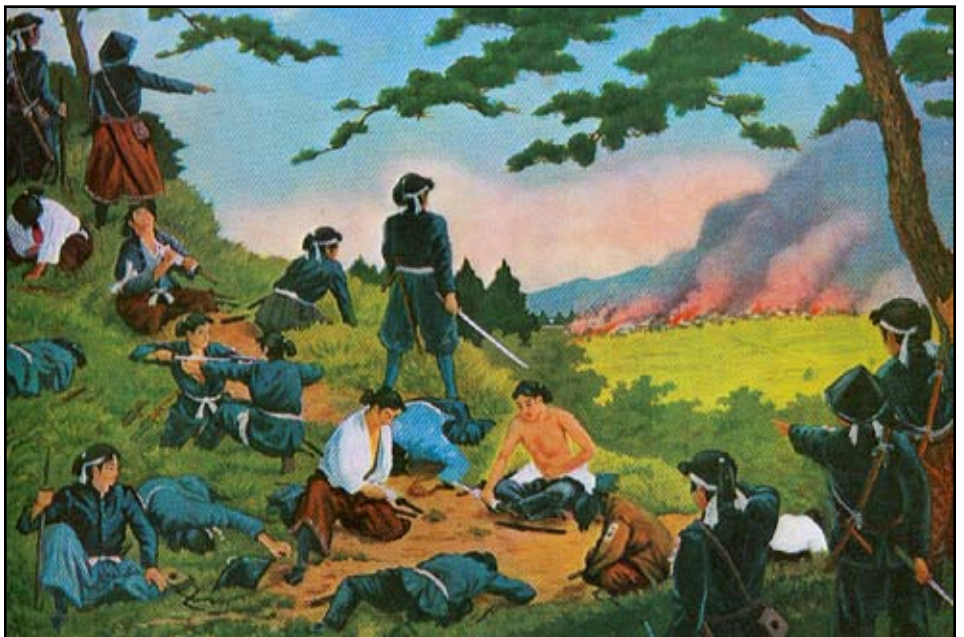


# Boy Soldiers

MY photo of the old Mukaitaki Mat right doesn't do justice to the sprawling *ryokan* at Aizu-Wakamatsu in Fukushima Prefecture. But the Mukaitaki Inn, a registered cultural treasure, was where Yoshi and I stayed and bathed as we explored nearby sites associated with an obscure battle in Japan's 1868 civil war. This war, mainly fought far to the southwest, overthrew the last Shogun, 15th in the long Tokugawa line, and restored to true power the reigning Emperor, Hirohito's grandfather. As America had learned a few years earlier in a bloody civil war of its own, modern warfare with its deadly cannon and firearms had arrived. The Aizu *samurai* clan, traditional to the bone, wielded mostly swords and lances in support of the Shogun. Of course they were doomed, and of course their troops included teenage firebrands, school-boys who today are still honored for their sacrifice in this lost cause. At right, on an Aizu-Wakamatsu hilltop, Japanese tourists gather before the graves of nineteen boy soldiers who fought, then retreated in the face of the Emperor's well-equipped army. The boys killed themselves in despair on this spot. Actually there were twenty of them, but one boy's nanny went looking for his body, found him barely alive and nursed him back to health. He lived to be an honored old man, the only living eyewitness to the mass suicide scene as depicted in the painting at right. Why can't Japanese soldiers just go home after being defeated in battle? Often, even as recently as World War II, they



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can't. Oh, the shame of it all! Better to be dead. Likewise, the Aizu youngsters in 1868 were young and stupid. From their hilltop perch, they saw fires burning in town and thought the castle was ablaze. All was lost. They assisted each other in killing themselves. The castle survived. Some years later it burned to the ground as wooden structures often do. Most of Japan's castles are just ruins. This one, fortunately, had retained its original architectural drawings, so bureaucrats who oversee such things allowed it to be rebuilt. It is a museum now, full of mementoes of times when *samurai* ruled. The politics of the 1868 civil war are interesting. The battle cry of the Emperor's troops was "Expel the barbarians!" You see, it was the military dictatorship, the Tokugawa Shogunate, that openly welcomed Westerners and their technology into Japan in the wake of Commodore Perry's sobering "Black Ships" back in the 1850s. The Emperor's sup-



porters latched onto the xenophobic slogan because it resonated with widespread antforeigner opinion. But all was not as it seemed. As it turned out, the barbarians were embraced by the far-sighted victors, not expelled. The young Aizu warriors died in defense of a policy that soon became official, and Japan became

a global powerhouse, to both the admiration and regret of the world. By the way, Yoshi doesn't appreciate castles as much as I do, but she likes autumn-colored maple leaves. Below, the maple's limbs hang over the Aizu-Wakamatsu castle's moat, so the photo ties into all this pretty well. Nice shot, Jackson.

