

Japan Since 1852

By FRED KARN

Commodore Matthew C. Perry led a fleet of four American battleships into the Bay of Tokyo ninety years ago. His instructions from the President of the United States were to obtain certain concessions for American seamen by threat or argument or, as a last resort, by force. He fired enough salutes to frighten nearly everyone in Japan. Then he presented the demands of the American government and steamed away.

The next year Perry returned with ten ships and received a favorable reply. American seamen shipwrecked on Japanese soil would receive humane treatment — much better than the Japanese had been accustomed to giving visitors. Two poor harbors, Shimoda and Hakodate, were opened to American commerce and to whaling vessels which might stop for repairs and coal. An American Consul was permitted to reside at Shimoda. This story of the opening of Japan is known to every American schoolboy. But Perry only began the job.

American merchants eagerly looked forward to a thriving silk trade. On the other hand, Japan considered her American treaty as similar to one which she had maintained with the Dutch for 250 years. This treaty had provided Japan's only contact with the Occidental world during all this time. A single Dutch ship was annually permitted to sail into the harbor of Nagasaki, and to exchange its goods for Japanese silk and tea. While in port the Dutch sailors were virtually prisoners of the Japanese. This trade monopoly, restricted though it was, proved to be highly profitable. With the Perry treaty signed, American seamen expected to break this monopoly and to carry on unrestricted trade with the Japanese.

It was the duty of Townsend Harris, America's first Consul to Japan, to reconcile the two conflicting interpretations of the treaty. He was left in Shimoda with his Dutch translator Heusken, and several Chinese

servants, to administer Perry's treaty. But now that the battleships were gone the Japanese changed their attitude toward Americans. They did everything in their power to cause Harris to lose his patience and to give up hope of enforcing the treaty. At the same time they hesitated to do anything that might cause the United States to send back its battleships.

Since Harris was a Consul General instead of a mere Consul as provided in the treaty, they contested his right even to land in Japan. For nearly a year, government officials accepted American coins at only one third their bullion value. This was the general exchange rate because foreigners were allowed to trade only through the Japanese government. If free exchange had been allowed, the competition between Japanese merchants would soon have established a fair monetary ratio.

The harbor of Shimoda had been blocked by a sand bar which made it nearly worthless to ocean going vessels. Harris requested that a more suitable port be opened. Needless to say, this request was denied.

The American Consul had a letter of introduction from President Pierce which he was anxious to present to the Mikado. Japanese politicians de-

layed the meeting in every way possible. They did not want foreigners to understand the organization of their government. In fact, it was only with the greatest difficulty that Harris was able to obtain an audience with any responsible government officials.

By pleading ignorance of western customs, the Japanese were able to delay negotiations and to frustrate their unwelcome guest. Harris called the Japanese, "the greatest liars on earth." Despite all this, he treated them with honesty and courtesy year after year. Eventually his patience was rewarded and Japan made an effective trade treaty with the United States. Four years after Perry's treaty was signed, Japanese ports were actually thrown open to foreign trade. And Harris had earned the esteem of the Japanese as completely as Lafayette had earned that of Americans.

When she was uncovered by the western nations, Japan was on the verge of a political and economic revolution. Two hundred years before, the Tokugawa family had established itself at the head of the Japanese government. The oldest man in that family carried the hereditary title of Shogun. The Mikado had been reduced to an impotent figurehead. Other nobles who hoped to displace the Tokugawa family were kept in check by a collection of hostages. But the last few Shoguns had been feeble and witless and the power of the ruling family was on the decline. A group of large landowners—daimyos or feudal lords—was plotting its overthrow.

In this revolt the United States unconsciously played an important part. The average superstitious Japanese looked on foreigners as a serious threat to the safety and good fortune of their country. Shortly after Perry's visit, a destructive tidal wave swept over their islands. It caused particularly great damage to one of the harbors which had



been opened to foreign trade. What would happen if foreign ships should make frequent calls at Japanese ports they could readily imagine. Thus, if the Shogun permitted trade with the United States, the daimyos would have a popular ground for revolt. And if it refused to negotiate, the Shogun feared the return of Perry's fleet and the destruction of Japanese cities. The daimyos suggested that Japan build ships of her own for defense against the foreigners. But this was only idle talk, inspired by political ambitions. So the government adopted a policy of delay. It required all the patience and friendliness which Harris possessed to bring his mission to a successful conclusion.

It was not until he obtained the confidence and respect of Lord Hotta that Harris was able to make any real progress. Hotta was one of the few Japanese statesmen of that day who were sincerely concerned with the welfare of their country. Harris was able to convince him that Japan had much to gain by trade with the western nations. But Hotta was afraid that a trade treaty would cause the overthrow of his government, so he appealed to the Mikado for support. The Mikado had been inactive in politics for years, yet he had still some influence on his subjects. But the personal advisers of the Mikado were ambitious. They urged him to reclaim the powers of the Shogun and prevented him from supporting the trade treaty. Lord Hotta appealed to the Mikado's vanity by suggesting that trade with the rest of the world was only the first step toward world domination. But apparently the Mikado determined to dominate Japan first. He denied the Shogun his support.

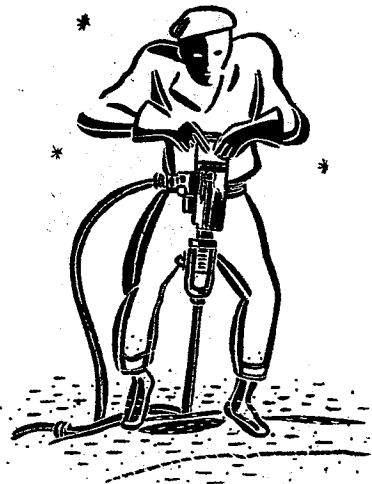
The Japanese government decided to establish foreign trade even at the risk of civil war. First they signed the treaty which Harris had worked out with them. Within a month they established treaties with Great Britain, France, Holland and Russia. Harris moved his consulate to Tokyo and was joined by representatives from the other western nations. In an effort to cause loss of prestige for the Shoguntale, a po-

litical enemy murdered Heusken, Harris' secretary. The British and French consuls fled from Tokyo to Yokohama and demanded reprisals by their governments. But the American Consul refused to be a pawn in the game of Japanese politics. He continued to carry on business in Tokyo and the expected revolution was prevented.

The downfall of the Tokugawa Shoguntale occurred ten years later. This was due to the efforts of fifty men, chiefly members of the nobility and of the military caste. By primogeniture, feudal powers had been passed on by each ruler to his eldest son. The other male members of the family did not work, but depended for their incomes on the generosity of their brother. These idle men were a potential source of revolt. In 1867, the feudal system was overthrown. The daimyos gave up their fiefs and were appointed governors with salaries paid by the imperial government.

Immediately Japan came to life. Commerce and manufacturing had long been restricted by law. Production suddenly opened up and the national wealth increased rapidly. There was a great increase in the population of the cities and towns. Opening of new opportunities in the cities relieved the struggle for existence on the tiny Japanese farms. The standard of living of the agricultural population rose with that of the industrial workers.

And land values increased with



production. Soon the increase in rent began to force wages and interest down. And this has continued until today there is no industrialized nation in the world with as low a standard of living as Japan. Capital also fares badly there. So Japanese investors put their money into land instead of capital. In 1913, their land was valued at 40 billion yen and their national capital at only 70 billion yen. This exceptionally high proportion of land value to capital accounts for the low wages and interest available in Japan.

Thus Japanese industry was restricted, and a nation similar to Great Britain in area and geographic position continues to support half its population on farms. They are small subsistence farms of about two and a half acres. The average farm in the United States is 150 acres. Of course, Japan finds it difficult to produce enough food for 80 million people. Many modern writers cite the Malthusian doctrine and declare that Japan suffers from overpopulation. But Belgium and Great Britain have higher standards of living than Japan. Belgium has twice the population density and Great Britain practically the same as Japan. It is foolish for Japan to produce its own food while modern industry and commerce are available. The United States, Canada, Australia, and Argentina are all eager to dispose of an excess food supply.

Japan's troubles are not technological but economic. It is not necessary to get an extra bushel of rice from an extinct volcano crater or from a rocky hillside. But it is necessary to raise the wages of labor and to keep prices down. Low prices made Japanese manufactures available for export. But wages were so low that Japanese workers were unable to accept the American wheat and beef due them as their share of the exchange. Instead, the Japanese government accepted the credit by buying war materials. In 1932, it used these to overrun Manchuria, an area twice the size of the Japanese Empire.

Manchuria might have been a new frontier for Japan. It might have been as beneficial to her as the set-

tlement of Oklahoma or California was to the United States. But land speculators reached Manchuria before labor and capital. Wages were driven to a lower level there than in Japan. So the expected migration never took place.

Unrest continued to grow in Japan. The world wide depression of 1929 caused the collapse of the Japanese silk industry. Farm land was so expensive and silk and rice so cheap that the landowner could not gain a fair income on his investment. So the farm owners proposed a scheme that would assure their

rent. They offered to transfer their property to the state for 18 billion yen. Needless to say the imperial government did not accept the offer. It did however, reduce the direct taxes on agriculture. For years the government had been burdening farm producers with excessive taxes. The proceeds were used to subsidize heavy industries for armament production. Such an economy could have but one result. The Japanese envied the high standard of living which prevailed in England and the United States. They believed that England's prosperity was due to her

The Freeman, March, 1942

colonial empire. So Japan proceeded to carve out her own empire in China. And China would readily have fallen if she had been unable to import arms from the United States. On December 7, Japan turned her military machine directly against the nation which had been frustrating her imperialistic conquest.

A century ago the Japanese believed that Commodore Perry caused their islands to be devastated by a tidal wave. Today they believe that their national economy can be improved by military conquest.