

## LADY SNOWBLOOD LOVE SONG OF VENGEANCE

To help you understand the time period and historical context of “Lady Snowblood: Love Song of Vengeance,” here is a brief timeline of events:

1603-1867	Tokugawa Shogunate rule.
1867-1912	Reign of Emperor Meiji, Meiji Restoration, influx of Western ideas and culture.
1873	Yuki's family is destroyed by four villains during the Ketsuzel (“Blood Tax”) Riots.
1874	Kajima Sayo dies after giving birth to Yuki in prison.
1890	Plague reappears in China, spreading to Japan.
1894	Yuki takes out her vengeance (as seen in “Lady Snowblood”)
1894-1895	Sino-Japanese War, reflected successful modernization of Japan.
1904-1905	Russo-Japanese War, solidified Japan's status as a world power.
1905	Yuki surrenders to the authorities in September.
1906	Yuki is sentenced to death on March 14th.
1907	Yuki's final confrontation with Kikui in May

Here is a quick guide to the history of Japan up to and during the time that “Lady Snowblood: Love Song of Vengeance” takes place. We will start with the Tokugawa Shogunate Era and then move into the Meiji Restoration. The story occurs during the 38th year of the Meiji Restoration and the end of the Russo-Japanese War, which was a major accomplishment for Japan's military.

However, traditional samurai ideas and culture still clashed with Western ideas and culture, and there were also elements of anarchism and anti-war sentiment coming into play. Japanese scholars began studying and practicing the ideas of renowned socialist and anarchist thinkers of the day. There was also the looming menace of the plague that had already affected Japan for many years.

### **The End of the Tokugawa Shogunate**

For nearly three centuries (approx. 1603-1867), Japan existed as a feudal society under the relatively tranquil rule of the Tokugawa Shogunate, which attempted to keep the nation isolated from the rest of the world.

The last few years of Tokugawa rule were characterized by an unstable, highly chaotic political scene. The arrival of US Admirals Perry in 1853, and Harris in 1856, offered convincing proof that the Western nations were far more advanced than Japan was in every way, especially in matters military, economic and technological. This realization planted the seeds of the final downfall of the Shogunate, which was by this time considerably weakened.

### **The Meiji Restoration**

Modern Japan begins in the fall of 1868, when the era name “Meiji” was proclaimed and ruling

authority was officially restored to the new emperor, Meiji. At that time only sixteen years old, he had been petitioned by the final Tokugawa Shogun, Keiki, to accept the restoration of power the year before in order to resolve political chaos that the Shogunate could no longer control.

Emperor Meiji, who ascended the throne in 1867, and reigned until his death in 1912, was a firm supporter of Western ideas, unlike the Tokugawa seclusionists. He helped Japan to emerge from feudalism into a modern age, quickly transforming the nation into an Eastern superpower. Meiji's centralized bureaucracy replaced the balance of power between the Shogunate and the autonomous domains. The military authority of the samurai class was replaced by a conscript army, based on the Prussian model. Many official missions (some in the form of foreign exchange students!) were dispatched to examine Western countries.

The sudden modernization was not universally embraced. Importing Western philosophies, several of which contradicted long-held traditions, outraged many. Others, however, enthusiastically viewed anything Western as the new ideal.

As Japan's seclusionist policy ended, it became clear that other nations viewed it as a backward nation. To correct this, the leadership devised a new policy of "Fukoku Kyohei" (lit. "Enrichment of the Nation, Strengthening of the Army") in the belief that the rapid enlargement of trade and the establishment of foreign colonies were essential for Japan's survival in the modern age. In other words, they stole a copy of the Western powers' playbook.

The new government also cooperated closely with "zaibatsu" --- major merchant families and other plutocrats. By 1872, private banks were established, and the government offered for sale, at low prices, many previously government-run enterprises, such as mining and shipping, to prominent zaibatsu houses such as Mitsui and Mitsubishi (the same giants which prosper to this day). These successful ventures not only boosted the economy, but also played a major role in enhancing the nation's military capabilities.

### **The Sino-Japanese War**

From before the official declaration of war on August 1, 1894 to the Treaty of Shimonoseki on April 17, 1895, China and Japan battled over a dispute for control of Korea. Japan's victory in the Sino-Japanese War symbolized the weakness and decline of China's Qing dynasty in the wake of the successful modernization of Meiji Restoration Japan. Fearing Russian expansion into China and Korea, Japan looked outward for foreign conquests, which would preserve its status in the region as a major military force. Yi dynasty Korea sought to preserve its traditional seclusion and tributary relationship with China, which in turn strove to protect its principal vassal. However, Japan's military might was too much for China.

### **The Russo-Japanese War**

The rivalry between Russia and Japan developed in Korea after the Sino-Japanese War. Russia was also interested in extending its influence to Manchuria. Japanese officials recommended talks to arrange for "Russia to recognize Japan's interests in Korea in return for Japanese recognition of Russian interests in Manchuria." (Hane) Many negotiations followed, but the failure to reach an agreement infuriated the Japanese government, and on February 4, 1904, Japan

notified the Russian government of her intention to resort to military actions if necessary. At Port Arthur, a Japanese fleet destroyed several Russian warships. A few days later, on February 10, 1904, Japan declared war.

From the start, Japan had a clear military advantage: more troops (nearly one million) and warships, and easier lines of supply and reinforcement. Although Russia had much larger forces at home, they faced huge logistical problems in deploying and supporting them.

A series of battles followed, both on land and at sea. Each encounter resulted in thousands of casualties for both sides. In March of 1905, the biggest land battle of the war was fought at Mukden. Over the course of ten days, 300,000 Japanese troops faced 310,000 Russian soldiers. Japan finally took Mukden, at a cost of 70,000 men. Russia lost 90,000.

The final battle took place in the Tsushima Straits. On May 27, 1905, Russian Admiral Rozhdestvenski's Baltic Fleet (which started its journey back in October of the previous year) finally arrived, to face a fleet commanded by Admiral Togo that was well prepared to fight. In twenty-four hours, the Japanese fleet sank twenty Russian ships and captured five. It was clear that Japan was winning. Growing internal political pressure, as well as a strong recommendation by US President Roosevelt, placed the Russian Government in a position where the only option was to surrender. On September 5, 1905 in Portsmouth, New Hampshire U.S.A., a treaty was signed ending the Russo-Japanese War and garnering US President Roosevelt a Nobel Peace Prize in 1906 for orchestrating the event.

Japan's victory, however, cost her more than 200,000 dead and wounded. Still, by the end of the Russo-Japanese War, Japan had achieved a goal set in the previously mentioned "Fukoku Kyohei" policy - to be firmly established as a major military and political power.

### **The Anti-War Movement**

For the most part, the Japanese public supported the war effort with enthusiasm and often exaggerated patriotism. However, a small number of religious groups and socialist political activists loudly voiced their anti-war sentiments.

Tokunaga Ransui is loosely based on one such real-life socialist, and the events surrounding the anarchist's execution are in fact directly related to his life. Kotoku Shusui (1871-1911) was a leader of the new socialist movement, and co-founded a newspaper called the "Heimin Shinbun" (The Commoners' Newspaper), which "proclaimed egalitarianism, socialism, and pacifism as their guiding principles." (Hane)

In 1907, Kotoku encouraged the Socialist party to adopt a much more aggressive posture, and in June, 1908, "at a meeting of the socialists, two red flags with the words 'Anarchism' and 'Anarchic Communism' were hoisted." (Hane) It is not surprising that Kotoku's preachings created extremists, such as one Miyashita Takichi (1875-1911), "a factory worker who came up with the idea of assassinating the Emperor after reading a book on anarchism." (Hane) Miyashita tried to get support from Kotoku and his followers. However, Kotoku was away visiting the US (in Berkeley, where he became acquainted with refugee anarchists from Russia), and by the time he returned to Japan, "he had become a syndicalist and was convinced that the way to bring about a

socialist society was through general strikes rather than individual acts of terrorism.” (Hane)

In May, 1910, Miyashita and his fellow conspirators were arrested, before they could plan their assassination of the Emperor. Also arrested were Kotoku and other socialists who had nothing to do with Miyashita's plans. In all, “twenty-four were charged with treason, twelve, including Miyashita and Kotoku, were executed, and the rest were sentenced to life imprisonment.” (Hane)

**Trivia:**

Ransui's room contains a portrait of Mikhail Aleksandrovich Bakunin (1814-1876), a Russian anarchist.

Ransui also reads a Japanese translation of a book by Petr Alekseevich Kropotkin (1842-1921), another Russian anarchist.

**The Black Death**

The Plague (known by many as “Black Death,” “Black Plague,” “Bubonic Plague,” etc.) is caused by a bacterium called *Yersinia pestis* and transmitted from rodent to rodent by infected fleas. It is of course well known that millions of people across Europe and Asia died from the pandemic during three major waves. The first struck central Europe (Constantinople), China (Canton, Shantung) and Japan in the 6th century. The second wave devastated Europe and China in the 14th century, eventually killing almost half the populations of both.

The third ravaged Asia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This wave of disease went on to kill over 20 million people throughout China, Southeast Asia, India, and Japan. It also popped up on Pacific islands such as Hawaii and finally reached San Francisco in 1900.

When “Black Death” invaded Japan in the 1890s, the government recommended that every household keep a cat (as cats do not get ill from eating plague-infested mice).

**Biological Warfare**

In this film, the “Secret Police” is in possession of this deadly germ. This bears an uncanny resemblance to the infamous Unit 731 of the WWII era, a secret government biological-warfare organization, which was formed in the mid 1930's after the Manchurian Incident. Other parts of the plot contain many elements from the circumstances surrounding the fate of this horrible group. The organization, under the direction of one physician who had become interested in the possibilities of germ warfare in the 1920's, conducted intensive experiments (mainly centering on plague and anthrax) in newly built labs near Harbin.

After tests had been performed on thousands of unwilling human subjects, in 1942, the Unit commenced large-scale germ warfare on Chinese soldiers and civilians; the deaths numbered in the tens of thousands. During the last stage of the war in the Pacific, the Japanese destroyed the Unit 731 compounds, and the Unit's head ordered the remaining human subjects murdered in order to destroy evidence of the Unit's secret operations.

### **In Memoriam**

By the end of 1997, around the time we went into production of the VHS release for this film, we learned that Itami Juzo, one of the principal actors (Tokunaga Ransui, the anarchist), had died from an apparent suicide, and Fujita Toshiya, the director of both Lady Snowblood movies, died from liver failure. Mr. Itami, one of Japan's most celebrated filmmakers, was known internationally for his production, directing and acting mastery in such films as "Tampopo," "The Funeral" and "A Taxing Woman." He was 64. Mr. Fujita was a celebrated director, writer and actor in Japan and worked steadily up until his death. He was 65.

A considerable amount of historical research was necessary in translating Samurai Cinema's films and in compiling the information contained here. Among the many sources we have consulted, the following were especially helpful:

- 1) "Tokugawa Japan - The Social and Economic Antecedents of Modern Japan" Chie Nakane, Shinzaburoo Ooishi and Conrad Totman, eds. Univ. of Tokyo Press, 1990
- 2) "Japan - A Historical Survey" Mikiso Hane. Scribner, 1972
- 3) "A History of Japan: 1615 - 1867" George Sanson. Stanford Univ. Press, 1963
- 4) "The Emergence of Meiji Japan" Marius Jansen, ed. Cambridge University Press, 1995