

Some readings on Japanese history through World War II

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Some more resources for teaching modern Japanese history:

1. For your own background on Japan in the era of the “closed country” (1630s–1850s), the best general account is:

Conrad TOTMAN, *Early Modern Japan* (Univ. of California Press, 1993). ISBN-10: 0520203569

Very readable and still the best thing out there. Unlike most textbooks, there is a strong thesis, which is based on an ecological reading of Japanese history. (It’s also more for your own background than for student reading, as it would be a heavy lift for all but the most advanced high-school students.)

Totman’s textbook, *Japan: An Environmental History* (I.B. Tauris, 2016) is also excellent, though concerning this time period I think he’s mistaken in not emphasizing the Meiji revolution as a radical break in environmental history also.

2. For the same period, Susan HANLEY, *Everyday Things in Premodern Japan*, is very interesting and very readable for students. Especially good readings are: ch. 2, “Housing and Furnishings”; ch. 3, “A Resource-Efficient Culture”; ch. 5, “Urban Sanitation and Physical Well-Being.” My one caution would be that it may give an overly rosy picture of Tokugawa living standards (the famines and grinding poverty are left out). A quick remedy for that is to read any section of Mikiso Hane’s book *Peasants, Rebels, and Outcastes*, listed below.
3. FUKUZAWA Yukichi, *Autobiography of Yukichi Fukuzawa*, trans. Eiichi KIYOOKA (Columbia University Press, 1983). Engaging first-hand account that crosses the divide from Tokugawa to Meiji by the leading Westernizing educator of the Meiji period, very usable for students with some support. Fukuzawa’s account of his education is especially interesting to students.
4. ISHIMOTO Shidzue, *Facing Two Ways, The Story of My Life*, Stanford University Press, 1984 [orig. publ. 1935]. Autobiography of the first 30-some years of life of a pioneering 20th century feminist from a high-elite background, extremely accessible to students. (She originally wrote it in English with foreign readers in mind.) The Stanford edition is now out of print but has a useful introduction. Several chapters can stand alone as readings (such as the short chapter, “Are Miners Human Beings?”). Originally married to a young baron, Ishimoto got remarried to a labor activist and changed her surname to Kato; there’s a very short and accessible biography of her under the name Katō Shizue called *Katō Shidzue: A Japanese Feminist*, by Helen M. Hopper.
5. Mikiso HANE, *Peasants, Rebels, Women, and Outcastes: The Underside of Modern Japan*. (The first edition, entitled *Peasants, Rebels, and Outcastes*, was almost exactly the same book—the women were already there but not advertised in the title.) Very accessibly written, filled with up-close details and personal stories. Hane’s translation of Yamashiro Tomoe’s story, “Bog Rhubarb Shoots,” is very moving, something I like to use for teaching. Opposite

Hanley's optimistic account, a problem with Hane's account is that it will leave readers with such a dark picture of modern Japanese history that they may miss the era's tremendous material progress, movement toward social equalization and democratization, and growth of education and cultural pursuits.

6. A sidelight, but another engaging and accessible biography in case students ask about yakuza (which they do) is: SAGA Junichi, *Confessions of a Yakuza*, tr. John Bester, Kodansha 1995. Saga, a medical doctor who talked to many people from all walks of life, has also published a volume of oral history vignettes that make fascinating reading and are individually usable, entitled *Memories of Silk and Straw*.
7. IENAGA Saburo, *The Pacific War, 1931-1945*, tr. Frank Baldwin, Pantheon Books, 1979. A general history, written in a way that's very accessible to students. Originally written for a Japanese popular audience by a historian who lived through the period he writes about—excellent account of the causes of the war including Japanese imperialism in China and militarism at home including militaristic education. Ienaga engaged in a long legal battle with Japan's Ministry of Education, which censored some critical passages from a high-school textbook that he wrote.
8. Haruko Taya COOK and Theodore COOK, *Japan at War: An Oral History* (New Press, 1993). This is one of the very best resources for teaching about the war, composed of many very brief oral histories with excellent, accessible section introductions, so you can break it out in a modular way and just use individual stories or sections. Be warned that some of the reading is extremely grim.
9. For the atomic bombing, the animated movie *Barefoot Gen* is an important document in its own right, based on the manga (also available in English) by NAKAZAWA Keiji, who lived through the atomic bombing of Hiroshima as a child. The manga includes many important social historical details that are left out of the animated movie, and it can make for good discussion to have students compare the two. *Barefoot Gen* also contains some very grim scenes but is softened by an uplifting ending. (I can't say the same about *Grave of the Fireflies*, also a very powerful animated movie that focuses on the bombing of Nishinomiya and its aftermath but which may leave some students feeling suicidal.)

This may be enough to start with! I'm also curious to know what other topics you may be interested in.