

**Organization of the Defense
of the Ezo Republic by French Officer Jules Brunet
During the *Boshin* Civil War
(1868–1869)**

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Abstract

During the Bakumatsu period (1853–1867), under pressure from Western countries, the Tokugawa shogunate was forced to end Japan's policy of self-isolation and conclude unequal treaties with a number of Western powers. This caused deep discontent in the country, affecting various segments of the population. In the context of the political crisis, the shogunate launched a series of reforms aimed at strengthening its power, including military power.

Great Britain secretly supported the opposition forces in the south of the country, and France made a bet on the shogunate, expressing its readiness to support its reforms. As a result, in January 1867, a French military mission consisting of 15 people arrived in the Japanese port of Yokohama, commanded by Captain Charles Chanoine, who had previously led French troops in China during the Second Opium War (1856–1860). The purpose of the mission was to modernize the obsolete military system of the Tokugawa shogunate.

However, the recommendations of the French military advisers were not fully realized, because, after the outbreak of the civil war in January 1868 and the defeat of the supporters of the shogun, Emperor Meiji ordered the mission to leave Japan in October. A number of members of the mission, who did not obey this order, led by Jules Brunet, along with supporters of the shogunate, took part in the creation of the Republic of Ezo (1868–1869) on the island of Hokkaido.

Keywords: Jules Brunet, “the last samurai”, Boshin War, Ezo Republic, French military mission, Bakumatsu.

During the Bakumatsu period (1853–1867), under pressure from Western countries, the Tokugawa shogunate was forced to end Japan’s policy of self-isolation and conclude unequal treaties with a number of Western powers. This caused deep discontent in the country, affecting various segments of the population. The anti-shogun opposition started to form, uniting around the Imperial court and supporting the restoration of the emperor’s power and the abolishment of the shogunate. The Western powers maneuvered, trying to strengthen their influence upon Japan: Great Britain secretly supported the opposition forces – the Satsuma and Chōshū domains in the south of the country, while France made a bet on the shogunate, expressing its readiness to support its reforms [Ootsuka 1952, p. 352].

As a result, in January 1867, a French military mission consisting of 15 people arrived in the Japanese port of Yokohama, commanded by Captain Charles Chanoine, who had previously led French troops in China during the Second Opium War (1856–1860) [Chanoine 1907, p. 5–6]. After several months of becoming familiarized with Japanese troops in the military training facility near the village of Otamura (not far from the contemporary Harbor View Park), where the members of the mission lived alongside Japanese servicemen, the French developed a concept of reforming the military system of the shogunate. The recommendations and suggestions were presented to Shogun Yoshinobu in spring of 1867 and to the nation’s military minister Matsudaira Norikata in June same year in the form of the so-called *White Book* by Charles Chanoine, compiled with participation of Jules Brunet [Takahashi 1968, p. 156].

The shogunate did not manage to fully realize its plans in accordance with the recommendations of the French military advisers: in January 1868, a civil war began, where the supporters of the shogunate were defeated, and Emperor Meiji ordered the mission to leave Japan in October. Therefore, the French officers spent around a year and a half

in the country, of which they spent around a year solving the tasks they were faced with [Polak 2001, p. 81].

Despite the short stay of the military mission in Japan, it did leave a trace. For example, the French officers managed to create the elite “Training Battalion” (*Denshūtai*) numbering 800 men, with the student of Brunet, Ootori Keisuke, assigned its commander. They managed to develop a plan to establish the Ministry of Defense of Japan, as well as to lay the groundwork of a contemporary system of physical training of Japanese troops and, more broadly, of physical education in general [Okubo 2009, p. 4].

Captain Chanoine reported to the French military minister about the departure of all members of the mission in two groups on October 15 and 28, 1868. However, in reality, the second group of eight officers, led by Jules Brunet, stayed in Japan. On October 4, they left their place of residence in Yokohama under the pretext of visiting an arsenal in Yokosuka, but went to Shinagawa instead, where the fleet under the command of Admiral Enomoto Takeaki, who intended to continue fighting the emperor’s regime, was stationed [Sawa 1987, p. 265].

So as not to be considered a deserter, on the same day, Brunet submitted a resignation request to Captain Chanoine. He sent another letter to Emperor Napoleon III, in which he explained the reasons for his decision to join the resistance: the samurai left in the north invited him to become a commander of their troops, and their potential victory in the war would meet France’s national interests, allowing it to gain a foothold in the region.¹

In early December, the fleet of Enomoto reached the island of Hokkaido, then known as Ezo. On their way to the north, the resistance army was joined by Ootori Keisuke, whose battalion (*Denshūtai*) became the strike force during the capture of the port of Hakodate. After capturing the entire island by the end of the year, Enomoto made the last attempt to

¹ Letter of Jules Brunet to Emperor Napoleon III, October 4, 1868: https://web.archive.org/web/20181106160122/http://www.geocities.jp/r12_44104_b/letter/brunet.htm

submit a petition to the emperor to allow him to develop Hokkaido and support the traditions of the samurai there, but his request was rejected [Black 1881, pp. 240–241].

After that, Hakodate was turned into the capital and the key defensive point of the first democratic republic in Asia, established on January 27, 1869, and named after its location – the Ezo Republic [Hoshi 2011, pp. 145–146].

The structure of the state was modelled after that of the United States, but only the samurai were granted the right to vote. As a result of the first election to take place in the territory of Japan, Enomoto Takeaki became president. The position of the defense minister was given to Ootori Keisuke, Hijikata Toshizo, former deputy commander of Shinsengumi, became his vice minister, and Jules Brunet was appointed military expert and minister of foreign affairs [Ootori 1998, p. 71].

In reality, the powers of the French officer were much broader than the official ones. He not only led negotiations with foreign powers aimed at the international recognition of the newly established state but was also building a multi-layered system of defense of the city centered around the five-cornered fortress Goryokaku, built several years before these events to defend the Tsugaru Strait from Russians. The work to fortify Goryokaku under the guidance of Brunet was not limited to digging moats around the fortress. Great effort was paid to place artillery batteries, build numerous ramparts outside the fortress and protect all approaches to it. As Ootori Keisuke noted, the work had completely been finished by early April 1869 [Ibid., pp. 78–80].

On March 28, 1869, Brunet composed a letter to his former commander, Captain Chanoine, in which he gave a detailed account of the current state of affairs in the republic and its defensive capabilities. Brunet reported that the republican government, headed by Enomoto, did everything possible to settle the conflict peacefully, but the emperor ignored all requests for direct negotiations, setting forth unrealistic preconditions of complete capitulation of the republic and giving up all weapons within one month, or, otherwise, a military operation would be unavoidable. Such conditions were defined by Iwakura Tomomi,

but Brunet believed that they had been suggested by the British ambassador, Harry Parkes, whose main goal was to weaken French positions in Japan.²

Brunet wrote about plans to create defensive positions on six fortifications held by the Ezo Republic. Even if the emperor's government decides to send its army to attack, then, according to the French officer's opinion, more than 6,000 soldiers would be required, but, in Aomori, no such number of government troops was observed. Ezo had 3,000 soldiers to defend the republic, while its territory was 90 by 50 *ri* (ca. 360 by 200 km).

Brunet notes that the supporters of the republic serve in the administration of Hakodate and maintain law and order in the city. Out of these 3,000 soldiers, about a half had been trained by the French military mission, but another part was recruited from among the volunteers of the former shogunate army, and they were studying western battle tactics under the guidance of former students of the French military officers. Most of all, Brunet insisted on the necessity to maintain strict military discipline.

The training was done using the translations of French military manuals, as well as French regulations and codices of military organization, military court, and the military ministry. That is, the training copied the program aimed at the shogunate forces and conducted by the French mission before the beginning of the civil war. Besides, each of the eight 400-strong battalions was given excerpts of the most important points from the military instructions and proposals introduced by the mission's officers.

Under the guidance of Brunet, four French officers served, each of them commanding a brigade of 800 men: Cazeneuve, Marlin, Fortant, and Bouffier. The latter also commanded the other eight French officers who had decided to join the republic. In order to duly improve the

² Letter of Jules Brunet to Captain Charles Chanoine, March 28, 1869: https://web.archive.org/web/20181106160122/http://www.geocities.jp/r12_44104_b/letter/brunet.htm

military command and the quality of performing tasks by the entire army, operational headquarters were established in the middle of the Goryokaku fortress, where stands were erected to display the training manuals and the defensive plans.

In the same letter, Brunet writes about his order to deploy the 3,000-strong army if the emperor's forces are dispatched to one or several places simultaneously. He lists more than 20 place names with clear instructions stating which battalion and under whose command is to move out in the case of a military threat. Meanwhile, Brunet believes it necessary to leave no more than 200 soldiers in the very center of the republic, the Goryokaku fortress, as, according to his words, it looks very reliable, partly due to the conducted renovation. At the very end, Brunet reiterates his firm intention to defend Ezo, as this territory is not merely a temporary defensive base, but the foundation for a future northern republic.

One of the French military officers described Brunet's actions as follows: "... the border, the political leadership, the fortifications, the army – nothing happens without his consent. The Japanese are puppets whom he manipulates with great skill... He conducted something of the 1789 revolution in this valiant new Japan; by choosing the leaders and the officials of the republic by their merit, and not by their family background – these are unthinkable things for such country!" [Sims 1998, p. 122].

Meanwhile, the emperor's troops were strengthening their positions in the Japanese "mainland," and in April 1869, naval and ground forces were sent to Hokkaido. The battle of Hakodate, taking place in June, became the last battle for the supporters of the shogunate. The republican forces were defeated by the 7,000-strong government army. The Goryokaku fortress was surrounded, and Enomoto signed the instrument of surrender on June 26, 1869 [Héon 2010, pp. 88–89].

Brunet and other officers managed to evacuate from Hokkaido in early June on a small ship and headed to the French embassy in Yokohama, from which they were extradited to France in September the same year. The new Japanese government demanded a severe punishment for

Brunet for his participation in the Boshin War, but his actions became widely known and supported by the French. Due to this, according to the decision of a military court, Brunet was only suspended from military service for five months, joined the army again in February 1870, and participated in the Franco-Prussian War the same year [Polak 2001, p. 88].

Brunet's friendly relations with the mission's captain, Charles Chanoine, with whom he was corresponding for half a year since his resignation and to whom he reported about the state of affairs in the Ezo Republic, only strengthened after Brunet's return to France. A few months later, Charles was the best man at Brunet's wedding, and, in 1898, when, during the Dreyfus affair, Chanoine was appointed French military minister, he picked his former subordinate officer as his deputy and head of the General Staff, which became the peak of their joint military career [Héon 2010, pp. 104–105].

Several years after the events in Hokkaido, his former ally, Admiral Enomoto, became the Japanese Imperial Navy minister and, later, the foreign minister. Using his influence in the government, he attained not only amnesty for Brunet in Japan, but even two awards for him – the orders of the Rising Sun and the Sacred Treasure [Shinohara 1983, p. 281].

After the end of the Boshin War, the new Japanese government continued to reform the military in accordance with the plans proposed by the French specialists, due to which, in 1872, it asked France to dispatch a second military mission to Japan, which worked in the country in 1872–1880.

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This article was originally published in Russian. The reference for primary publication is: Naumov S. S. (2023) Organizatsiya oborony respubliki Edzo frantsuzskim ofitserom Julem Brune v period grajdanskoi voiny Bosin (1868–1869) [Organization of the Defense of the Ezo Republic by French Officer Jules Brunet During the Boshin Civil War (1868–1869)]. *History and Culture of Japan. Issue 15. Orientalia et Classica Series. VII (LXXVIII)*. Moscow: HSE University, pp. 447–453.