Yamagata at the End of the Shogunate

In 1867, shogun Tokugawa Yoshinobu returned political power to the Imperial Court. The new government further demanded that Tokugawa lands also be returned to the Imperial Court, increasing the likelihood of resistance from the former shogunate. After the Battle of Toba-Fushimi (1868), the new government decided to attack Edo Castle, and attention focused on the movements of the Ou domains. The Mizuno family, a line of hereditary vassals who had long served the shogunate, was particularly distrusted by the new government. In 1868, the lord of Yamagata, Mizuno Tadahiro, and his father Tadakiyo were ordered to appear in Kyoto. They went to the capital, pledged loyalty to the emperor, and were effectively put under house arrest.

At the beginning of the Boshin War in 1868, the new government forces initially targeted the Aizu and Shonai domains as enemies. The Yamagata domain was ordered to dispatch troops to assist in the subjugation of Shonai, but Shonai was extremely powerful, and the small Yamagata domain avoided direct conflict. However, in April, they were attacked in battles such as the Nagasaki-Ochiai guchi engagement (1868), suffering casualties including Captain Okubo Denpei.

The Yonezawa and Sendai domains' attempts at peace negotiations with the new government fell apart. The domains of the Tohoku region then formed the Ou Domain Alliance to oppose the new government, launching a full-scale war in the region.