most heavily on their shoulders. 
A wealthy farmer could buy exemption from military service for his sons by paying ¥270, a luxury that no ordinary farmer could possibly 
afford. But if a poor farm family lost a son’s labor for three years, its very survival would be threatened.

These protests reveal understandable suspicions regarding laws that, it must be remembered, were promulgated by the central govern-
ment without public discussion or consultation. To understand why poor farmers in Misaka called for a return to the old ways, we should recall that the Meiji Restoration did not bring popular participation in the political process. If anything, the centralization of authority made it more difficult for the villagers to influence the very policies that most affected them. With respect to the land tax, the most frequent cause of conflict, the Meiji state was infinitely better prepared to resist protest than was the bakufu or daimyo. Not infrequently, the peas-
ants’ protests in the Tokugawa period had succeeded in wringing concessions from lords, even though the leaders of illegal protests might be severely punished. However, the creation of an efficient national bureaucracy and modern police and army drastically under-
cut the efficacy of traditional forms of protest. In the case of the Misaka riots, the villagers considered petitioning the Tokyo govern-
ment but decided that their appeals would be fruitless and so took matters into their own hands instead. Hence, the apparently irrational “blood tax” riots and related disturbances stemmed from the peasants’ justified fears that political centralization had actually increased their powerlessness and vulnerability to the new government’s arbitrary decisions.

THE MEIJI LAND TAX AND VILLAGE PROTESTS

After abolishing the feudal domains in 1871, the Meiji leadership grappled with the problem of how to reform the feudal land tax system to meet the demands of national development. The enormous financial costs of pensioning off the daimyo and samurai made their task all the
more difficult. How the government persuaded daimyo to surrender peacefully their ancient rights and powers will be discussed in the next section. What concerns us here is the economic constraints on fiscal policy incurred by pensioning off the ruling class, for stipends and domain debts alone consumed most of the government’s revenue in the early 1870s.  

There were few sources of additional revenue that the government was willing or able to tap. It rejected borrowing abroad because of the obvious perils to national security in case of subsequent default, and it was determined to tax commerce and industry as lightly as possible in order to speed capital formation. Meanwhile, the commercial treaties forced on Japan by the West had fixed tariffs at uniform low rates that limited the revenue from foreign trade.  

Although the leaders saw no alternative to maintaining the high taxes on agriculture, they could not afford to alienate the farmers’ allegiance to the state. There was little reason to fear rural revolution. But even passive resistance in the form of withholding taxes would strain the treasury, and small, nonviolent protests always had the potential to escalate. Memories of yonaoshi (world rectification) and uchikowashi (urban smashing) uprisings that had erupted in the mid-1860s were still fresh. If the farmers violently protested the new tax, prefectural officials would be forced to mobilize ex-samurai bands to restore order. Unemployed retainers were only too willing to unsheathe their swords, but the central government judged the risks of unleashing them to be unacceptably high. Whatever the changes made in tax and property rights, the government needed the farmers’ acquiescence.  

The dilemma facing the Meiji government was how to ensure the farmers’ cooperation with the new tax system without substantially reducing land tax revenues. Part of the solution involved eliminating feudal restrictions on landholding and legalizing capitalist relations of production, changes welcomed by most farmers and particularly beneficial to large landholders. In 1871 the government abolished the customary restrictions on land use. Early in 1872 it legalized the sale of private holdings and prohibited the daimyo and retainers from expropriating farmland in their former domains. Next, new land surveys were ordered, and certificates were issued. Finally, in July 1873 the government promulgated a law that fundamentally restructured the

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13 The United States and the other major Western imperialist powers had forced the bakufu to sign commercial treaties that limited import and export duties to a flat rate of 5 percent.
OPPOSITION MOVEMENTS IN EARLY MEIJI

land tax system while maintaining the old levels of taxation. It deserves closer scrutiny.

The Meiji land tax established uniform procedures for assessing taxes based on the market value of land as a fixed investment. The Tokugawa land tax had been based on estimates of productivity measured in output of rice, and both nominal and real rates of taxation varied considerably from fief to fief. However, the new tax was set at a uniform 3 percent of the monetary value of each parcel of land as determined by a complex formula that included estimates of land fertility, commodity prices, fixed production costs, and reasonable rate of return. The tax was paid in cash directly to the state by each owner; it was a fixed tax that initially made no provision for reduction in the event of natural calamities. In return, taxpayers were given title deeds that conferred full rights of ownership. No attempt was made to regulate landlord-tenant relations: Landlords were responsible for paying the yearly tax, after which they were free to charge whatever rents the market would bear.

Inasmuch as the 1873 revision of the land tax altered every feature of the old tax system, we should expect conflicts to have arisen. According to Arimoto Masao’s data, there were ninety-nine rural protests between 1874 and 1881, the period during which the reform was carried out. Why did farmers protest, and how did they mobilize?

Initially, the most frequent complaint was not the tax rate itself but the way that the local tax commissions had determined land values and interim taxes. Often villages disputed the prices used to calculate the cash value of crops and to commute taxes previously collected in kind; for the lower the price, the lower the assessment. And because rice prices fluctuated from year to year and from one district to the next, some villages were likely to feel unfairly treated, especially if local soil, climate, and market conditions lowered the price of their crop.

One of the larger protests occurred in the Naka district of Wakayama Prefecture in 1876. In February, Kodama Shōemon, the eldest son of the mayor of Nakayama village, petitioned the governor to complain that in commuting taxes formerly collected in kind, the tax commission had overcharged villages by assuming an unrealistically high rice price. Spurred by Shōemon’s appeal, the mayors of twelve neighboring villages petitioned jointly and voiced the same complaint. When the governor responded by rejecting the petitions, Shōemon made yet another appeal in which he insisted that although the official

price accurately reflected conditions in other districts of Wakayama, the prices in his district were in fact considerably lower. Anticipating the objection that the procedures must be uniform, he lectured the governor on the proper function of laws: "Laws are made for the people, not people for laws."

At first, the villages disputed only the assessment of interim taxes, but they soon broadened their demands to include land values. As before, they insisted that the official rice price was too high and cited examples of more favorable treatment afforded by other tax commissions. In their petitions they also played on the fears of popular disturbances. Reminding the governor that the mayors stood "between the officials and the people," they warned of the hardship caused by the tax revisions, hardships so severe that "even the blind can stir up the people."

Only after twenty-nine mayors and assistant officials had tendered their resignations did the governor attempt a compromise. He refused to accept the resignations and authorized a 5 percent reduction in the official price, about half of what the mayors had requested. However, instead of ending the protest, his actions stirred the hope of even greater concessions and swelled the ranks of the protesters. In April, 177 village officials jointly petitioned the governor to demand that prices be determined on a case-by-case basis according to the conditions in each district.

By contesting the use of uniform procedures, the protest threatened to cause interminable delay. As compromise had not produced a settlement, the governor now took a hard line. The mayors were summoned to a meeting and admonished; when they still objected, he fired them and arrested five ringleaders. Although the arrest of popular village officials provoked a large demonstration, within a few days the local authorities had restored order without resort to force. A company of infantry had been dispatched to Wakayama, but it was not necessary to deploy it in the countryside. Later large-scale arrests were made to set an example: Over 1,000 people were arrested, and 688 were convicted of encouraging public disturbances.

The protest of Wakayama was unusual in that most disputes that arose in conjunction with the tax law revision were resolved without fines or mass arrests. How, then, did the tax officials gain the consent of recalcitrant villagers, for the law required owners to agree to new assessments? The fate of the protests in Tottori suggests some of the answers.16

15 Arimoto, Chiso kaisei, p. 605. 16 Ibid., pp. 618–29.
In Tottori, more than twenty villages in the Yatsuhashi and Kume districts rejected the new tax assessments, and an equal number postponed making a decision. Hoping to quell the resistance before the revolt spread, the tax commission ordered representatives of the villages to the prefectural capital where they were subjected to intense pressure to give their consent. Most of the bullying was verbal, but one man reported being held ten hours a day in the back of the jail for eight consecutive days. Not surprisingly, some of the representatives gave in and agreed to the assessments; soon only seventeen holdouts remained. But then several villages that had previously consented reversed their decision and joined the protest. In December, thirty-six villages filed suit in the district court challenging the assessments, and the pendulum swung the other way. By February 1876, 112 villages were holding out. Again, the officials did their best and convinced eight powerful landlords to break ranks and sign individual consent orders. Because their holdings spanned many villages, the effect was to undermine resistance, especially by their tenants.\(^\text{17}\) As a result, the number of holdouts had dropped in half by spring.

Opposition collapsed in July when the local tax commission invoked a recently adopted amendment to the land law that authorized binding on-site assessments as a last resort.\(^\text{18}\) The commission appointed a committee of local notables to investigate conditions in the eight villages that had been at the forefront of the protest. To the surprise of no one, they reported that conditions in the villages did not warrant special consideration, a finding that gave ample warning of what to expect from on-site assessments. Soon after, most of the villages abandoned the protest. The reduction of assessments for seven of the remaining holdout villages ended all opposition. By December the tax commission reported to the main bureau in Tokyo that its work was done.

The largest number of protests occurred in the latter half of 1875 and 1876. Although revision of the land tax had begun in the spring of 1874, initially there were few protests, for in areas such as Hiroshima, Chikuma, and Yamaguchi local notables participated in the commissions, and the new assessments were generally lower than the old. However, in May 1875 a special agency was established in Tokyo to supervise the work of the local commissions and to speed implementa-

\(^{17}\) Almost half of all the land in the Yatsuhashi and Kume districts was tenant cultivated, and a few landlords controlled immense holdings. Their acceptance of the commission’s assessments undermined resistance in all of the villages.

\(^{18}\) The law was amended in April 1876 to authorize assessments without consent when based on inspections carried out by the local commissions. Because the new assessments were generally lower than the old, in most cases it was necessary to invoke this provision.
tion. Thereafter, state interests tended to predominate. Assessments were less generous to the farmers, for the commissions were given target quotas that, though not absolute, influenced their decisions. And to discourage villages from protesting, in May 1876 an amendment authorizing on-site inspections was adopted.

The tougher policy produced a sharp increase in protests. At the same time, however, samurai revolts erupted in southwestern Japan, and soon the government adopted a more conciliatory posture toward the farmers. In January 1877, the land tax was lowered from 3 percent of market value to 2.5 percent, a reduction of 17 percent in the yearly tax. Later in the year, the law was further amended to permit reductions when crop loss due to natural disasters exceeded 50 percent. Finally, farmers in villages distant from marketing centers were allowed to pay part of their tax in produce.

The adoption of these measures was followed by a noticeable decline in protests, but it did not eliminate all resistance. The most stubbornly contested dispute over revised assessments occurred in the summer of 1878 in Ishikawa Prefecture. Initially, 232 villages in seven districts refused to accept the newly published assessments, but as the prefec-tural commission applied pressure, resistance dwindled. In the 28 villages that continued to hold out, opposition was led by a group of very wealthy local notables who did not back down when the tax commission invoked the threat of on-site inspections, a tactic that had worked well against poor villages in Tottori. Rather, they borrowed the rhetoric of natural rights to justify their refusal to accept the new assessment, lecturing the authorities that “if liberty be our right, we will never accede to what is not just.” To strengthen their hand, they sought outside support and made contact with the Risshisha, a liberal political society headed by Itagaki Taisuke that was campaigning for an elected national assembly and that sent Sugita Teiichi to help their movement. Experienced in legal matters, Sugita filed various suits on behalf of the villagers, and it is likely that the linking of the two movements caused the government considerable alarm.

Perhaps because the government feared the involvement of the Risshisha in land tax–related protests, the dispute was settled in Tokyo by Ōkuma Shigenobu, chief of the Finance Ministry, who ordered that the entire process be redone, starting with new surveys. When

21 Arimoto, Chiso kaisei, p. 631.
these were completed one year later, the result was not an unqualified victory for the landowners, for although the new assessments were substantially lower, the administrative costs charged to the villages amounted to more than twenty times the yearly savings in the land tax.22

What does this brief survey of resistance to land tax revision reveal? What can we conclude with respect to rural opposition to the Meiji land tax, an institution that fundamentally shaped the development of the Meiji state?

First, the revision of the land tax must be judged a political as well as an economic success. Given the magnitude of the changes and the interests involved, conflict was inevitable. It was naturally in the farmers' interest to seek lower assessments, although the government could not afford substantial reduction in revenue. In the light of these facts, the total number of protests was small: ninety-nine incidents between 1874 and 1881, of which thirty-seven were landlord-tenant conflicts and did not directly involve the state. Most of the disputes over assessments were eventually settled through negotiation and compromise without arrests or resort to armed force. In a handful of cases, the local officials were sufficiently alarmed to call in the national army and mobilize samurai bands. But compared to the "blood tax" uprisings, these were tame and orderly affairs.

The principal effect of the Meiji land tax was to equalize and rationalize tax assessments according to market value and thereby to eliminate the arbitrary factor in Tokugawa taxation. Under daimyo rule, the actual rates of tax extraction varied considerably depending on the rigor of fief administration; rice fields (suiden) were more heavily taxed than was unirrigated land (hatake), as was arable compared with residential and commercial land. By making the land tax fall more equally, Meiji tax assessments provided some relief to the majority of landholders.23

Not all classes of landholders benefited equally, however. The Meiji land tax caused special problems for the poor.24 The tax had to be paid in cash, a provision that forced subsistence producers into greater

23 Arimoto, Chiso kaisei, p. 637.
24 Norman, Japan's Emergence As a Modern State, pp. 138–44.
dependence on the market and increased the risk of bankruptcy. Sub-sistence producers also lost the protection previously afforded by daimyo benevolence – the granting of tax reductions to mitigate the effects of crop failure. Farmers on the margins of the market economy had the greatest need of short-term aid, as they did not have the resources to withstand severe shortfalls. The Meiji land tax, however, initially allowed no exemptions at all and, when amended, permitted reductions only if the crop loss exceeded half of the harvest.

At the same time, the revised land tax system worked to the advantage of large farmers and especially landlords. The corporate features of the Tokugawa land tax were eliminated, as was payment in kind, and both of these changes gave capitalist farmers greater access to the market. Second, the feature of the Meiji land tax that caused the greatest hardship to poor farmers – the fact that taxes were held constant – proved highly profitable to those farmers who, through investment and technological innovation, boosted output and income, for taxes were not tied to profits. Of course, innovation and production for the market were not limited to the wealthy. Nevertheless, landlords and farmers with large holdings naturally reaped the greatest benefits of the decline of the land tax as a fixed cost of production. Third, as noted earlier, taxpayers were given full rights of ownership, even to the mortgaged land and paddy fields that tenants (or their ancestors) had brought into cultivation, and conditions of tenure would no longer confer customary right to permanent tenancy. Finally, landlords were legally free to sell land and renegotiate rents. Although the landlord who cared about social esteem was unlikely to put out all his holdings to the highest bidder, the courts and police – both vastly more efficient than were their feudal counterparts – would back him up if he did.

It is not surprising, therefore, that in the latter phase of land tax revision, and particularly after the general reduction ordered in 1877, the number of disputes between tenants and landlords increased. Between 1877 and 1881, twenty-nine of the forty-nine incidents recorded were landlord-tenant conflicts. The major issues of contention were rents and the customary rights of cultivators. The issue of rents was connected to the revised assessments because tenants expected reduced rents when taxes were lowered, but tended to resist rent increases if the tax had been increased. Customary rights were a more volatile issue. The best-known, and certainly the bloodiest, dispute over proprietary rights involved tenant farmers in Shindo village, Kanagawa Prefecture, who had mortgaged land “in perpetuity” – a
Tokugawa practice whereby the mortgagor retained use rights. When the tax commission awarded title to the mortgage holder, a powerful landlord and village mayor, the tenants contested the ruling through the courts, persisting with appeal after appeal over a two-year period. Finally, after a direct but fruitless appeal to the Ministry of Finance, they attacked the landlord’s house in frustration, killing him and seven of his relatives and servants. Despite the murders, it was the dispossessed cultivators who won the sympathy of local opinion. When they were brought to trial, fifteen hundred villagers signed a petition pleading for leniency.

Taken as a whole, village protests against land tax revision reveal the pivotal role of the local notable (gōnō) class of farmers in representing to the state the interests of the rural communities. With the exception of disputes between landlords and tenants, opposition to land tax revision was spearheaded by mayors and local notables. That they assumed this role is not surprising, for throughout the Tokugawa period, headmen had represented the village in all dealings with fief authorities. Under the Tokugawa tax system, taxes were assessed on the village rather than on individual householders, and it was the responsibility of the headman to see that they were paid. Legally responsible for all financial relations between the corporate village and the state, headmen were also perceived by the community to be, and themselves felt, morally responsible for safeguarding their communities’ well-being. If landholders suffered crop failure or the lord increased taxes, it was the headman’s duty to petition the authorities; if permissible appeals failed to achieve redress of grievance, the village head had a moral obligation to continue the petitioning process, even if this entailed breaking the law. Hence, we find the tradition of gimin, the extreme case of leaders who risked (or lost) their lives protesting onerous taxes and officials’ malfeasance.

To understand the political dynamic of village protest against land tax revision, we should remember that the headmen and notables had traditionally assumed responsibility in all matters involving the village’s fiscal obligations and other financial dealing with the state.

Thus, mayors and notables acted out a familiar role when they participated in the implementation of land tax revision by overseeing the enormously elaborate and time-consuming work of surveying, grading, and registering the thousands of parcels of land in their communities. Although the Finance Ministry determined policy objectives, prefectural commissions necessarily relied on the cooperation of village heads and prominent citizens to supply the data used to calculate the new assessments. This gave heads and notables both power and responsibility to ensure a satisfactory outcome. Hence, most of the disputes between villages and local tax commissions involved issues that affected the interests of all farm households, regardless of the size of their holdings. The collective interests of villagers in lowering land evaluations and interim taxes permitted political mobilization within the tradition of Tokugawa village protests. As we saw in the conflicts in Wakayama, Tottori, and Ishikawa prefectures, when principled mayors and notables felt that the commissions had done them an injustice, these otherwise law-abiding citizens resisted stubbornly.

We can now analyze the political dynamic in village protests against land tax revision. First, responsibility for initiating protest rested with the village heads and local notables, and they acted only when the interests of all landholders were affected by the rulings of the tax commissions. The relatively small number of protests is therefore explained by the fact that the revised assessments, though higher than desired, were usually somewhat lower than the Tokugawa tax rates. Second, because high-status villagers assumed responsibility for representing the community's interests to the state and relied on petitions and legal process, the protests tended to be orderly and restrained. Generally, they did not mobilize the village poor – the most volatile and potentially most militant social class. With few exceptions, village protests against tax revision were settled through negotiation and compromise. Despite confrontation and the testing of wills, conflict occurred within the larger context of economic reforms that were welcomed by the majority of rural producers. One does not see villages protesting the principal provisions of the Meiji land tax, only specific rulings of the prefectural commissions. This limited the scope and intensity of the conflicts.

The real hardships caused by the Meiji land tax did not readily lead to collective action. The social classes affected most adversely – subsistence farmers forced into bankruptcy and cultivators dispossessed of customary rights – were relatively powerless. Because capitalist farmers profited from the system of unqualified ownership rights and fixed
monetarized taxes, the village as a whole did not share a common interest in opposing these provisions of the Meiji tax. Moreover, the political obligations of the headmen and notables did not extend—or did so in only attenuated form—to hardship arising out of contractual and commercial relations; as landlords and moneylenders, they themselves might be party to such disputes. Thus the dispossessed were left to fend for themselves. Although *uchikowashi* and *yonaoshi* uprisings provided a model of collective action by the poor against both the rich villagers and the state, conditions favorable to the mass mobilization of small farmers did not materialize until the mid-1880s, well after the revision of the land tax had been completed.

**SHIZOKU REVOLTS**

In contrast with the generally peaceful and limited opposition movements of rural commoners during the first decade of Meiji, samurai opposition initially took the form of armed uprisings that sought to topple the government. The underlying cause of the rebellions was profound discontent and considerable economic distress within the former warrior class caused by early Meiji reforms that dismantled the feudal polity and all but abolished samurai elite status. To the extent that the rebellions expressed the frustration and resentment of former samurai, they represented the clearest and most forceful example of resistance to modernization in the early Meiji period. Viewed as the organized, political response of a dispossessed social class, the half-dozen *shizoku* rebellions between 1874 and 1877 can be explained as the predictably violent reaction of a traditional elite displaced by a modern revolution. There can be no doubt that materially and psychologically the samurai bore the major burden of rapid modernization; and because they were systematically disadvantaged by early Meiji reforms, they had an obvious interest in joining counterrevolutionary movements.

Nevertheless, important aspects of *shizoku* rebellion do not readily fit the mold of counterrevolution. The leaders of the rebellions were not defenders of the ancient regime, nor had they lost power and status as a result of the Meiji Restoration. Without exception, the rebellion leaders were young samurai from southwestern Japan who had early joined the anti-Tokugawa movement and continued to identify passionately with the imperial cause. Outstanding members of the revolutionary elite that seized power in 1868, they had been richly rewarded for their services. In fact, the leaders of the largest rebel-
lions – Etō Shimpei, Maeba Iose and Saigō Takamori – all had served on the Council of State, the highest decision-making body, before breaking with the government. Before resigning in 1873 to protest the cancellation of the Korean invasion, Etō and Saigō supported, if somewhat grudgingly, sweeping reforms that all but ended feudalism and laid the foundations for subsequent modernization.

As we shall see, the shizoku rebellions were complex events that incorporated various political impulses. Insurrections led by disaffected leaders, they reflected personality conflicts and bureaucratic rivalry within the ruling elite; local protests against the increasing power and assertiveness of the government in Tokyo, they expressed sectional opposition to political centralization. Nevertheless, at least among the rank and file, the underlying impetus to armed resistance was the opposition to the loss of traditional warrior status and class privilege. Whatever the motivation of individual leaders, the social basis of antigovernment shizoku ferment in the mid-1870s was resistance to early Meiji reforms that, by dismantling the feudal polity and building a modern army and a centralized state bureaucracy, eliminated samurai class privilege.

The young samurai who came to power in 1868 had experienced the frustration of subordinate rank in feudal society, and they quickly ended the social distinctions based on hereditary status.\(^{27}\) Having come to the realization that the traditional status system was an obstacle to national unity, they dismantled it one step at a time. Beginning in 1869, the government ordered the profusion of hereditary ranks within the samurai class reduced to two, shizoku (knight) and sotsu (foot soldier), and ended the archaic division of commoners into status groups – peasant, merchant, and artisan – based on occupation. Two years later, it freed outcaste communities from legal prescriptions that had enforced strict segregation. All commoners were required to adopt surnames and were informed that public acts of deference toward samurai, such as prostration, were no longer necessary or desirable. Samurai, on the other hand, were told that they need not wear swords in public, an oblique request that they abandon their swaggering ways of old. For the first time, warriors were authorized to take up farming, industry, and trade and were offered capital for starting new enterprises if they gave up their hereditary stipends. Samurai were also advised to cut off their topknots and adopt Western headdress, and

\(^{27}\) Some of the leaders of the sonnō jōi movement were discontented with the Tokugawa class system and ideologically committed to a meritocracy. See Thomas M. Huber, The Revolutionary Origins of Modern Japan (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1981).
soon Western-style clothing was encouraged—indeed required of certain government officials, as a final step toward eliminating the visible marks of traditional status.

The abolition of the feudal domains in 1871 accelerated the decline of the warrior class. Overnight, the samurai lost their traditional perquisites as retainers and sinecures as soldiers, functionaries, and administrators. The most dramatic and far-reaching of the early Meiji reforms, the transformation of the polity from feudalism to centralized nation-state did not so much spring from a social critique of feudalism as from a concern for national strength. The Meiji leaders realized that the Tokugawa political order, based on parcelized sovereignty, was fundamentally incompatible with the political and military mobilization required to preserve Japan’s independence in the world of nineteenth-century imperialism. Kido Takayoshi, who among Restoration leaders was the most conscious of Japan’s precarious international position and need to “hold its own in the world,” early advocated greater centralization of state power and soon convinced Ōkubo Toshimichi of Satsuma and Itagaki Taisuke of Tosa. The central government was still too weak to compel the daimyo to give up power, but Kido, Ōkubo, and Itagaki persuaded the lords of their respective domains—who were moved as much by traditional rivalry as by patriotic duty—to surrender voluntarily their han registers, symbols of daimyo authority, to the emperor. As other daimyo followed their example, they were appointed “governors” and granted one-tenth of fief revenue as personal income, and the Tokyo government paid all the administrative costs. If anything, the daimyo were probably better off financially, and outwardly their power had not diminished drastically.28

Nevertheless, not all daimyo agreed to give up their hereditary rights and privileges, and the government waited two years before compelling compliance. In the meantime, Chōshū, Satsuma, and Tosa combined forces to create the embryo of a national army, the ten-thousand-strong Imperial Guard subject to the sole authority of the Tokyo government. With an army at their command, the Meiji leaders felt sufficiently secure to abolish the fiefs entirely. In August 1871, the emperor issued an edict that proclaimed the end of daimyo rule. Daimyo were offered various inducements: appointment as governors of their former domains, generous pensions, state assumption of fief debts, and, in time, titles of nobility in a new peerage. Later in 1871, the government eliminated the last vestiges of daimyo administration.

Daimyo were ordered to take up permanent residence in Tokyo; fief armies were disbanded; and many local officials were dismissed. Governors appointed by the Home Ministry, who were often outsiders and protégés of leading ministers, now administered the countryside.

Even a cursory account of the process by which the Tokugawa feudal polity was abolished suggests some of the reasons for the slow development of counterrevolution in the Meiji period. First, the daimyo class, which had little capacity for collective action, was divided vertically along traditional sectional lines as large southwestern fiefs, whose clansmen dominated the national government, were played off against one another, and then against the more numerous, but smaller, fiefs of eastern and northeastern Japan. Second, and more importantly, the preferential treatment of the elite ranks divided the warrior class horizontally, thereby vitiating the kashindan – hierarchically organized corps of retainers – as a vehicle of antigovernment mobilization. Daimyo and fief elders received lavish pensions, in addition to ranks and titles, and possessed a strong material incentive to accept the loss of traditional status without protest. On the other hand, the pensions of most samurai were less than subsistence livings, and even these were commuted to interest-bearing bonds in 1876. Thus, nonelite samurai had every reason to resist, but without the sanction of the domain leaders they could not use the existing (feudal) structures of collective action. Before the samurai could act in defense of their traditional rights as warriors, they would have to find a new basis for collective action.

If shizoku privilege was to be preserved, the new national army was the logical place. A minority within the leadership clung to the feudal ruling class conceit that as the inheritors of a thousand years of military service, the samurai were uniquely endowed with the requisite martial virtues – courage, loyalty, and honor. Maebara Issei wanted the army to be entirely shizoku. Kirino Toshiaki and Shinohara Kunimoto, Saigō’s chief lieutenants and commanders of the Imperial Guard, violently opposed the induction of commoners and resisted all attempts to integrate conscripts into their force. Others saw the drafting of unemployed shizoku as a solution to a pressing social problem. Torio Koyata, a general from Chōshū, proposed that 20 percent of the revenue be set aside to create a standing army and national reserve large enough to enlist all shizoku between the ages of twenty and forty-five. Tani Kanjō of Tosa advocated first conscripting the sons of shizoku and, only later, after all able-bodied shizoku had been inducted, opening recruitment to commoners.29 However, majority opin-

ion within the oligarchy supported universal conscription— in part because it was the system used in the West but mainly because of its intrinsic merits. Yamagata Aritomo, who succeeded Maebara Issei as head of the army, foresaw that samurai virtues were a mixed blessing in a modern army. Shizoku might well be fierce and brave fighters, but they were also likely to be fractious, undisciplined, and more loyal to their clansmen than to the central government. High regard for ascriptive status and particularistic loyalties were as much as part of bushidō as was unflinching courage. Yamagata correctly anticipated that the first task of the national army would be to suppress internal revolts and reasoned that among the shizoku, their strong emotional identification with fief and clansmen impaired unity. Even as soldiers of the imperial army, the shizoku might act and think in terms of old loyalties.

Promulgated on January 10, 1873, the Conscription Act made all twenty-year-old males liable for seven years of military service—three in the regular army and four in the reserves—and required men between the ages of seventeen and forty-five to register for possible call-up. The immediate aim was to create a truly national army loyal to the central government and suited to the highly regimented military system recently adopted from the West, but the adoption of universal conscription widened the distance between conservatives who insisted that the shizoku remain the military and political elite and those who viewed ascriptive status as being incompatible with modern national development.

Saigō Takamori was the leading conservative in the Meiji government. In 1871 he submitted two memorials outlining a model of economic and political development very different from the “iron and coal” model favored by the majority of the oligarchs. The first memorial advocated not only the adoption of Shinto as the state religion but also the proscription of Buddhism and Christianity; a national tax on agriculture based on the feudal norm of half to the lord and half to the people; and a tax on manufacturing to pay in full all warrior stipends under 100 koku. The second memorial proposed specific measures to revitalize the rural economy: hiring foreign experts; appointing especially diligent farmers as headmen to instruct villagers in the virtues of filial piety, frugality, obedience, and sincerity; setting up agricultural research stations; selecting the best technologies of traditional farm practices and Western agronomy; invest-

ing public funds in irrigation and flood control; and providing credit
to individual farmers.\textsuperscript{31}

Whatever the merits of specific proposals aimed at improving agri-
culture, Saigō's conception of political economy was thoroughly tradi-
tional. The 50 percent land tax he proposed would impoverish all but
the richest farmers and inhibit investment and growth. Instead of
promoting industrialization, the manufacturing sector would be heav-
ily taxed to support the socially unproductive \textit{shizoku}. In later propos-
als, Saigō came to support and even advocate reduction in the level of
\textit{shizoku} support, but there remained little common ground between
his thought and the "iron and coal" school of modernization.

The issue that split the original leadership group ostensibly involved
foreign relations rather than domestic policy. When Korea refused to
open diplomatic and trade relations with Japan, Saigō proposed a
venture in gunboat diplomacy that he secretly hoped would lead to
war and the immediate mobilization of unemployed samurai.\textsuperscript{32} He was
supported by Itagaki Taisuke and Gotō Shōjirō of Tosa and Etō
Shimpei and Soejima Taneomi of Hizen, who agreed that Japan
should invade Korea and impose diplomatic and trade relations, as the
West had done to Japan fifteen years earlier. However, Iwakura
Tomomi, Ōkubo Toshimichi, and Kido Takayoshi, who had recently
returned from an extended tour of the United States and Europe,
argued forcefully against Saigō's plan. They did not object on grounds
of principle: They agreed that it was Japan's destiny to rule the back-
ward nations of Asia, if only to protect them from the predatory West.
But they realized that despite the abolition of feudal political institu-
tions, Japan remained weak and vulnerable compared with the coun-
tries that the Iwakura mission had visited between 1871 and 1873. The
possibility of Chinese or Russian intervention if Japan invaded Korea
raised the stakes considerably, for the costs of fighting a prolonged
war would jeopardize the development of the very institutions on
which Japan's future as a major power depended. Although initially
outvoted, the "peace" party managed to reverse the vote in the Coun-
cil of State in October after Iwakura was appointed chairman. With
his group now in the majority, Iwakura reintroduced Saigō's plan,
which, of course, was voted down; and despite vehement protests
from the war party, he immediately presented the results to the em-
peror. Humiliated and outraged by tactics that violated the spirit, if

\textsuperscript{32} Saigō volunteered to head an uninvited diplomatic mission to Korea, fully expecting to be
attacked and very possibly killed, thereby precipitating war.
not also the letter, of collective rule, Saigō, Itagaki, Gotō, Etō, and Soejima resigned from the Council of State and left Tokyo. So did many of their followers in the bureaucracy and army.

Underlying the debate over policy toward Korea was the acute social crisis confronting the shizoku class. Even though the pensions paid to the shizoku provided less than a subsistence living, they drained the treasury of revenue needed to finance national development. Clearly, the government could not live indefinitely with this arrangement; in 1873, before the debate over Korea, the Finance Ministry had introduced a plan for the voluntary conversion of pensions into lump-sum payments in interest-bearing bonds. Ideally, the shizoku would invest in farming, trade, or manufacture and thereby enhance economic development while freeing tax revenues for public investment. But relatively few shizoku accepted the offer, and of those who did, many soon lost all their money. As their economic situation deteriorated, they became increasingly alienated and restive. Saigō had earlier written to Ōkubo, who was in London with Iwakura, that he felt as though he was “sleeping on a powder keg,” because of the dissatisfaction of the Satsuma men in the Imperial Guard. Perhaps he exaggerated; nevertheless, the prospect of immediate employment and the excitement and adventure of war seemed to offer a temporary solution. The army had only just begun to conscript commoners, and the shizoku constituted the only segment of the population with military training. In addition to providing immediate employment and salary, mobilization for war promised to resuscitate traditional martial values and to restore the shizoku to a position of honor and respect. War might also strengthen the hand of Saigō and Itagaki, the “old soldiers,” against the professional bureaucrats.

Of the six councilors who resigned in the fall of 1873, all but Soejima ended up leading antigovernment movements. In January 1874, Itagaki and Gotō submitted a memorial to the emperor (Etō and Soejima also signed) asking the throne to establish an elected national assembly. Rebuffed, they returned to Tosa and began a national campaign for constitutional government. Saigō immediately sailed for Kagoshima. Renouncing all political involvement, he retired to the Satsuma countryside. Although three years later he would lead the greatest of all shizoku revolts, the 1877 Satsuma Rebellion, his first inclination was to withdraw entirely from politics.

After resigning from the Council of State, Etō Shimpei returned to

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Saga where he led the first major rebellion against the Meiji state. By birth a lower-ranking Hizen samurai, Eto had defied the orders of his daimyo while still a young man to leave Saga to join the ranks of activists leading the loyalist cause against the Tokugawa shogunate. He rose steadily within revolutionary circles, even though as a native of Hizen, he was something of an outsider. Appointed to the Council of State in 1873, Eto also held key posts in the ministries of Education and Justice. During his tenure as chief of the Ministry of Justice, he oversaw work on legal codes that laid the foundation of the Meiji legal system. He was personally responsible for several humanitarian reforms: outlawing the sale of women into prostitution and putting restrictions on contracts of indentured laborers. However, he advocated an aggressive foreign policy in the belief that only forceful demonstration of Japan’s military power would end extraterritoriality. Convinced that Japan’s failure to chastise Korea would be interpreted as a sign of weakness, Eto sided with the war party.

The decisive factor in Eto’s move from opposition to rebellion was his involvement with the Seikantō (Attack Korea Party), one of two shizoku groups in Hizen openly critical of the Tokyo government. The larger group, the Yūkokutō (Party of Patriots), was headed by Shima Yoshitake. Shima was also a veteran Restoration activist, revolutionary, and after the defeat of the bakufu he initially held several middle-ranking posts in the Meiji government. Unlike Eto, however, he lacked the skills and temperament to be a successful bureaucrat. He was also violently opposed to reforms that smacked of Westernization. The political program of the Yūkokutō was xenophobic and reactionary. In addition to restoring fiefs and warrior rule, the party advocated the proscription of Christianity to prevent contamination of the national gods, the revival of traditional martial arts as part of a program of moral self-strengthening, and a massive military buildup. The Seikantō, on the other hand, focused its criticism of the government entirely on foreign policy. It was made up mainly of young shizoku who hoped to escape poverty and tedium by enlisting for the war with Korea; they were sufficiently desperate to resolve to carry out an invasion on their own, even without government authorization. Meeting for the first time in December 1873, the society enrolled more than one thousand members. Soon after it sent a delegation to Tokyo to confer with Eto, who agreed to assume leadership.

It is by no means certain that Eto returned to Hizen with the intent

of leading a rebellion. Rather, the government, alarmed by reports of an imminent uprising in Saga, forced his hand by sending an expedientary force into the prefecture. Previously, the Yūkokutō disdained any association with the Seikantō, but its members too felt compelled to resist the entry of government troops. Ironically, Shima had gone back to Saga at the express request of Iwakura to forestall rash action by his compatriots when he learned en route that the government had already sent a force to occupy the prefectural capital. Meeting at Nagasaki on February 12, Shima and Etō agreed to organize armed resistance, even though they realized that they faced certain defeat. Etō had already received word of Saigō’s refusal to join forces, and without Saigō, it was hopeless to expect the support of Itagaki and the Tosa faction. Although a rebellion limited to Saga could not possibly succeed, Etō decided the issue by exclaiming that because the government had already ordered troops into Saga, “we have reached that point where there is no room for discussion. Rather than die with hands at our sides, isn’t it better to seize the initiative?”

Two days later the Seikantō set up headquarters at a temple five miles north of Saga. There was little consultation with the Yūkokutō, which had commenced its own preparations. The rebellion started by chance at dawn on February 16 when a party of Yūkokutō warriors exchanged fire with sentries posted by the vanguard of the government force that had entered the city a few hours earlier. A successful attack on the army garrison followed, but this was the only rebel victory. Three days later the main body of the expeditionary force led by Ōkubo in person linked up with the garrison troops, which had managed an orderly retreat. The Imperial army counterattacked and quickly gained the upper hand. In addition to more than five thousand soldiers from the standing army, the government had enlisted an equal number of shizoku volunteers from neighboring prefectures who were more than willing to aid in the suppression of the rebellion. Regional and class loyalties helped the Saga rebels not at all. In fact, at least several hundred Saga shizoku led by Maeyama Ichirō turned against their clansmen and joined the government forces.

The revolt lasted less than two weeks. Faced with certain defeat, the rebel soldiers surrendered or deserted after the first pitched battle. Etō and his lieutenants fled to Kagoshima where they made a final appeal to Saigō. They went on to Tosa where they were tracked down and returned to Saga, brought to trial, and summarily executed. Punish-

ment of the rank and file of the rebel force was relatively lenient. Of the several thousand who took up arms, about one hundred were given sentences ranging from three to ten years.

Two and a half years elapsed between the Saga rebellion and the next major shizoku insurrection, the Shimpūren uprising. That the Saga rebellion was not the last attempt by the shizoku to overthrow the Meiji government should not surprise us. During the intervening years the position of shizoku had become increasingly insecure financially and psychologically as the government pushed ahead with policies that eliminated the last vestiges of warrior privilege. Moreover, Western culture and customs were spreading beyond the treaty ports and largest cities to the provincial towns and even villages. The expansion of diplomatic relations with the West caused great displeasure to nativists for whom the pre-1868 revolutionary slogans, “revere the emperor” and “expel the barbarian” were not separable. At the same time the central bureaucracy, now dominated by Chōshū and Satsuma men, asserted itself in more conspicuous and decisive ways in local affairs. Thus, a variety of factors fed shizoku discontent in the mid-1870s.

The leaders of the Shimpūren were lower-ranking samurai in Kumamoto who had joined the movement to overthrow the bakufu but remained passionately committed to Shinto nativism. Their mentor, Hayashi Ōen, was a Shinto priest and scholar who had advocated resisting all demands from the West to enter into trade and diplomatic relations, whatever the short-term consequences. Like many loyalists in the bakumatsu period, he acknowledged Japan’s military inferiority and foresaw initial defeat but held that defeat would prove salutary: Samurai of all ranks would unite in the traditions of old, and fierce resistance would make occupying Japan too difficult and costly for distant invaders to maintain for long. Having expelled the West, Japan could then freely decide the terms on which it would relate to the outside world.37

Hayashi died shortly after the Meiji Restoration, but his disciples founded a nativist political society in Kumamoto and remained true to his teachings. Many were Shinto priests who vehemently opposed Westernization and denounced diplomatic relations with the West as dangerous, offensive, and cowardly. They were especially aroused by the arrival in Kumamoto of a young American, Leroy L. Janes, the first teacher at the newly established foreign school. Janes was a dy-

namic and popular teacher and impressed many of his students with the virtues of Christianity. Not only staunch conservatives were shocked when in January 1876, thirty-five of Janes's pupils publicly swore an oath to "enlighten the darkness of the empire by preaching the gospel," if necessary at the sacrifice of their lives.  

In mid-1876 the government eliminated the last privileges and vestiges of warrior elite status. First, the commutation of shizoku pensions with bonds was made compulsory; in March the wearing of swords in public was prohibited, and in June schoolchildren were required to cut off their topknots and wear their hair short in the Western fashion.

For the Shimpūren the provisions outlawing swords provided the final impetus for rebellion. The sword was the very soul of the samurai, they declared, and carrying two swords was a sacred national custom without which life was not worth living. Recent government policies threatened to destroy Japan's unique polity, but if they rose up in the spirit of righteousness, brave and loyal warriors would rally from all sides. Even if the revolt failed and all perished, this was their destiny. After consulting an oracle and receiving an affirmative response, they began active preparations that initially included efforts to coordinate their rising with insurrections in neighboring prefectures. Shimpūren leaders met with Miyazaki Kurunosuke of Akitsuki and with leaders of bands of disaffected shizoku in Saga, Fukuoka, Tsuruzaki, and Shimabara. In Chōshū they made contact with Maebara Issei, a former leader of the Chōshū shishi movement who had left the government in the early 1870s. These efforts met with some success as both Miyazaki and Maebara promised support.

However, the Shimpūren leadership placed more faith in the wisdom of gods than in the benefits of acting in concert. After again consulting the oracles, they advanced the date of their uprising to October 24, which did not give their confederates in Akitsuki and Chōshū sufficient time to complete their preparations. They also refused to use rifles in the assault on the army garrison because firearms were of foreign origin. Nor did they enlist the support of the Gakkōtō, a rival conservative shizoku party in Kumamoto equally committed to overthrowing the Tokyo government. As a result, the uprising proved to be little more than a suicidal insurrection. Striking without warning, they succeeded in killing the commanding officers of the Kumamoto garrison and mortally wounding the prefectural governor. But vastly outnumbered and outgunned, they were quickly defeated, with

most members committing seppuku to avoid capture. The Akitsuki and Hagi uprisings were also quickly suppressed.

The last shizoku revolt, the 1877 Satsuma Rebellion, was by far the greatest. Unlike the minor insurrections that preceded it, the Satsuma Rebellion is rightly considered a civil war.\(^{39}\) Commanded by Saigō Takamori, the Satsuma army fought unrelentingly for seven months. Although confined to the southern half of Kyushu, the scale and intensity of combat were far greater than in the Restoration wars. Defeat proved to be decisive, for the annihilation of the Satsuma army extinguished the threat of counterrevolution in the foreseeable future.

The leader of the “war party” in the debate over relations with Korea, Saigō had resigned from the Council of State and given up his commission as supreme commander of the armed forces immediately after his proposal for armed intervention was defeated. Enraged by the tactics employed by Iwakura and Ōkubo, Saigō realized that in the near future he would have little power to influence policy. If he remained in the government, his principal role would be the unrewarding and morally distasteful task of reconciling former comrades at arms in the army and bureaucracy to policies that further undercut the position of the shizoku class.\(^{40}\) Saigō was disgusted by the pretentiousness, venality, and vanity of many of his colleagues. He had publicly insulted Inoue Kaoru, Kido Takayoshi’s protégé, over his unsavory connections with the business world, and his relations with Yamagata, whom he respected, had recently become strained owing to the Yamashiroya incident.\(^{41}\)

After resigning, Saigō insisted that he wanted nothing more to do with politics and refused to support either Eto’s revolt or Itagaki’s campaign for an elected national assembly. However, whatever his initial intentions may have been, the possibility of his living out his life as a gentleman farmer was greatly diminished by the actions of his followers. As soon as Saigō’s break with the government became known, a large contingent of officers and soldiers from the Imperial Guard picked up their weapons and followed him back to Kagoshima. Soon they were joined by more than three hundred clansmen from the newly formed national police, who, like the guards, pointedly ignored appeals from the emperor not to desert. Together they formed the

\(^{39}\) Japanese historians use the term seinan senso (southwestern war) rather than Satsuma Rebellion.


\(^{41}\) Hackett, *Yamagata*, p. 71. Yamashiroya, a military supplier that Yamagata had trusted and favored, had embezzled funds.
nucleus of a potential rebel army; the only question was what Saigō would do.\textsuperscript{42}

Saigō had not encouraged his followers to defect and may have been, as some argue, more dismayed than pleased by their actions. Nevertheless, six months after returning to Satsuma, he established a system of “private schools” (shigakkō) which closely resembled military academies. The success of the shigakkō was due in no small part to Saigō’s patronage: He provided funds for the schools from the large salary he still collected from the government; his popularity among the Satsuma shizoku had only been enhanced by the circumstances surrounding his break with the government; and his status as a “founding father” of the Meiji Restoration contributed to the schools’ prestige. Equally important was the support of the shigakkō system provided by local government officials. Governor Ōyama Tsunayoshi, a close friend of Saigō, used prefectural funds to pay the salaries of the schools’ staff and to provide rations to students, and he even purchased guns and ammunition which were distributed throughout the shigakkō system. The directors of the schools served under Ōyama in the prefectural administration, and many graduates of the schools were appointed to positions in the lower ranks of the provincial bureaucracy. Before long the entire administrative apparatus of Satsuma was staffed by shigakkō people or by senior officials like Governor Ōyama who were in complete sympathy with the antigovernment movement.\textsuperscript{43}

As the line separating public and private institutions became increasingly blurred, the authority of the central government in Kagoshima all but disappeared. Satsuma officials openly criticized, and even disobeyed, the policies and directives of the central government. Governor Ōyama ignored instructions from the Finance Ministry to pay the shizoku stipends in cash rather than rice, and he refused to impose a surtax on shizoku income. Opposed to universal primary education and the progressive features of the Meiji land tax, he refused to implement either law. But most egregious was the use of the shigakkō to recruit, equip, and train an army hostile to the central government. The first academies established in Kagoshima were known as the “infantry” and “artillery” schools; the teachers and most of the students were former officers and soldiers of the Imperial Guard. The curriculum included academic subjects such as the study of Chinese

classics, but the daily regime stressed physical fitness, military tactics, drill, and troop maneuvers conducted on land donated by the prefecture. By 1876, branch schools had been set up in every district to enroll gōshi, rural samurai. For military-age males, attendance became practically compulsory.\(^{44}\)

Nearly one-quarter of the population of Satsuma were *shizoku* who provided a very large pool of potential recruits to the antigovernment movement. The extraordinarily large proportion of the population in Satsuma that claimed samurai status was due to the fief’s policy of including gōshi, “rustic warriors,” within the warrior class.\(^{45}\) In most fiefs the gōshi had lost their warrior status at the beginning of the Tokugawa period and were assimilated into the wealthy farmer (gōnō) class. However, the Satsuma gōshi were accorded elite status and continued to think and act as warriors. They served the fief as rural administrators—district magistrates, policemen, and, most commonly, village headmen. Gōshi headmen governed hamlets of up to twenty households and lorded over the peasants like the estate managers of the medieval period. Elsewhere in Japan during the Tokugawa period, villages enjoyed considerable autonomy, and peasants acquired de facto proprietary rights to the land they cultivated. However, in Satsuma, the gōshi headmen strictly supervised the village economy and treated the peasants like tenant farmers. They had the authority to assign land to individual cultivators and adjusted the tax rate from year to year to take from the peasants all but what was needed for subsistence.\(^{46}\)

Meiji reforms struck at the very heart of gōshi privilege. Like castle town samurai, they were accustomed to thinking of themselves as an elite, superior in status, if not always in wealth, to commoners. And as the lowest-ranking status group within the warrior class, they perhaps felt even more keenly the loss of the symbols of elite status, such as the right to bear arms. More concretely, the 1873 land tax revision threatened their socioeconomic power in the village. By conferring ownership rights on peasant farmers and taxing individual proprietors, the Meiji land tax eliminated the feudal role of the Satsuma gōshi as petty overlords. Not surprisingly, they flocked to the *shigakkō* once branch schools were established outside the city and later joined the rebel army in large numbers.

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44 Masumi, *Nihon seito*, p. 156.
45 Elsewhere, samurai numbered 5 or, at most, 10 percent of the population.
The government did not attempt to counter the *shigakkō* movement until late 1876, in part because it remained ignorant of the actual state of affairs. Prefectural officials, who would normally inform Tokyo of antigovernment activity, were in complete sympathy with the movement; they remained silent and, if questioned, denied that there was any cause for alarm. Furthermore, Ōkubo and the other Satsuma men in the oligarchy did not want to believe that Saigō and their clansmen in Kagoshima were capable of sedition. As late as November 1876, Ōkubo argued that Saigō’s refusal to support the Shimpūren, Akittsuki, and Hagi uprisings was sufficient proof of his loyalty and honor and held that as long as Saigō remained in command, Satsuma would never rebel. Events soon proved Ōkubo wrong, but he was not entirely mistaken in his estimation of Saigō’s character, for Saigō authorized rebellion only after the actions of government agents forced his hand.

Late in 1876, the government sent police spies into Kagoshima to infiltrate the *shigakkō*. It appears that their mission was to gather intelligence, foment dissention, and in other ways undermine the movement. A few weeks after arriving in Satsuma, the spies were exposed and apprehended. Under torture, one agent confessed that he had been sent to assassinate Saigō. The only evidence was his confession, but the officers and many of the students of the *shigakkō* desperately wanted an excuse to go to war, and Saigō appears to have believed the facts as reported to him.

Because of the increasingly tense situation in Satsuma, the government next tried to remove munitions stored at the Kagoshima arsenal. Although a commercial steamship and civilian crew were employed to disguise the operation, *shigakkō* students soon discovered what was going on. Without Saigō’s knowledge, they broke into the arsenal and began carting off guns and powder. The local police did not try to stop them; emboldened, the students went one step further and forcibly prevented the ship’s crew from loading cargo. The captain immediately set sail and, upon reaching Kobe, telegraphed the news to Tokyo. Although angered by the students’ rash action, upon learning of the raid on the arsenal, Saigō met with his lieutenants and authorized preparations for war. His intention was to topple the ruling oligarchy headed by Ōkubo. Believing that opposition to the oligarchy was sufficiently great to realize this goal with a minimum of force, he tried with vague public announcements to maintain the appearance of legality. On February 9, Saigō, Shinohara, and Kirino formally notified Governor Ōyama that they would “shortly leave the prefecture,” taking with
them “a number of former troops.” Ōyama obliged by announcing that Saigō was proceeding to Tokyo in order to investigate the plot against his life, that a large force of former government troops would accompany him, and that the emperor had been fully informed. Although clearly in rebellion, Saigō and his officers wore their old Imperial army uniforms, and Saigō issued orders as commander in chief. At first he even refused to enlist volunteers from neighboring prefectures in order to avoid charges of having entered into a confederacy.47

By using the shigakko system, mobilization was carried out with great speed. By the end of the first week in February, even before Saigō had notified Ōyama of his intentions, armed men from the schools had begun to assemble in Kagoshima. Within a week, the vanguard and a four-thousand-strong First Division completed mobilization and departed the capital; soon after, the Second Infantry Division, rear guard, artillery, and finally Saigō’s bodyguard started the march north. On February 20 the Satsuma army crossed into Higo Prefecture. Defeating an advance party of troops from the Kumamoto garrison, they marched into the city and laid siege to the former domain castle that now served as the army headquarters. Almost immediately, two local bands of shizoku—the Gakkōto and the Kyōdōtai—came over to Saigō’s side. It was an auspicious beginning.

After a final attempt to dissuade Saigō, the government mobilized for war. Three thousand troops from the Tokyo garrison were immediately transported by ship to Kobe, and the Osaka and Hiroshima garrisons proceeded directly to Fukuoka in northern Kyushu. Prince Arisugawa assumed command of the hastily assembled army and immediately dispatched two divisions to block further advance by the rebel force. Thereafter, the Imperial army steadily gained the upper hand. Despite being outnumbered, the Kumamoto garrison did not capitulate, and contrary to Saigō’s expectations, it repulsed repeated assaults. Meanwhile, the government not only mobilized the standing army and called up reserves, but it also enlisted thousands of shizoku volunteers as “police” auxiliaries. Fresh units arrived daily, and the well-equipped Imperial army counterattacked. After several days of fierce fighting, on March 20, the government forces captured the key pass at Taharazaka. Both sides suffered heavy losses. The Satsuma army executed an orderly retreat and set up a new line of defense. During the next two weeks, the Imperial army assaulted this line while additional units advanced on Kumamoto from the south. Threatened

with encirclement, Saigō abandoned the siege and retreated. Although not yet defeated, the rebellion had clearly failed. The government controlled all of northern and central Kyushu, which severely curtailed the recruitment of additional forces. Most able-bodied shizoku from Satsuma had already enlisted, and Saigō was forced to conscript peasants, who had little incentive to fight on behalf of the shizoku, and convicted criminals, who were not likely to be dedicated soldiers. Nevertheless, Saigō and what remained of his army continued fighting through the summer. By September, only Saigō and a few hundred troops were still in the field. On September 23, 1877, confronted by a vastly larger government force in the hills north of Kagoshima, Saigō refused a personal plea from Yamagata to surrender. The next day the army attacked; the rebel force was annihilated; and Saigō committed suicide on the battlefield rather than allow himself to be captured.48

Unlike previous shizoku uprisings, which were small and poorly organized, the Satsuma Rebellion severely tested the government’s capacity to wage war. To defeat the large and well-trained rebel forces, the government had to mobilize the entire standing army and reserves and enlist an additional 7,000 shizoku as “police” auxiliaries. Of the 65,000 soldiers sent to the front, 6,000 were killed in action, and 10,000 were wounded. The financial cost of prosecuting the war was staggering. Direct expenditures totaled ¥42 million, a sum equal to 80 percent of the annual budget.

However costly the war had been to the government in men and coin, the oligarchy had reason to view the outcome with considerable satisfaction. The annihilation of the Satsuma army – eighteen thousand rebel troops were killed or wounded, and Saigō and his lieutenants died in battle or by suicide – eliminated the only shizoku force capable of threatening the central government. Moreover, the performance of the Imperial army vindicated the government’s decision to adopt universal military conscription. Approximately two-thirds of the Kumamoto garrison were conscripts; although outnumbered and short of supplies, they withstood a fifty-day siege, thereby preventing Saigō’s army from moving into northern Kyushu. To say that the victory proved commoner conscripts to be superior to samurai is nevertheless an oversimplification, for the majority of government soldiers were also shizoku. The Imperial Guards and “police” auxiliaries, which were exclusively shizoku, bore the brunt of the fiercest fighting. Nevertheless, the overall efficiency with which the govern-

48 The most detailed account of the military campaigns of the Satsuma Rebellion is contained in Mounsey, *The Satsuma Rebellion*, pp. 154–217.
ment prosecuted the war amply demonstrated the advantages of military modernization and particularly of centralized command and national recruitment.

The Satsuma Rebellion marked the final attempt by disaffected shizoku to overthrow the Meiji government. What does the failure of the greatest revolt reveal about the limits of shizoku rebellion?

After the first three weeks, Saigo’s army was outnumbered and outgunned. The core of the Satsuma army consisted of six infantry regiments of 2,000 men each, in addition to artillery and the rear-guard. After entering Kumamoto, they were immediately joined by two bands of local shizoku, the politically conservative Gakkōtō and the Kyōdōtai (an association of nominally progressive shizoku affiliated with the Popular Rights movement) and an additional 5,000 volunteers from nearby provinces.\textsuperscript{49} Thus, at peak strength the rebel forces numbered no more than 22,000.

In contrast, the government initially fielded an army of 33,000 and sent an additional 30,000 before the end of the war. The rebel army was short of guns and munitions throughout most of the war. The looting of the Kagoshima arsenal secured an initial stock of guns and powder, but when the army marched out of Kagoshima in February, each soldier carried only one hundred bullets, enough for two to three days of combat. Attempts were made to purchase arms abroad, but even if the negotiations had succeeded, the Imperial navy’s control of the sea would probably have prevented their delivery. The government occupied Kagoshima in April, cutting off the overland supply of munitions that were manufactured locally.

Tactical miscalculations, and especially the decision to lay siege to Kumamoto Castle, undoubtedly hastened defeat. Because of the strategic advantages enjoyed by the government forces, it was unrealistic to expect victory in a prolonged war. The best hope lay in a rapid advance to link up with sympathizers and create the impression of success before the government had time to mobilize. If Saigo had proceeded directly to Fukuoka and thereby carried the rebellion into northern Kyushu, additional groups might have declared for the rebellion. As the Shimpūren, Akitsuki, and Hagi uprisings of the previous autumn had demonstrated, shizoku disaffection was intense, and the decision of the “liberal” Kumamoto Kyōdōtai to join Saigo when it appeared that the rebellion might succeed suggests that the timing was indeed a critical factor. How long would Itagaki and the Risshisha

\textsuperscript{49} Tamamuro, Seinan, p. 139.
have held off if Saigō's army had crossed the Inland Sea? One does not have to be a cynic to recognize that opportunism was a powerful determinant of political alignments in the early Meiji period. But by failing to stay on the offensive, Saigō forfeited his one chance of victory - a general uprising against the Tokyo government.50

However, military defeat was inevitable given the very narrow political base of the rebellion. Although Satsuma had been made into a bastion of counterrevolution, the high level of mobilization achieved there between 1874 and 1877 depended on a combination of factors unique to the domain: size and composition of the warrior population, virtual autonomy from central authority, sanction and support of prefectural officials, and Saigō's prestige as a "founding father" of the Meiji Restoration. Because these conditions could not be duplicated, Satsuma stood alone. In fact, its strength was also its weakness, for the leadership's parochial political loyalties stood in the way of horizontal alliances. From Saigō's return to Kagoshima in the fall of 1873 until the attack on the Kumamoto garrison in February 1877, mobilization had been carried out entirely within the prefecture; no effort was made to encourage, aid, or link up with like-minded shizoku bands outside Satsuma. As we have seen, Saigō steadfastly held aloof, even in the autumn of 1876 when the disaffected shizoku in nearby Kumamoto, Akitsuki, and Hagi went on the offensive. When Saigō finally moved against the government and authorized sending emissaries in search of allies, the optimal moment for a general uprising had passed. Potential allies had already committed themselves to local uprisings, which produced little more than suicidal insurrections. Lacking advance notice of Saigō's rising, in some cases sympathizers were not able to act quickly enough.51

In short, Saigō failed to capitalize on his greatest asset. Arno Mayer observed that counterrevolutions are similar to revolutions in that both "feed on socio-economic dislocations, discontents and cleavages."52 But despite widespread disaffection, frustration, and despair among the shizoku nationwide, the antigovernment movement in Satsuma remained stubbornly parochial. This doomed it to defeat. Because mobilization was restricted to Satsuma and did not tap shizoku discontent nationwide, Saigō's rising produced a formidable, but geographically limited, military threat. As Goto Yasushi has observed, despite geographical proximity, similar grievances, and a common

50 Ibid., pp. 134-5. 51 Goto, Shizoku kouran, pp. 174-84.
enemy, the *shizoku* rebels were incapable of acting in concert; dispersed and isolated, each was defeated.\(^53\)

The Satsuma leaders also failed to mobilize politically disaffected commoners. Class itself need not determine the scope of counterrevolutionary mobilization. Historically, recruitment to counterrevolution has depended on the degree to which “segments of different classes experienced or were apprehensive about declassment, defunctionalization, or alienation.” It is not simply displaced elites and formerly dominant classes who make up the cadre of counterrevolution, but strata of all classes, “whose fears and anxieties [are] heightened by crisis conditions.”\(^54\) However, the Satsuma leaders showed no interest in propagandizing and agitating the rural poor, who, no less than the impoverished *shizoku*, constituted a “crisis stratum” whose grievances and fears might have been turned against the government. As we have seen, small landholders and tenants gained little benefit from Meiji land policies; indeed, in some areas they had violently opposed its social, educational, and religious policies. How great the potential was for inciting rural uprising and what effect extensive social disorder might have had on the outcome of the Satsuma Rebellion cannot be known. But when the Satsuma army first entered Higo and laid siege to Kumamoto, the poor farmers in the Aso district carried out widespread attacks against the homes and property of local landlords and moneylenders. Although not encouraged in any way by the rebel army, they apparently assumed that the Satsuma army represented the poor and disadvantaged and associated the Imperial army with the rich. Against a background of resentment of the new land tax and allegations of malfeasance by village headmen, rumors circulated that Saigō had abolished the land tax and canceled outstanding debts. But the Satsuma army showed no interest in the peasants, except as suppliers of food, labor, and draft animals. In fact, they treated the local population so roughly that before long opinion swung against them.\(^55\)

Counterrevolution was defeated because none of the rebellions drew on more than a fraction of the potential recruits to the antigovernment cause. Because the leaders did not develop models of collective action suited to mass mobilization, they failed to tap the vast reservoir of discontent among the declassed samurai nationwide. Generally, the revolts replicated the patterns of mobilization that characterized the *tōbaku* (overthrow the bakufu) movement: voluntary associations of like-minded men, on the one hand, and the domain as the territorial

\(^{53}\) Goto, *Shizoku hanran*, p. 64.  
\(^{54}\) Mayer, *Dynamics*, p. 41.  
and emotional unit of collective action, on the other. However, whereas limited mobilization of *shishi* (men of spirit) and militant action by Chōshū succeeded in toppling the Tokugawa bakufu in the crisis conditions of the mid-1860s, a decade later the fully centralized Meiji state managed to suppress any single group that rose up against it.

**THE POPULAR RIGHTS MOVEMENT**

Liberal opposition to the Meiji oligarchy can be traced back to the splintering of the original leadership group in October 1873. Unlike Saigō Takamori and Etō Shimpei, Itagaki Taisuke and Gotō Shōjirō, the leaders of the Tosa faction, rejected rebellion; instead, they organized a public campaign to establish an elected national assembly. Calling themselves the Aikokukōtō, “Public Party of Patriots,” in January 1874, they enlisted a handful of prominent Restoration leaders – among them Etō Shimpei and Soejima Taneomi – and drafted a memorial urging the adoption of “a council chamber chosen by the people.”

Although it was rejected by the government, the memorial raised for the first time a liberal challenge to the incumbent leadership and signaled the opening round in what became a decade-long campaign by a socially and politically diverse coalition known as the “People’s Rights” (*jiyū minken*) movement. Espousing liberty, equality, and the right to elect government officials, the People’s Rights movement brought together at various times former Restoration leaders and intellectuals, urbanites and villagers, *shizoku* and wealthy commoners, and, finally, radicals and impoverished farmers – all who shared an interest in opposing oligarchic rule.

As suggested by the circumstances leading up to the Aikokukōtō petition, Japan’s first “liberals” were members of the original leadership who had lost out in the power struggle of 1873. Indeed, there is reason to question the depth of their commitment to liberalism as a political doctrine, for their interest in representative government coincided with their loss of power. Moreover, they were prone to jingoism and rarely passed up an opportunity to denounce the government’s handling of Japan’s international relations, insisting on early revision of the “unequal” treaties, an aggressive pursuit of national interests in Asia, and favorable resolution of territorial disputes with Russia. They also repeatedly protested high taxes, especially the land tax. What,

then, was the connection between specific grievances and advocacy of an elected national assembly?

The most prominent feature in the Aikokukōtō memorial was its criticism of the oligarchic and cliquish character of the government. The petitioners charged that the incumbent leadership, much like the hateful Tokugawa bakufu, monopolized power, thereby excluding both the emperor and the people. "When we humbly reflect upon the quarter in which the governing power lies, we find it lies not with the Crown (Imperial House) on the one hand, nor with the people on the other, but with the officials alone."57 Officials acting in the name of the emperor ruled in an "arbitrary" and "partial" manner, to the detriment of the imperial institution, which was losing prestige, and of citizens, who could not express legitimate grievances. The consequence, the memorial asserted, was internal conflict and discontent which imperiled the nation; the remedy lay in government by "public discussion." Representative government, it was urged, would fortify the nation, for national strength depended on "the people of the empire being of one mind."58 If entrusted with political rights, the people of Japan would willingly assume the many duties of citizenship, manifest a new unity of purpose, and develop the spirit of enterprise that was known to exist among the populations of fully civilized countries.

One finds in the Aikokukōtō memorial many of the themes and contradictions that permeated liberal thought in the Meiji period. In support of representative government, the petitioners emphasized the likely benefits to national strength rather than the value of individual rights. Instead of directly challenging the principle of absolute monarchy, they denounced "despotic officials" who stood between the emperor and the people. By claiming the imperial and popular will to be harmonious, they argued that the expression of public opinion would eliminate dissension between ruler and ruled. To this extent they implicitly invoked Confucian concepts to justify liberal reforms. At the same time, however, they called on the authority of natural rights theory, boldly citing the "universally acknowledged" principle according to which payment of taxes conferred rights of representation on citizens.

Although rightly criticized by modern scholars as shortsighted and opportunistic, the tactic of evoking the emperor's authority to legitimate demands for representative institutions reflected the realities of the contemporary political landscape.59 Although theoretically abso-

57 Ibid., pp. 427–8. 58 Ibid., p. 430.
lute in every realm of public life, imperial authority had not yet been marshaled against progressive forces by conservative politicians and ideologues; the process of associating the throne with specific authoritarian structures had only just begun. On the other hand, the Meiji emperor symbolized the recent triumph over feudalism and Tokugawa-style despotism. Liberals, therefore, could make a strong claim to being the legitimate heirs of the 1868 revolution. After all, the first article of the Meiji Charter Oath – the most authoritative, if deliberately vague, statement of Restoration aims – promised deliberative assemblies and public debate of affairs of state. Nor were out-of-power politicians the only proponents of liberal reform. Generally, officials not aligned with the dominant Satsuma and Chōshū cliques favored broader political participation. In fact, the Sa-in, the lower chamber of the state council, formally adopted the Aikokukōtō argument, declaring that “the subject of the establishment of a council chamber chosen by the people is an excellent one” and urged the Council of State and Home Ministry to take appropriate steps.60

However, the oligarchs were not yet prepared to share power with elected officials. They ignored the Sa-in’s favorable recommendation and replied that the great majority of the people were “ignorant and unlearned.” Although some segments of the former warrior class were advancing intellectually, “the peasant and merchant classes are still what they have always been . . . satisfied in their stupidity and ignorance, and it has not yet been possible to arouse in them the spirit of activity.”61 To avoid disaster, public opinion would have to be guided and educated before representatives of such people could be entrusted with the power to make laws. Although they admitted that government in principle existed for the people, not the people for government, the most they were prepared to offer was an experiment with prefectural assemblies chosen by shizoku and well-to-do commoners that would be allowed to discuss, but not legislate, local matters.

Nevertheless, the oligarchs were sufficiently astute to recognize that the issue of representative government was a likely rallying point for the opposition, and they tried to forestall the growth of a broadly based movement by co-opting key leaders. They were most concerned about the activities of Itagaki Taisuke, who, after Saigō, ranked second among the military heroes of the Restoration. Itagaki and his clansmen had returned to Kochi in February 1874 to build up a local party. There they founded the Risshisha, an association that functioned both as a

self-help society for former samurai and as a vehicle for promoting liberal political thought. The Risshisha charter proclaimed that all Japanese were equally endowed with rights to life, liberty, property, livelihood, and the pursuit of happiness—rights that “no man can take away.” To educate members to this new political philosophy, the association sponsored public lectures and talks that introduced the thought of Locke, Mill, Rousseau, and Bentham. Although the society was generally unsuccessful in managing economic enterprises, which included forestry, tea plantations, and credit unions, it attracted a large and enthusiastic following among the Tosa shizoku. Consequently, the government became worried when the Risshisha tried to link up with other groups of disaffected samurai, as it did in 1875 by organizing the Aikokusha, a national “association of patriots.” To deflate the challenge and restore a semblance of unity within the leadership’s ranks, Ôkubo Toshimichi, the dominant figure in the oligarchy, agreed on the eve of the conference to issue an imperial edict promising “gradual progress” toward an elected national assembly. In return, Itagaki, Gôtô, and Kido Takayoshi of Chôshû reentered the government.

The agreement between Ôkubo and Itagaki is noteworthy, less for its immediate consequences than for what it revealed of the oligarchy’s attitude toward the liberal opposition. The majority of the top leaders were not opposed to a constitution, or even in principle to limited representation. They were, however, determined to dictate the substance and pace of liberalizing reforms and to keep executive and bureaucratic power in their hands; as pragmatists they had no difficulty making token concessions to recent colleagues.

The announcement of the agreement between Ôkubo and Itagaki and the promise of progress toward an elected assembly upstaged the first meeting of the Aikokusha. However, inasmuch as Ôkubo and his colleagues had a very restricted notion of what constituted “progress,” renewed conflict was inevitable. In October, Itagaki, by now convinced that he would have no real influence in the government, resigned once more and returned to Tosa. The stage was set for a resurgence of liberal agitation.

During the first phase of the People’s Rights movement, that is, from 1874 to 1878, the Tosa leaders did not actively seek the support


63 Kido, the senior member of the Chôshû faction, had resigned in 1874 after failing to dissuade Ôkubo from sending a punitive expedition to Taiwan. Bringing Kido back into the government was essential to preventing a further narrowing of the oligarchy.
of commoners, for they too believed that former samurai, those with education and experience as administrators, were the people worthy of political representation. However, as wealthy farmers and local notables took up the liberal cause toward the end of the decade, the political and social character of the movement changed dramatically. The turning point came in the summer of 1879 when Sakurai Shizuka, a commoner farmer of moderate means from Chiba, published an appeal in which he denounced the oligarchy’s failure to institute representative government and invited prefectural assembly delegates and concerned citizens throughout the country to join forces in a new campaign. Sakurai published his appeal in the Chōya shimbun, a Tokyo daily newspaper, and mailed thousands of handbills. The response was immediate and overwhelming. In Okayama, the prefectural assembly unanimously endorsed Sakurai’s plan and authorized a mass petition campaign. From Iwate Prefecture in the northeast to Hiroshima in the west, assemblymen raised their voices in support and began circulating similar petitions.64

The stunning success of the petition movement was largely due to the broad support it received from the traditional village elite—headmen, landlords, and small-scale entrepreneurs who lent their prestige and influence to the campaign, thereby ensuring its success.65 In March 1880, when the Aikokusha convened its semiannual meeting, ninety-six representatives from twenty-four prefectures attended, bringing petitions bearing a total of 101,161 signatures. Reconstituting themselves as the Kokkai kisei dōmei, “League for Establishment of a National Assembly,” they authorized Kataoka Kenkichi and Kōno Hironaka to present the petitions to the government. Supremely self-confident, the delegates pledged to carry the campaign to a successful conclusion. Recognizing the importance of grass-roots support, they vowed to organize up to fifty new societies of over one hundred members each.66

With the national petition campaign of 1879, the initiative within the People’s Rights movement passed to hundreds of local political societies, many located in villages and small towns. Among the earliest of the societies was the Sekiyōsha, established in 1875 in Ishikawa, a small and out-of-the-way mountain town in southern Fukushima. Kōno Hironaka, the founder of the Sekiyōsha, had been born into a once-prosperous gōshi family of Miharuprefecture and began his political career as a

66 Gotō, Jiyū minken, pp. 100–1.
district officer in Ishikawa. If we can believe Kōno’s autobiography, he read a translation of John Stuart Mill’s classic *On Liberty* while en route to his new post. Perhaps directly influenced by Mill, or possibly following the lead of Itagaki Taisuke, Kōno organized within the year a political society dedicated to promoting popular rights and representative government. The charter of the Sekiyōsha boldly proclaimed: “We have come together because government is for the people . . . and inherent rights of life and personal freedom, which are higher than the mountains and deeper than the sea, will endure forever on this earth.”

Unlike the Risshisha, which had restricted membership to Tosa shizoku, the Sekiyōsha welcomed all persons who supported the society’s goals, irrespective of “class, wealth or station.” In addition to discussing current political issues, its members studied political science, economics, history, and even the natural sciences, relying for the most part on translations of European and American texts. At weekly meetings, which were open to the public, they discussed such classics of Western political thought as *On Liberty, The Spirit of the Laws, The History of English Civilization,* and *Social Contract.*

Four years after founding the Sekiyōsha, Kōno took a new position in Miharu district. There he established a second political society, the Sanshisha, and an academy, the Seidōkan. Before long, the Seidōkan graduated young men imbued with ideas of liberty, equality, and democracy who set up popular rights organizations in nearby villages, including one mountain village with a mere forty households.

The burgeoning political activity in rural areas that began in the late 1870s is one of the remarkable developments of the Meiji period. According to recent data, 303 societies sprang up in the six provinces around Tokyo, at least 120 in the northeastern region of the country, and approximately 200 in western and southwestern Japan. To be sure, the political and social character of the societies varied considerably. Not all actively supported the popular rights movement or even considered politics to be their main activity; some restricted membership to men of similar social and economic status; and others were founded with the express purpose of enhancing the leaders’ prestige. Nevertheless, most of the societies were influenced to some degree by the Popular Rights movement and supported the constitutional movement.

We have seen that shizoku popular rights leaders Itagaki Taisuke and Gotō Shōjirō saw representative government as a vehicle for regaining

influence in the national government. Although this was not their only motivation, their commitment to the concept of representative government was inextricably bound up with hopes of regaining their former positions as leaders of the Meiji government. This was not true, however, of the thousands of local notables who provided leadership and financial support for the constitutional phase of the Popular Rights movement. How, then, can we explain their commitment?

To some extent these men were reacting to political centralization, a process that reduced their local status and authority, especially after the government promulgated the so-called Three Laws on Local Government in 1878. The first of these invested the power to appoint prefectural governors in the Home Ministry and authorized prefectural governors to appoint district officials, thus giving the central government control over all but the village and town councils. The second law added a prefectural tax of up to 20 percent to the national land tax without granting taxpayers a say in how these revenues would be used. The third law provided what the more liberal-minded oligarchs hoped would be a first step toward institutionalizing limited popular participation in the governing process by establishing elected prefectural assemblies that had the right to discuss, but not initiate, legislation and to review the annual budget.

During the Tokugawa period the village headmen had performed many of the functions that now came to be carried out by the state bureaucracy. The erosion of their authority began in 1871 with the abolition of private fiefs, and by the latter half of the decade the extension of the powers of the state bureaucracy was becoming apparent. It is not surprising, then, that they were attracted to the doctrine of natural rights which accorded the propertied classes not only guarantees of private wealth but political participation as well. Moreover, natural rights justified both participation and the right to resist.69

However, neither the eclipse of traditional authority nor the desire to promote their economic interests accounts fully for the grass-roots support among local notables for the constitutional movement. We should not overlook the cultural dimension of the political ferment in the countryside that characterized this phase of the Popular Rights movement. As Irokawa Daikichi has argued, political activism at the village level expressed the desire of Japan’s new citizens to transcend the narrow world of feudal culture.70 Intellectually and socially, the Popular Rights movement opened up avenues of activity long denied

69 Bowen, Rebellion, pp. 303–13. 70 Irokawa, Jiyū minken, p. 49.
to commoners, a phenomenon that Irokawa’s research on the community of Itsukaichi, a small market town located in the mountainous Nishitama district northwest of Tokyo, amply illustrates.

Early in 1880, the mayor of Itsukaichi and the heads of locally prominent families – the former mayor, the supervisor of the village school, the mayor of a nearby hamlet – founded the “Learning and Debating Society.” According to the first article of the society’s charter, its members pledged to “work together with indomitable spirit to develop liberty and improve society” and to relate to one another “as brothers of the same flesh and bone, with love and respect as if one big family.” Much like the Sekiyōsha and Sanshisha, politics began with self-education. Using translations of Western classics and secondary works, the members avidly absorbed the “new knowledge.” In 1881, when the movement to draft a national constitution reached its climax, these mountain villagers, ostensibly the “ignorant and unlearned” whom the oligarchs declared “satisfied in their stupidity,” eagerly debated the shape and substance of Japan’s future constitution. A list of subjects discussed by the society included fifteen topics concerned with drafting a national constitution, nine with the legal system, and six with civil rights. Several of the younger members of the society became accomplished political orators who campaigned actively on behalf of popular rights. One member, Chiba Takusaburō, produced a complete draft of a national constitution which, in terms of protection of citizens’ rights, ranks high among the more than thirty extant draft constitutions.

Intellectuals, most of whom were former samurai, played an instrumental role in publicizing natural rights theory and kindling enthusiasm for political reform. Nakamura Masanao and Fukuzawa Yukichi were pioneers of the Meiji “enlightenment” whose translations and essays first introduced Western culture and political institutions; younger, more radical thinkers like Ueki Emori, Nakae Chōmin, and Ōi Kentarō were ideologues as well as political activists. But we should also note the contribution of many young intellectuals who dedicated themselves to the constitutional movement. Beginning in the late 1870s, scores of Tokyo journalists and amateur orators carried the

73 Irokawa, Meiji no bunka, pp. 107–8.
74 Irokawa, Kindai kokka, pp. 86–90.
constitutional campaign directly to the people. Dressed dramatically in black capes and broad-brimmed hats, they popularized a new kind of politics – barnstorming.

Because of the comparatively high rates of literacy and urbanization at the start of the Meiji period, journalism provided a vocation for politically ambitious young men excluded from government service. Numa Morikazu and his colleagues in the Ōmeisha, an intellectual circle founded in 1873 to discuss Western legal institutions, exemplified this new type of urban intellectual. Numa, who had fought on the Tokugawa side during the Restoration wars, bought the *Tokyo-Yokohama Mainichi Shimbun* in 1879 and immediately used the paper as a forum for the constitutional movement, publishing twenty-seven editorials between November 1879 and January 1880 that advocated the early convening of a national assembly. At the same time, the Ōmei Society established a network of provincial branches that promoted discussion and debate of political issues. Some highly committed members toured villages and market towns; traveling by ricksha, horseback, and even on foot, they lectured at temples, schools, storehouses, and wayside shrines, wherever they could assemble a crowd. One young journalist delivered over twenty speeches during a two-month tour that took him as far north as Sado Island in the Japan Sea.\(^7\)

With the support of hundreds of local political societies and countless dedicated individuals in villages and towns across the country, the constitutional movement generated a deluge of petitions. As we have seen, organizations affiliated with the Kokkai kisei dōmei had collected over 100,000 signatures by the spring of 1880, and although the government repeatedly refused to accept petitions, enthusiasm for the campaign showed no sign of abating. Even after the highly publicized failure of Kokkai kisei dōmei representatives Kataoka Kenkichi and Kōno Hironaka that April, leaders of provincial petition movements came streaming into Tokyo, if anything more determined to succeed. From Sagami came Amano Seiryū who arrived in Tokyo in June and vowed not to return home until the government received his countrymen’s petition. Furuya Sensō of Yamanashi first sought an audience with Prince Iwakura and, when rebuffed, threatened to take his demands directly to the emperor during the next imperial tour, thus emulating the English nobles who had forced King John to sign the Magna Charta. And in an episode that symbolized both the remark-

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able achievements of this phase of the Popular Rights movement and the limits of its power, Matsusawa Kyūraku persevered for fifty days in a futile effort to present petitions containing more than 25,000 signatures from his native Shinano.76

The constitutional campaign thus succeeded beyond all expectations in mobilizing popular support: sixty petitions and a quarter of a million signatures by the end of 1880, a mere year and six months after Sakurai Shizuka's seemingly naive appeal to his countrymen. Not surprisingly, this mass mobilization alarmed conservatives. In an often-quoted letter to Itō Hirobumi dated July 4, 1879, Yamagata Aritomo, chief of the army general staff, noted the growth of the Popular Rights movement and predicted, "Every day we wait the evil poison will spread more and more over the provinces, penetrate the minds of the young, and inevitably produce unfathomable evils."77 In the same letter he voiced the fear that popular rights leaders hoped to overthrow the government when the time was right. Yamagata did not, of course, fear an armed rising. Until the mid-1880s the movement eschewed violence and at no point constituted a credible military threat, in marked contrast with the shizoku counterrevolution. Rather, what Yamagata and other conservatives feared was loss of control: The constitutional movement had given birth to new organizations, ideologies, and class alliances; it presented the ominous specter of the people acting not merely to protect parochial interest but also to demand a voice in determining the future of the nation. Consequently, conservative and pragmatic leaders favored concessions to preempt the goals of the mass movement while preserving the principal structures of oligarchic rule.

Until the mid-1870s the Meiji government had only local opposition movements with which to contend, but not a hostile public; no issue or party had transcended the various community, class, and status barriers to popular mobilization that were inherited from Tokugawa feudalism. But once opponents voiced demands for alternative institutions and the press joined the campaign, the oligarchs began to restrict free expression of opinion and citizens' rights to organize. The first target was the press. In 1875 and 1877 the government promulgated press and libel laws that were used to silence dissident journalists. As the Popular Rights movement gained momentum, the number of arrests increased, rising from approximately sixty in 1875 and 1876 to more than three hundred in 1880. Freedom of assembly was also

76 Irokawa, Kindai kokka, pp. 103-4. 77 Translation from Ike, Beginnings, p. 93.
restricted. The Ordinance on Public Meetings, published on April 5, 1880, while the first meeting of the newly formed Kokkai kisei dōmei was still in session, gave the police considerable authority to investigate and regulate the activities of political groups. All associations were required to submit membership lists and charters and to obtain permits before convening public meetings. Uniformed police attended all rallies and speeches and intervened if the speaker deviated from the approved topic or made statements “prejudicial to public tranquility.” The law also denied soldiers, police, teachers, and even students the right to appear at political meetings. Employed selectively but forcefully when the occasion demanded, the press and public meetings laws provided a legal framework for political repression. According to police records, 131 political meetings were disbanded in 1881 and 282 in 1882. Many more never took place because the police simply denied permits to assemble. In addition, editors and journalists critical of the government were fined or jailed, sometimes for seemingly modest proposals. For example, the editor of the Azuma, a Tokyo newspaper, was sent to jail for two years and fined ¥200 merely for voicing the opinion that the emperor, no less than other government officials, was a public servant.

Nevertheless, the constitutional movement was ultimately defeated without resort to systematic repression. No such coercion was needed, for the oligarchs neatly defused the mass movement by conceding the very issue that had so aroused public enthusiasm. After extensive consultation among the leading ministers, consultations that revealed fundamental differences among them, Ōkuma Shigenobu, the only advocate of the early establishment of an English-style parliament and cabinet, was expelled from the government on October 12, 1881, at the very moment that the delegates to the semiannual meeting of the Kokkai kisei dōmei were debating proposals for convening a constituent assembly, and the government announced that the emperor would graciously grant a constitution and convene a national assembly before the end of the decade.

Although much more than a tactical move to stem the tide of popular agitation, the imperial proclamation struck the Popular Rights movement at its most vulnerable point. From the beginning, liberal opponents of the oligarchy had steadfastly insisted on the harmonious

relationship between the imperial and the popular will and staked their claim to legitimacy on the proposition that representative institutions would fulfill the aims of the imperial state by eliminating “despotic ministers” who stood between the emperor and the people, that is, barriers between ruler and ruled. Rhetorically committed to justifying liberal reform in the name of imperial sovereignty, advocates of popular rights were trapped when the oligarchs, speaking through the Meiji emperor, appropriated the issue of constitutional reform for the throne. Leaders of the Popular Rights movement could not continue agitation without disputing the imperial prerogative, even though it was apparent to all that in writing the imperial constitution, the oligarchs would be able to dictate the form and content of the new body politic. To reject this would have required a radical redefinition of liberal ideology and goals and a fundamental critique of the Meiji state. No leader, theorist, or faction subsequently demonstrated the capacity to reconstitute liberalism as a mass movement, and having failed to transform popular enthusiasm for representative government into institutions of independent political power, the liberals “won” a constitution while losing the war against oligarchic rule.

After October 1881, the Popular Rights movement splintered. There were at least four distinct developments: formation of national political parties, agitation for greater power in local and prefectural government, rise of an insurrectionist faction, and the emergence of a radical populist movement. None enjoyed more than temporary success; each was suppressed or chose to disband well before the convening of the first elected national assembly.

The creation of a national political party to replace the Kokkai kisei dōmei came after the announcement of an imperial constitution in October 1881. Proposals for such an organization had been made the previous year, but disagreement between those who advocated building up local affiliates and those who wanted a strong metropolitan party had delayed implementation. The issue was first debated at the October 1881 plenary session of the Kokkai kisei dōmei, but no sooner had discussion begun than the delegates learned that the oligarchs had announced a specific date for promulgating an imperial constitution. In an atmosphere of urgency and confusion, the Tosa faction took control. Itagaki Taisuke was elected party president, and his allies and

81 Many historians consider the various conflicts between 1882 and 1885 as constituting a separate phase of the popular rights movement and label them collectively as “incidents of extremism” (gekka jiken). See Bowen, Rebellion, “Introduction.”
Tosa followers filled the executive positions, virtually excluding the rural and commoner contingents.

Although the record of the Liberal Party (Jiyūtō) is mixed, on the whole it probably did more to hinder than to promote effective opposition to oligarchic rule. On the positive side, 149 local societies affiliated with it, thus creating for the first time a political party with elected leaders, a party platform, a permanent secretariat, and a national membership. In addition, it published a newspaper, set up a legal bureau, and provided at least some funding and advice to local movements. On the other hand, because the Tosa faction monopolized the top positions, factional rivalries intensified. Competing for public support with an eye to future elections, the Jiyūtō leaders put as much effort into attacking the Constitutional Progressive Party (Rikken Kaishintō), a rival liberal party headed by the Saga leader Ōkuma Shigenobu, as it did the government. Moreover, although he was undoubtedly a charismatic figure, Itagaki was at best an unsteady leader who often appeared to have been more interested in promoting his career than his party. He caused irreparable damage in 1882 when he allowed himself to be co-opted by the government for a second time after being persuaded by Gōtō Shōjirō to embark on an extended tour of Western nations, one year after assuming the party presidency, apparently at government expense. To make matters worse, he left Japan at a time when violent repression of the Fukushima Jiyūtō and a deepening agricultural recession created demands for direct action by the party rank and file. Leaderless, the Jiyūtō neither aided nor controlled radical groups acting in its name.

If the national Jiyūtō failed to define new goals, in some localities party leaders revived the mass movement by contesting the state bureaucracy’s control of local government. The most effective local Jiyūtō leader was Kōno Hironaka, who, in the spring and summer of 1882, skillfully rallied liberal delegates to the Fukushima prefectural assembly. Kōno’s campaign provoked a strong reaction, and eventual repression, at the hands of the governor, Mishima Michitsune, a loyal servant of the Home Ministry. What happened in Fukushima deserves our attention, for it illustrates both the strength of opposition movements supported by local elites and the limits to dissent that the state was prepared to tolerate.

82 Gōtō, Jiyū minken, p. 95. In fact, the money was provided by Mitsui interests at government request.
83 The conflict in Fukushima is given a different interpretation in Bowen, Rebellion, pp. 8–28.
When he was elected chairman of the Fukushima prefectural assembly in 1881, Kōno's first act was to introduce motions calling for universal male suffrage and the election of district magistrates and opposing recent increases in prefectural spending, especially for the governor's office and police. However, the issue that Kōno chose to dramatize was largely symbolic: the refusal of the governor to acknowledge the legitimacy of the popularly elected assembly's role as a forum for the expression of political opinion. Governor Mishima, a Satsuma samurai and former protégé of Ōkubo Toshimichi, ignored the assembly and failed to answer two assembly requests that he attend its discussion of the budget. Kōno called for a vote of no confidence with a speech that vividly expressed the tenor of the confrontation:

This assembly was established to represent public opinion, and therefore public policy should be carried out in accord with its opinions. Let there be no mistaking that today's world is not the world of the past and that today's people are different from the people of former days. . . . Yet, [Governor Mishima] has not attended one session of the assembly; not only has he failed to take the will of the people into consideration, but he has shown his contempt for this precious public assembly.84

After Kōno's oration, the assembly voted to suspend debate until the governor appeared in person in the assembly chamber. Mishima, who had allegedly warned against "robbers, arsonists, and the Jiyūtō" when he took office, refused to back down. The battle lines were drawn.

Because the assembly lacked the legal authority to reject the budget or withhold appropriations, the vote to suspend debate amounted to a strong vote of censure and marked the beginning of an aggressive campaign by the Fukushima Jiyūtō to create a groundswell of popular support, comparable to the earlier petition campaign, that the oligarchs would not be able to ignore. In this they succeeded, for local Jiyūtō speakers were soon attracting large and enthusiastic crowds. Governor Mishima responded by turning to the police, who frequently refused to issue permits for political meetings and who intervened as soon as criticism of the government was voiced. What happened at a Jiyūtō rally in Ishikawa district in August was typical. Speaking to the topic "Who Is to Blame?" a local activist developed the theme that repressive government bred revolution. Arguing that English misrule had brought on the American independence movement and that tyrannical emperors and aristocrats in Russia had given rise to anarchism,
he then turned his attention to Japan: “Do not the police seize on a single word or phrase to throw the speaker in jail and disband the meeting?” he asked. At this the policeman on the podium stepped forward and declared the meeting a threat to public order. The speakers were ordered to step down, and the audience was dispersed.85

Concurrent with, but independent of, the campaign led by Kōno Hironaka, the Aizu Jiyūtō in western Fukushima organized local opposition to a major road construction project that Governor Mishima had assigned top priority. Residents of Aizu wanted the roads built; in fact, they had already approved additional taxes and corvée labor as part of an agreement on funding that had been negotiated with Mishima’s representatives. But when it was discovered that the central government was paying considerably less than had been promised and that the residents would have no say in planning the route, the local Jiyūtō mounted a petition drive and tax boycott. Because the Aizu Jiyūtō was made up of the local notables and many party members were village mayors, it was able to mount large and effective protests, at least in the countryside.86

Backed by the Home Ministry, Governor Mishima ordered his subordinates to break the boycott. Two hundred and thirty policemen were sent to Aizu; homes were raided; property was seized; and leaders were harassed and arrested. Strong-arm tactics intimidated some of the party members, but they also aroused popular passions. Although the local Jiyūtō leadership tried to avoid violent confrontation, on a fateful day late in November a large crowd of villagers, urged on by young Jiyūtō activists who had recently arrived in Aizu, marched on the district jail in Kitakata where two leaders of the boycott were incarcerated. In the course of the demonstration, someone in the crowd, very possibly an agent provocateur, threw stones at the station, breaking several panes of glass. Immediately the police, swords drawn, charged and attacked the unarmed crowd, killing one demonstrator and wounding several others. Mishima, who was in Tokyo when the incident occurred, seized upon the incident as a pretext for legal action against the Fukushima Jiyūtō. He immediately sent a secret communiqué to his secretary which began: “The rioting of the scoundrels in Kitakata provides an excellent opportunity to arrest them all, bar none.”87 Within less than a week, one thousand Jiyūtō party members and sympathizers in Fukushima had been arrested; many were tortured; and some died while in

85 Takahashi, *Fukushima retsuden*, p. 47.
police custody. Most of them had never set foot in Aizu during the period of the protest.

In incidents that are collectively known as the "Fukushima incident," Jiyūtō-led resistance to Governor Mishima is usually considered the first of the so-called gekka jiken, violent incidents that marked the final stage of the Popular Rights movement. Yet in most respects, Jiyūtō activity in Fukushima shared more with the second phase of the Popular Rights movement, the constitutional movement, than with subsequent insurrections. As in the campaign for constitutional government, the majority of its leaders were of the local notable class, respectable and solid citizens who naturally inclined toward peaceful politics within the law. But despite such limited goals and peaceful tactics, the authorities had responded with violence, finally bringing the full weight of the judicial system to bear on the opposition.88

Nevertheless, the Fukushima incident was indeed a turning point in the Popular Rights movement, for the authoritarian face of the oligarchy had been revealed for all to see, causing a decline in support for the Jiyūtō among more cautious party members to whom commitment to representative government was not worth the risks of continued agitation. In this sense, the "incident" was both an end and a beginning. Mishima broke the power of a deeply entrenched local opposition movement, as he had allegedly been instructed to do upon taking office; and to young radicals, who continued the struggle against oligarchic rule, violence now appeared to be politically and morally justified.

In the last years of the Popular Rights movement, opposition to the Meiji oligarchy turned violent. It is essential, however, to distinguish between popular uprisings driven by acute economic distress, as in the Chichibu revolt of 1884, and the several insurrectionist plots of which the Kabasan incident is perhaps the best example. Whereas local leaders in Chichibu who had only recently joined the Jiyūtō organized thousands of destitute farmers around economic issues, the sixteen Kabasan rebels acted without popular support in an ill-conceived attempt to bring about revolution by assassination. Whereas the principal goal of the Chichibu uprising was debt relief, revenge and despair with conventional politics motivated the young Jiyūtō radicals of Kabasan. Hence it is the contrasts between Chichibu and Kabasan

88 Fifty-seven party members of the Fukushima Jiyūtō were charged with treason. Although six party members, including Kônô, had signed a "blood oath" to overthrow the oligarchy, there was no other evidence that any of them were actually plotting an insurrection.
that are of the greatest significance, for each movement possessed elements of revolutionary mobilization while it lacked other, essential ingredients.

For the majority of the Kabasan conspirators, the initial motive was to assassinate Mishima Michitsune and thereby avenge the brutal suppression of the Fukushima Jiyūtō. Twelve members of the Kabasan group were natives of Fukushima and had either been arrested in 1882 or witnessed the crackdown. Still, revenge was not their only motive, and the assassination of government ministers was conceived to be more than an act of terrorism. The Kabasan rebels proceeded on the assumption that the simultaneous assassination of high-ranking officials would cause the government to fall and set the stage for a revolutionary seizure of state power. Nor were they alone in thinking that direct action was the only road open to opponents of the authoritarian state. After 1882, a sizable group in the Jiyūtō headed by Ōi Kentarō had begun to advocate insurrection, a strategy that proved to be profoundly wrong but that reflected the despair of many of the most committed party members. The constitutional movement and the mass movement it had spawned were dead; the Jiyūtō party secretariat was controlled by the ineffectual and compromising Itagaki; and the naked use of state power against the Fukushima Jiyūtō had demonstrated the perils, as well as the futility, of legal agitation. Thus, the Kabasan group was exceptional in its choice of tactics - plans to use homemade bombs to kill officials attending a public ceremony - but not in its frustration with conventional politics.

The particulars of the adventures and misadventures of the Kabasan conspiracy need not detain us, for they have been recorded elsewhere and illustrate only the many pitfalls that await an amateur band of political assassins. The more significant failure of the Kabasan group was the scant attention that it (and most of the radical Jiyūtō) paid to organizing support among the people. To some extent, its failure to recruit the local population to the cause of revolution reflected practical limitations - primarily the need to maintain secrecy - that the group’s choice of tactics imposed. Moreover, most of the conspirators were shizoku or sons of wealthy farmers and not natives of the locale in which they established their headquarters. But most of all, the band proved to be naive in its expectations, believing that it could raise an

90 Bowen, Rebellion, pp. 31-49.
army of sufficient size to march on Tokyo simply by appealing to the rural poor, recruiting gangs of miners, and freeing convicts, all without prior political work to explain the purpose of the revolt. Completely cut off from reality, they never posed a serious threat to state power.91

The conspirators' lack of interest in organizing the people is all the more surprising in light of the desperate economic situation of many small farmers and the signs of incipient unrest. Beginning in 1882, a severe depression that lasted more than four years racked the countryside. The collapse of the rural economy had been precipitated by antiinflationary policies adopted at the recommendation of Finance Minister Matsukata Masayoshi in the fall of 1881 to curb inflation and promote capital accumulation and industrialization. Over the next four years the government withdrew 36 percent of the paper currency in circulation and increased excise taxes more than fivefold. Prefectural and local taxes also rose as the costs of public works and services were transferred to prefectural and local government. At the same time, the government reduced expenditures, in part by selling off to private concerns most of the industrial enterprises it had established and run as state industries.

In purely economic terms, Matsukata's policies must be judged a success. Nearly bankrupt in 1881, the government increased the ratio of reserves to currency in circulation from 8 percent to 37 percent by 1886; the nation's balance of trade swung from a deficit to surplus; and interest rates declined, all of which encouraged long-term investment in a manufacturing sector with growing capital requirements. On the other hand, what benefited industry hurt agriculture, particularly the small and marginal producers who produced cash crops and had experienced the gains of the previous inflation of prices. The immediate effect of the deflation was to depress commodity prices, thus reducing farm income. Rice prices fell from a post-Restoration high of ¥14.40 per koku in 1881 to ¥4.61 per koku in January 1884; raw silk and cocoons, the principal cash crop in many districts of eastern Japan, declined by one-half between 1882 and 1884. At the same time that the farmers' incomes were falling, taxes rose. There were new taxes to pay on consumer goods, but in addition, the real burden of the land tax increased as commodity prices declined. Paid in cash, the land tax consumed a far greater portion of total household

91 Most of the insurrections of the period were discovered by the police well before the conspirators could act.
income, rising from an average of 16 percent of the national harvest in 1877 to 33 percent in 1884.92

All farmers suffered to some extent as a consequence of the Matsu-kata deflation. However, small-scale producers of cash crops, and especially farmers who customarily relied on short-term debt, were hit the hardest. Caught between the government and the local money-lender, saddled with drastically reduced income but high fixed costs, such farmers struggled to stave off bankruptcy. Even moderately well-to-do farmers caught in the same predicament often had to mortgage their land. As the full effects of the depression took hold, bankruptcies soared, rising nationally from 33,845 households in 1883 to 108,050 in 1885.93

It is not surprising then that rural unrest was on the rise. Beginning in 1883, hardpressed farmers in eastern Japan began to agitate for debt relief, typically banding together to demand debt rescheduling or suspension of interest payments. These locally organized movements, self-styled “debtor parties” (shakkintō) and “poor people’s parties” (kommintō), appeared most frequently in sericulture districts among small producers for whom debt management was as much part of the productive cycle as was nurturing silkworm larvae and harvesting cocoons. According to one survey, there were sixty-two incidents of collective action by debtors in 1884, the trough of the agricultural depression, with the greatest concentration in Kanagawa and Shizuoka. These efforts were not entirely unsuccessful, for there were several cases in which creditors rescheduled loans and reduced interest rates.94

For the most part, the Jiyūtō, whose rural membership consisted largely of local notables and wealthy farmers, kept aloof from the debtor movement; some party members, moneylenders, and wholesalers in the silk trade were themselves the targets of agitation. But in Hachiōji, a market town west of Tokyo, Ishizaka Kōrei, a local leader of the Jiyūtō who had himself fallen into debt, organized a community

92 Irokawa Daikichi, Kindai kokka, pp. 345–6, who bases himself on the research of Niwa Kunio.
93 Ibid., p. 353. This is, however, an area of continuing controversy, its parameters outlined by Bowen’s estimate of three million bankruptcies in the mid-1880s (Rebellion, p. 104) and a recent assertion that much of the increase in tenancy was for newly reclaimed land and that “real income per farm worker fell only 9.2 percent from 1879–1881 [inflationary years] to 1882–1884.” Richard J. Smethurst, Agricultural Development and Tenancy Disputes in Japan 1870–1940 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 60.
effort to mediate between debtors and local creditors with Jiyūtō connections. Although Ishizaka achieved only moderate success, it is likely that events in Hachioji stimulated the much more vigorous movement that developed to the north in Chichibu, a movement that culminated in a full-scale uprising a few months later.

In Chichibu, a mountainous sericulture district northwest of Tokyo, debt-related protests developed into armed resistance by local farmers whose three-thousand-strong "Poor People's Army" sacked municipal offices and attacked moneylenders and credit companies. The rebellion far exceeded the previous popular uprisings of the Meiji period, in terms of organization, militancy, and ideological articulation if not in numbers of participants. The Chichibu rebellion raises a number of questions. Why was its mobilization so successful? How radical were its goals and ideology? What was its relationship to the Jiyūtō, nationally and locally? And what, finally, does the Chichibu revolt tell us about opposition to oligarchic rule at the end of the People's Rights movement?

Debt relief, the issue around which the people of Chichibu organized, spoke to their most pressing need. In the 1880s, 70 percent of all households in Chichibu raised silkworms, and the local economy was devastated by the sharp drop in silk prices after 1881. However, in contrast with the debtors' movements which originated among the poorest farmers and lacked politically sophisticated leadership, the Chichibu movement was led by middle and small farmers who had only recently fallen on hard times. The three men who initiated the campaign for debt relief in Chichibu—Ochiai Toraichi, Sakamoto Sōsaku and Takagishi Zenkichi—represented the middle stratum of village society: literate but without much formal education, economically self-sufficient but certainly not wealthy, respected by their peers but lacking the prestige and influence of local notables. Whatever their prior interest and involvement in the Popular Rights movement might have been, the first we learn of their political activity is a petition delivered to the district magistrate in 1883 urging measures to regulate usury. The next spring, discouraged by the government’s failure to act on the debt issue and impressed by speeches denouncing the government’s economic policies made by Ōi Kentarō during a recent tour, they joined the Jiyūtō. Nevertheless, when they organized a mass movement around the debt issue in August, they did not turn to the Chichibu Jiyūtō for help. Instead, they approached hard-

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95 Bowen, Rebellion, pp. 49–67.
pressed small farmers like themselves and made the village the unit of recruitment and mobilization. By September, they had mobilized a core of more than one hundred committed supporters. The Chichibu Kommintō (Poor People's Party) had been born.97

The Chichibu Kommintō decided on armed resistance only after the police and courts refused to do anything about the debt crisis and local creditors rejected conciliation. Its leaders had tried to postpone the revolt as long as possible, first, in the hope that continued agitation would produce tangible results and, second, to allow sufficient time for preparations. The head of the Kommintō, Tashiro Eisuke, and several of his lieutenants wanted at least one month to plan the uprising, arguing that success depended on simultaneous risings in neighboring provinces. However, they were forced to act prematurely because local farmers faced imminent foreclosures; by October Chichibu moneylenders had begun to call in their debts.98 The final decision for revolt was made on October 25, and one week later the Kommintō army assembled to hear Tashiro read out the orders of battle.

The brief success of the rebel army and its subsequent defeat were described and analyzed by Roger Bowen.99 What concerns us here is not the collapse of the rebel army but the political character of the rebellion. Consider its military organization. The formal command structure contained a clearly articulated hierarchy of staff positions descending from Tashiro, the commander in chief, to battalion leaders, establishing clear lines of authority needed to formulate and implement strategy. In addition, the goals of the revolt were clearly outlined and were supported by the rank and file, many of whom insisted on the rightness of their actions even after their arrest. At least some units followed orders and fought spiritedly, even when outnumbered and outgunned. These and other facts suggest a level of political consciousness greater than that found in Tokugawa peasant revolts or the rural protests of the early Meiji period.

On the other hand, the sophisticated conception of military organization evident in the formal command structure broke down once the Kommintō army took the field. On the third day of the revolt, when it was learned that the Imperial army was closing in, the battalion commanders disobeyed orders, creating such confusion that further attempts to coordinate operations ended. When Tashiro absconded the following day, the greater part of the army, which had grown to over five thousand men, melted away. As in traditional peasant revolts,

participation was neither individual nor entirely voluntary; to a large extent it represented a collective decision made by each village. And if there is evidence that some of the rank and file understood their actions in explicitly political terms, there is also evidence that many used the traditional language of *yonaoshi* (world rectification) to "equalize wealth," "aid the poor," and create "the kingdom of peace and tranquility" to describe the purpose of the revolt. They also raised banners proclaiming Itagaki Taisuke, "lord of world rectification" and referred to the Jiyūtō as "poor people's gold." This is not to argue that the entire movement in Chichibu was predominantly traditional or millenarian, but there can be no doubt that outside the ranks of the leaders, pre-Meiji concepts of resistance to authority still informed political consciousness. According to the transcript of Tashiro's interrogation, the purpose of the uprising was to force the government to protect farmers threatened with foreclosure, to control usury, and to reduce local taxes. Armed resistance was the means, but the strategy was to use force to compel the government to accept their demands. More immediate objectives included punitive attacks against unscrupulous moneylenders, raising funds for local relief by threatening the rich, and attacking courthouses to destroy debt vouchers, mortgage deeds, and tax records. For most of the local leaders, the goals were economic and limited in scope. This was not true, however, of Kikuchi Kambei and Ide Tamemichi, Jiyūtō activists from neighboring Nagano Prefecture who went to Chichibu late in October. They interjected a broader political vision with demands for reduction of the land tax and the immediate convening of a national assembly, on the one hand, and a rhetoric of revolution that had little to do with the popular movement, on the other. The distance between the radical faction, most of whom were from outside Chichibu, and the majority of the local Kommintō leadership was made clear at the first meeting between Tashiro and Kikuchi. Tashiro insisted that the principal objective was debt relief, and Kikuchi was so disappointed that he tried to persuade Ide to return home.

Finally, the role of the Jiyūtō remained marginal. A number of the leaders of the Chichibu Kommintō had recently joined the Jiyūtō or, as in the case of Tashiro, were associated though not formally enrolled in the party. But the Jiyūtō group in the Kommintō was not at all representative of the party membership, either locally or nationally. They had joined the Jiyūtō in 1884 out of concern for the plight of

impoverished farmers at the hands of local moneylenders. In the course of the campaign to negotiate relief measures, they had come to see the role of the state as the guardian of private property and contracts. In other words, they drew the crucial connection between state power and economic structure, and this gave a political dimension to their uprising. But the majority of the Jiyūtō members in Chichibu came from the well-to-do local notable class and took no interest in the campaign for debt relief. The same pattern prevailed in the Sakyū district of Nagano, which bordered Chichibu to the west. When Kikuchi led a force of several rebels there, hoping to attract new recruits, the well-established Jiyūtō gave them no help at all. Neither did Ōi Kentarō, head of the radical Jiyūtō faction in Tokyo. Informed of the rising in advance, Ōi sent a messenger with instructions to cancel the revolt. Nationally, Jiyūtō leaders condemned both Kabasan and Chichibu in an effort to disassociate themselves from the violence that they felt discredited the party. In fact, meeting in Osaka just before the Chichibu rebellion, the party executives voted to disband, partly out of recognition that they could not control radical groups acting in the party’s name.102

With the voluntary dissolution of the Jiyūtō and the suppression of the Chichibu rebellion, the Popular Rights movement ended. Although Jiyūtō radicals plotted several more insurrections, each was discovered, and the conspirators were rounded up before they were put to the test.103 What did the liberal movement accomplish?

Very little. The decade of agitation and ferment that began with the memorial of the Aikokukōtō in 1874 ended without achieving the institutional reforms needed to establish a democratic polity. It is true that the government, as it had promised, delivered a constitution in 1889 that provided the framework for limited representation at the national level. But the constitution written by the oligarchs so circumscribed the power of the elected lower house that it was another twenty years before the political parties gained a share of ministerial power, and it was 1918 before a parliamentarian became prime minister. Hence politics in the first half-century of modernization, the period in which the basic pattern of institutional and ideological articulation took shape, was bureaucratic and authoritarian. In most respects the

102 Irokawa, Kindai kokka, p. 241.
103 The final episode involved plans to send armed forces to Korea to aid the progressive faction in that country to seize power, thereby setting the stage for revolution in Japan. Marius B. Jansen, “Oi Kentarō: Radicalism and Chauvinism,” Far Eastern Quarterly 11 (May 1952): 305–16.
society created by the Meiji oligarchy was "modern," being capitalistic, meritocratic, and scientific, but also politically and socially repressive and increasingly chauvinistic and militaristic. In the light of Japan's difficult task as an Asian nation industrializing in the predatory world of Western imperialism, it is impossible to predict how modernization might have differed under more liberal political leadership.104 What we do know is that the liberals were excluded from power at the time when there was the greatest opportunity for progressive change.

Among the factors limiting the effectiveness of the People's Rights movement were factionalism, weak and compromising leadership, and a generally united oligarchy that did not hesitate to use the police and courts to harass and intimidate its opponents. But perhaps the fundamental weakness of Meiji liberalism was its acceptance of the imperial institution as the fountain of all legitimate political authority. Not only liberal polemics against the oligarchs but every constitution made public during the Popular Rights movement placed the imperial institution at the center of the new polity and stipulated joint rule by the emperor and the people.

The reliance of popular rights leaders on the Meiji emperor as a legitimizing institution signified an ideological commitment and not just a political strategy aimed at swaying public opinion. Although it was opportunistic as well, in a more basic sense the linkage of the imperial with the popular will in the rhetoric of the Popular Rights movement points out the all-too-real confusion on the part of the first generation of Japanese liberals about the relationship between imperial and democratic institutions and demonstrates the limiting historical conditions that they faced. The emperor was the one political force that transcended all the particularistic social divisions of rank, class, domain, and family inherited from centuries of feudalism. Needing an emotionally compelling symbol of progressive political relationships, popular rights thinkers and activists wholeheartedly accepted the Meiji emperor. But though they were free to lay claim to the imperial will, they had no control over the institution to which they hitched their star. For the Meiji emperor, as well as being a potent symbol of the modern era, was also a political actor controlled by the oligarchs. As such, he could be used with devastating effect against any group that appealed uncritically to his authority.

104 The political parties that emerged in the Taishō period were scarcely less chauvinistic than most other groups in Japanese society and overall more jingoistic than the bureaucracy.
The leaders of the Meiji Restoration never surrendered power during their lifetimes, and despite attacks from both progressive and reactionary political forces, they stuck to their agenda of rapid, top-down transformation of political, social, and economic institutions. To understand why the leaders prevailed, we need to consider the social character of the opposition forces, their interests, and the choices the oligarchs made. Put simply, they made tactical concessions that reduced the friction between the emerging middle class and the state but crushed movements by socially marginal classes.

Confronted with protests against the land tax and the campaign for constitutional government, movements that mobilized propertied and educated segments of the population, the oligarchs offered concessions addressing the long-term class interests of these groups. By reducing the land tax in 1877, subsequently shifting the tax burden from property to consumption, and writing a constitution that gave substantial fiscal and legislative power to the elected lower house, the oligarchs deflected demands for more progressive reforms without either surrendering power or permanently alienating the future middle class. Despite relatively heavy property taxes and exclusion from the government, the wealthy farmers, landlords, entrepreneurs, and the commercial and educated classes benefited enormously from the progressive reforms of Meiji — especially reforms that brought citizen equality, meritocracy, protection of private property, and promotion of capitalist economic growth.

Early in this chapter we observed that historians in the West tend to credit traditional values such as consensus and loyalty to the emperor with minimizing "dysfunctional" conflict in Meiji, whereas most Japanese historians emphasize the repressive role of the state. But at least in the case of liberal opposition movements, it is interests rather than values that are salient. The propertied and educated had a sufficient material stake in the emerging social order to keep them from launching a truly radical attack on the government. Their class interests dictated compromise rather than unrestrained confrontation; they faced selective, and not massive, repression by the state.

However, the classes marginalized by the Meiji reforms, groups that were losing social power as a result of modernization, faced an entirely different situation. The traditional warrior and small-scale subsistence farmer did not fit into the new order, and the government sacrificed their social needs quite ruthlessly to speed national integration and
capital accumulation. Victims of the particular development strategies pursued by the Meiji government, these groups suffered severe and irreversible decline in socioeconomic status. They had every reason to revolt, but why did their rebellion fail?

Historically, the ability of governments to repress rebellion has been profoundly influenced by interaction with world political and economic systems. Japan in the mid-nineteenth century was no exception. In the decade preceding the Meiji Restoration, military and economic pressures of Western imperialism hastened the collapse of the Tokugawa bakufu. Commodore Matthew C. Perry's warships undermined the legitimacy of the shogun and created a sense of national crisis within the ruling class. Faced with a possible loss of national independence, the bakufu was forced to authorize a military mobilization that strained its own resources and strengthened the hostile daimyo. The commercial treaties imposed on the bakufu by the Western powers disrupted financial and commodity markets. Rampant inflation, food shortages, hoarding, and rice riots further weakened Tokugawa authority. In the end, only a few of the hereditary vassals of the Tokugawa house were willing to fight on its behalf. Overall, the victory of the tōbaku (overthrow the bakufu) movement was due less to its own strength than to the crippling effects of Western imperialism on the traditional bases of Tokugawa strength. In the absence of the acute foreign crisis, the tōbaku forces, which were numerically small, internally divided, and ideologically diverse, could not have seized power in 1868 without first achieving a much higher level of mobilization.

Conversely, in considering the defeat of opposition movements in early Meiji, we should not overlook the fact that the oligarchs were not subjected to new pressures from the imperialist powers. The commercial treaties imposed specific constraints on economic policy and reduced state revenues, and extraterritoriality continued to be a cause of national humiliation. But during the critical first decade of political and social reform, when tension between the government and the former samurai class was the greatest, the Western powers did not make new demands for diplomatic, trade, or territorial concessions. There is no doubt that the relaxation of external pressure enabled the government to push ahead with modernization. Fighting a major war in the 1870s would have strained the government's resources while strengthening the exponents of reaction both inside and outside the

105 Theda Skocpol, States and Social Revolutions (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 23-4.
Oligarchy; a prolonged conflict would have necessitated mobilizing the shizoku. Once the traditional warrior class had been rearmed, it is unlikely that the government could have eliminated its stipends and class privileges. And without these reforms, the basis of the alliance between the oligarchy and wealthy commoners and progressive shizoku—meritocracy, lower property taxes, and the 1889 constitution—would have vanished.

The second contextual factor that aided the government was the sequential, rather than simultaneous, rise of opposition forces. The oligarchs faced challenges from both reactionary and progressive movements, but they did not have to confront both at the same time. Although the shizoku revolts overlapped with protests against the land tax, the constitutional movement reached its apogee well after the danger of shizoku rebellion had passed. Moreover, the liberal phase of the Popular Rights movement coincided with a period of general prosperity. From the defeat of the Satsuma Rebellion to the Matsukata deflation, good weather, the strong export demand for silk, expansive monetary policies, and inflation that reduced the farmers’ real taxes created unprecedented prosperity in the countryside—conditions more favorable to reformist politics than to radical movements. Finally, when the Matsukata deflation brought severe hardship to the villages in the 1880s, the constitutional movement was already in full retreat. And because the principal demand of the rural poor was debt relief, the Jiyūtō ignored them. Leaderless except in Chichibu, poor farmers did not mobilize effectively.

Without a conjuncture of external and internally destabilizing forces, revolts by shizoku and poor farmers could not possibly succeed so long as they remained localized movements. Mass mobilization along class lines was a precondition for success, yet in the end only a minority of shizoku and impoverished farmers took up arms against the state.

The very limited scale of antigovernment mobilization, despite the substantial decline in socioeconomic wellbeing nationwide, is the salient factor in the defeat of armed opposition to the Meiji oligarchy. Unlike the groups that rallied around the issues of property taxes and representative government, declassed shizoku and subsistence farmers had gained little and lost a great deal as a result of Meiji modernization. They had ample cause to take up arms, but comparatively few did.

There is very little evidence to support the claim that loyalty to the emperor, one of the traditional values assumed to have reduced politi-
cal conflict in Meiji, had a decisive impact on the political behavior of ex-samurai who were faced with the dilemma between acquiescence in loss of status and social redundancy or revolt in defense of traditional privilege. As we have seen, the shizoku rebels of the 1870s had once been at the forefront of the Restoration movement, and there is no reason to believe that they were any less patriotic or that they regarded the imperial institution with less reverence than did the samurai who served the oligarchy. On the contrary, had they not already demonstrated a greater degree of personal commitment than had most of their peers?

If loyalty to the emperor was not the decisive factor inhibiting shizoku rebellion, then what was?

Shizoku in the 1870s lacked the organizational resources to mobilize around class interests because Meiji reforms had crippled traditional samurai structures of collective action. For nearly three centuries the feudal kashindan (daimyo retainer band) had defined the political world of the samurai. Living within pyramidal, rigid status hierarchies, samurai were subject to the absolute authority of daimyo and fief elders; stratified by hereditary rank within the domain, they were segregated from the samurai of other domains because of affiliation with a single military house. At least until the emergence of the activist shishi bands in response to the foreign crisis in the bakumatsu period, the kashindan stood as the only legitimate forum for political action. Consequently, when the government ordered the abolition of private fiefs in 1871 and disbanded the kashindan, it deprived the middle and low-ranking samurai — the strata least adequately compensated for the loss of traditional income and privilege — of familiar and authorized organizations for collective action. If they were to resist, they would first need to create new ideological and organizational structures. The vast majority were not able to do that.

Viewed from this perspective, it is not surprising that disaffected veterans of the tōbaku movement and not, for instance, Tokugawa loyalists led the shizoku revolts in the early Meiji period. Unlike their more conservative peers, they had already participated in voluntaristic political associations which to some degree transcended ascriptive status. Having once rebelled against established political authority, they could more easily authorize their own actions in terms of higher principles, even when this entailed breaking the emperor’s laws. They did not, however, foresee the need to go beyond the organizations of the tōbaku movement, and they never developed class-based structures for
political action. As we have seen, they continued to rely on local associations of like-minded "men of spirit," and these proved inadequate against the newly centralized state.

Meiji reforms also undercut the social basis of traditional village mobilization. As seen in village protests against the Meiji land tax, sustained opposition depended on the leadership of headmen and local notables. Although by no means entirely contingent on shared economic interests, the tradition of village officials leading protests against oppressive taxation was integrally bound up with the corporate features of the feudal tax system. But the Meiji land tax eliminated the village as a fiscal unit; landholding was fully privatized, and the payment of taxes was made an individual responsibility. Under these conditions, the impending bankruptcy of small farmers unable to pay the land tax became a class issue and ceased to be a matter of collective village concern. Moreover, the modernization of the legal system and security apparatus strengthened the position of the landlords and moneylenders. Unlike the bakufu and daimyo, the Meiji state provided policing at the village level, laws that protected private property, and courts to enforce them—all of which reduced local constraints on individual acquisition.

The sharp and permanent rise in tenancy during the agricultural depression of 1882–6 stands out as the most decisive change in rural relations in the early Meiji period. Deprived of the thin margin of protection that village solidarity had once provided, impoverished farmers suffered massive loss of land as a direct consequence of monetary and fiscal policies enacted by the oligarchy to spur capital accumulation and investment in industry. But only in Chichibu did they take up arms.

The conditions that made rebellion possible in Chichibu suggest the nature of the obstacles that existed elsewhere. In contrast with the situation in most areas, some, though not all, members of the local Jiyūtō took up the cause of indebtedness and foreclosures, thereby providing leadership. Second, the social structure favored collective action by the poor, inasmuch as a majority of farmers were threatened with bankruptcy. Nearly 70 percent of Chichibu farm household heads were small landowners who reared silkworms as a cash crop. In contrast with the cotton and rice export regions where subsistence farmers had already lost their land and become tenant farmers, most peasants in Chichibu were still struggling to keep their status as marginal cash-crop farmers. Third, as recently as 1866, under similar conditions of economic hardship and indebtedness among small-scale
producers, the peasants of Chichibu had carried out massive attacks against moneylenders, local rice and silk dealers, and village officials in the name of "world rectification" (yonaoshi). In Chichibu, all the ingredients needed to pursue collective action were present: local leadership, a mass base, and familiar structures for peasant mobilization. However, whereas yonaoshi-type mobilization allowed the poor to carry out retribution against local propertied classes, it could not be sustained for a long period of time and had no chance of toppling the central government. The uprising dramatized the plight of impoverished farmers, but it did nothing to change the actual conditions of their lives.

It is part of the lore of Western historiography of the Meiji Restoration that in Japan, tradition aided rather than obstructed modernization. Although there is some truth to this interpretation, like many theories, it obscures even as it enlightens our understanding of historical process. What this analysis of the failure of the Meiji opposition movements suggests is that the Meiji reforms destroyed traditional structures of collective action that, if they had remained in place, would have permitted far broader mobilization against the programs of the Meiji government.

106 See Vlastos, Peasant Protests.