THE PRUSSIANS OF THE EAST: SAMURAI, BUSHIDO, AND JAPANESE HONOR IN THE GERMAN IMAGINATION, 1905-1945

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During the spring of 1944, the Deutsch-Japanische Gesellschaft, an organization devoted to improving and expanding German-Japanese cultural and intellectual engagement, solicited the German public for their thoughts and impressions about Japan through an essay contest. Participants were asked to identify the political, economic, and cultural values and institutions that united Germany and Japan against the United States, and — by most accounts — the results were better than expected. Out of the total submitted essays, 420 were judged to have met the minimum requirements for the contest; these submissions originated from across Germany and its occupied territories and had been written by a fairly diverse demographic cross-section of the German nation. Professional men, students, soldiers, housewives, and even a few foreign nationals all participated in the exercise. The essays themselves range from short, crude polemics written on scrap paper to elegantly argued theses, carefully typed and edited; in effect, what these essays represent to the historian is a survey — perhaps not comprehensive but nevertheless still useful — of German public opinion towards the Japanese during the last years of the Second World War.

When reading through the surviving essays, one is most immediately struck by the degree of consensus among the essayists. None of the archived essays question the central premise of the contest — that there was indeed some essential common cause between Germany and Japan — and only a few locate the basis for this relationship exclusively within the wartime alliance. Rather, the overwhelming majority of the essayists presented this relationship as emanating from a deeply embedded, shared cultural identity as “heroic” or “martial” peoples, a shared identity that was understood to set them apart, not only from their American adversary, but indeed from much of the rest of the world. In excavating this shared identity, most of the essayists intended to convey that the Germans and Japanese shared a common set of principles and values — specifically framed as masculine and
martial — that not only distinguished them as particularly chivalrous warriors, but also united them as allies.¹

At the same time, it is also clear that the essayists were not simply regurgitating state-generated propaganda. Indeed, several of the essayists were noticeably ambivalent as to the ability of the state to fully communicate the true depth of the German-Japanese alliance. Anni Haderer, a war widow, wrote in the letter accompanying her submission that she had initially been hesitant to contribute, given her lack of formal training on the subject: “Yet the longer I thought about it — and I could not let it go — the more I came to the realization that the voices of ordinary people should make themselves heard here too, in order to show the leading figures of the allied nations [Germany and Japan] that their alliance, their common goals, and their common fight was supported by the will and the understanding of the Volk.”² Many of her fellow essayists clearly felt similarly; the amount of energy and effort put into the submissions suggests a sincerity of purpose that runs counter to the image of the German-Japanese alliance during the Second World War as “hollow,” as purely strategic and lacking in substance.³ Instead, many of the essayists expressed the belief that there was a purpose to the German-Japanese alliance beyond the sphere of military coordination and mutual support, and that the basis for this alliance was not political, but rather cultural.

Because the German-Japanese relationship was not premised on a formal imperial or colonial arrangement, its development over the course of the first half of the twentieth century was distinct from that of most other contemporaneous relationships between European and non-European states. This lack of a formal political or economic system of dependency has led historians to overlook the dynamism and diversity of German engagement with Japanese culture throughout this period, whether in the associational structure of organizations like the Deutsch-Japanische Gesellschaft (DJG) or in other sociocultural milieux.⁴ In my work I explore how this atypical relationship generated a form of cultural reception that was significantly different from most other contemporary examples of transcultural engagement. Unlike the discursive mode of Orientalism, for example, which centered on the identification and reification of alterity, the language and tropes deployed in Germany by both German and Japanese intellectuals, thinkers, and scholars explicitly sought to make Japanese history and culture more immediately recognizable and sympathetic to a German audience.


² Bundesarchiv (hereafter: BArch), R 64IV/46, p. 132.


In focusing my research, I was particularly interested in why martial culture occupied such a central position within this rhetoric about German-Japanese cultural affinities. My dissertation, which engages with the reception and representation of Japanese martial culture in Germany between the Russo-Japanese War and the end of the Second World War, analyzes the evolution of a specific narrative about Japanese culture that was premised on the notion of German-Japanese mutual legibility and oriented around images and signifiers of the martial, the masculine, and the heroic. This particular narrative of Japanese history and culture proved to be both incredibly durable — persisting over multiple regime changes in Germany — and successful in influencing German rhetoric about Japan because it seemed to offer a solution to the essential problem of modernity, specifically how to reconcile the opportunities afforded by modernity with its perceived cultural costs. For an evolving segment of German society, especially after the crisis of the First World War, the idea of Japan fostered by these narratives was attractive because it purported to offer the model of a sustainable synthesis between modernity and tradition, an alternative national modernity built on, and protected by, aristocratic ideals of martial virtue.

I.

Although the German-Japanese relationship was not an imperial one, it was nevertheless the product of a world order centered on patterns of imperialist thought. The first part of this statement should not require much explanation; although Japan did sign an “unequal treaty” with Prussia in 1861, which remained in effect until 1899, German diplomatic and economic influence in Japan — whether formal or informal — was markedly less significant than that wielded by either Britain or the United States. The statement’s second part, however, deserves a bit more attention, for it speaks more to global processes of exchange, reaction, and contestation than it does to formal structures of power. Indeed, the German-Japanese relationship may not have been based on imperial structures of control and violence, but many of the key concepts and ideological structures reaffirming it emerged out of the era of high imperialism during the late nineteenth century. Key among these was a hierarchical vision of civilization embedded within Western European concepts of progress and modernity. Closely associated with this concept was the notion that international imperial competition was both necessary and useful and that, moreover, falling

5 It bears noting that this rhetoric was not the only way in which Germans engaged with Japan. For example, there was the ongoing German appreciation for Japanese innovation in the various fields of experimental science, particularly in medicine: Hoi-Eun Kim, Doctors of Empire: Medical and Cultural Encounters between Imperial Germany and Meiji Japan (Toronto, 2014).


7 Sebastian Conrad, Globalisation and the Nation in Imperial Germany (Cambridge, 2010).
behind in this global scramble for resources, capital, and labor was itself confirmation of a people’s or nation’s “inferior status.”

This ideological framework, which was premised on Western domination and on the tacit agreement that modernization was functionally equivalent to Westernization, began to experience substantive challenges around the turn of the twentieth century. Most notably, Japan’s victory over Russia in 1905 introduced the possibility of non-Western political and cultural polities successfully challenging Western pretensions to innate superiority. Further cracks in the global imperial edifice appeared after the First World War, which resulted in the increased circulation of ideological alternatives to the Enlightenment ideals of civilization, liberalism, and democracy. These alternative methods of ordering the world could be political — as with fascism and communism — or they could be geographic — as with the increased visibility of culturally defined pan-movements — but they all were fundamentally reactions against the imperialist model of globalization. This hollowed-out world order — wherein the technological advances and social-intellectual networks allowing for greater levels of global exchange and connectedness remained intact, despite the destabilization of the political framework that had created them — allowed for the formation of a new kind of transcultural relationship between Germany and Japan, which was built on a shared ambivalence towards Western modernity.

The image of Japan that emerged from this rhetoric was distinctly coded as masculine, as aristocratic, and as socially and racially homogenous. To a certain extent, the three constituent elements of this identity-complex were interdependent, as embodied in the archetypical figure of the samurai, who was understood to represent an idealized hegemonic masculinity. Within this framework, the ideals of bushido, literally “the way of the warrior,” the Japanese term for the ethos of the samurai, were transformed from an aristocratic worldview into a standard of comportment against which individuals could be judged within the modern world. This transition was important both in Japan, where bushido and its “invented traditions” were mobilized for the state, and in Germany, where the supposedly

8 Sebastian Conrad, Globalisation and the Nation in Imperial Germany (Cambridge, 2010).
9 H. Glenn Penny, Objects of Culture: Ethnology and Ethnographic Museums in Imperial Germany (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002); Andrew Zimmerman, Anthropology and Antihumanism in Imperial Germany (Chicago, 2001).
11 Kris Manjapra, Age of Entanglement: German and Indian Intellectuals across Empire (Cambridge, MA, 2014).
seamless transformation of the samurai into the modern soldier was envied. This gendering of Japanese culture as specifically hypermasculine enabled the samurai to be positioned in parallel with similarly hegemonic figures of German masculinity: the Germanic warrior, the mythic hero, and the Prussian soldier.

Within the context of German anxiety caused by evolving gender norms during the first half of the twentieth century, the samurai was legible as the literal guardian of proper relations between the genders against modern social phenomena like feminism and the so-called crisis of masculinity. This also helps to explain the relative invisibility of non-hegemonic gender constructs in German depictions of Japanese martial culture; the dominant mode of gender relations was not the heterosexual couple, but rather the homosocial Männerbund. Along with this selective erasure of women and marginal or “deviant” masculinities, narratives about Japanese martial culture within Germany also selectively obscured elements of Japanese history and society that contradicted claims as to the coherence of Japanese culture. Minority and marginalized ethnic and social groups effectively disappeared, political and cultural differences were minimized, and specific eras and events from Japanese history were privileged over others in order to construct a representation of Japanese history lacking substantive conflict and oriented disproportionately around the samurai. This depiction of Japanese history and culture may have been essentialized, but that was precisely what made it attractive in Germany; this romanticized depiction of Japanese society — ethnically, socially, and politically homogenous — seemed to confirm the suspicion that German weakness was the result of the presence of foreign peoples and cultural influences.

This identification of the samurai as the ultimate arbiters of Japanese culture was not simply an argument about Japan or Germany, however, but touched on a larger discussion concerning the fate of national culture in the modern era. A consistent thread throughout depictions of Japanese culture was the belief that national culture as a discrete entity was under attack, either by foreign elements active within the domestic arena or by an international hegemon. The samurai were therefore not just the aristocratic elites of Japan’s past; they were also the literal guardians of Japanese culture and values. By framing the samurai in this manner, the authors contributing to this rhetoric made their interests and priorities more broadly relevant to the ongoing debate in Germany about national culture and its relationship

12 For more on bushido in Japan, see Oleg Benesch, Inventing the Way of the Samurai: Nationalism, Internationalism, and Bushidô in Modern Japan (Oxford, 2014).
14 Anette Dietrich and Ljiljana Heise, eds., Männlichkeitskonstruktionen im Nationalsozialismus (Frankfurt am Main, 2013).
to modernity. It was no coincidence that the German valorization of Japanese martial culture became so exclusively identified with right-wing and völkisch politics after the First World War; it was understood to offer a possible answer to the problem of modernity that proposed to minimize the culturally homogenizing effects of global modernity by reaffirming the value of national identity.

In defining Germany and Japan as “kindred” cultures, this rhetoric shifted the bulk of its comparative work from a one-to-one binary to a model that juxtaposed Germany and Japan together against a shifting series of cultural and political counterparts. The most significant and lasting of these counterparts was the idea of an emergent international or global civilizational framework based on the virtues and ideals of a universal modernity. This Weltkultur was commonly associated with the Enlightenment and with the world system of liberalism, capitalism, and free-market trade. By positioning both Germany and Japan as cultural antagonists to this system, the individuals espousing this rhetoric meant to critique this system as inadequately sensitive to the value of national cultural identity. In practical effect, this transcultural relationship meant to offer an alternative model of modernity that was not predicated on national deculturation.

This conceptual framing, which took as one of its basic assumptions the shared martial character of the Germans and the Japanese, rearranged the hierarchical timeline of imperialism — whereby peoples and cultures were temporalized according to their relative status as “civilized” — into a dialectical model. The key concept that emerged again and again was synthesis — between modernity and tradition, between Kultur and Zivilisation — with the subtext that a culture unable to reconcile the two opposing forces would inevitably be subsumed into one of the two existing poles of international modernity. Germany and Japan, by virtue of their intermediary geographic and cultural positions between East and West, were thus uniquely placed to observe and to judge. To put this in slightly different terms, the Anglo-American liberal world order was the West, the Russian-Chinese “Oriental” world was the East, and Germany and Japan were stuck — for better or worse — in the middle. This model of cultural hierarchy thus situated both Japan and Germany at the fulcrum between two opposing identities, possessing elements of both and yet exclusively associated with neither. It was the recognition of a shared German-Japanese Sonderweg (special path) that allowed for the argument that Japanese culture had something worthy to offer

15 In thinking through this relationship I was particularly inspired by: H. Glenn Penny, Kindred by Choice: Germans and American Indians since 1800 (Chapel Hill, NC, 2013).
to Germany, and that specific elements of Japanese culture could be legible and sympathetic to nationally-minded Germans. For many Germans, it was the samurai and bushido that seemed to provide the “key” to this transcultural legibility.

Ultimately, the persuasiveness of these arguments was dependent on the outcome of real-world events; although the German-Japanese relationship was not politically determined, it was nevertheless shaped by political outcomes. Chief among these were the three major wars that demarcate the significant periods of interaction: the Russo-Japanese War; the First World War; and the Second World War. Whereas the Russo-Japanese War provided the foundation for German interest in the “upstart” Japanese and their unprecedented ability to synthesize technological modernity with cultural authenticity, the aftermath of the First World War served to mobilize this interest along specific political and ideological trajectories. The Second World War formalized this relationship and elevated the visibility of Japanese martial culture within German media over the course of the war, to the extent that — after the German defeat at Stalingrad — the Japanese seemed better able to perform the National Socialist ethos of loyalty and self-sacrifice than were the Germans themselves.

II.

It was the Russo-Japanese War of 1904/05 that, more than any other single event, enabled the development of this German romantic rhetoric about Japan. Before the Russo-Japanese War, the relationship between Germany and Japan was distinctly one-sided, with Japanese interest in German culture, technology, and social institutions far exceeding that expressed on the opposite side. The Japanese defeat of Russia, however, precipitated a reevaluation of Japan within Germany, especially with respect to Japan’s position as a politically and technologically sophisticated modern nation-state. Although the German state was, like all of the other Great Powers, ostensibly a neutral observer of the conflict, the German press was deeply invested in explaining the meaning and significance of events unfolding in Manchuria. The racist rhetoric of the “yellow peril” (gelbe Gefahr) may have maintained a certain visibility within the highest echelons of the German state, yet a competing narrative emerged among elements of the German educated middle class (Bildungsbürgertum) that was framed instead around the problem of whether Russia or Japan better fit the mold of a modern state: politically and industrially, but also culturally.

17 It is not my intention to revisit the historiographic debate of the German — or, for that matter, the Japanese — political Sonderweg. At the same time, the German conviction in their own exceptionality (Sonderbewusstsein) was integral to this way of engaging with Japan. See: Frank Usbeck, Fellow Tribesmen: the Image of Native Americans, National Identity, and Nazi Ideology in Germany (New York/Oxford, 2015).

This interest tended, at least during the war itself, to be located primarily among the more liberal elements of the German press, yet even the ardently conservative *Neue Preußische Zeitung* was willing to concede some grudging respect for Japanese military success.19 In editorializing the Russo-Japanese War in these terms, the German press could not help but also problematize common assumptions about the innate superiority of the West, if only for the simple reason that Russia quickly proved to be seriously outmatched strategically, technologically, and psychologically. It was in response to these clear structural disparities between Russia and Japan that a narrative emerged in the German press, which persisted throughout the war, that Japan owed its success over Russia to its more successful adoption of the material and intellectual trappings of Western modernity. Nowhere was this made more explicit than in a pair of cartoons printed by *Kladderadatsch* and *Simplicissimus* in August 1904 concerning the discovery, by Russian peasant conscripts, of proof that the Japanese were indeed “magic”: combs, soap, and toothbrushes.20 In a similar — albeit considerably darker — vein *Simplicissimus* offered its assessment of the Battle of Tsushima through a comparison of the religious fervor of the Russian sailors against the military precision of the Japanese navy, concluding that the humiliating Russian defeat was: “Because the Russians pray like good Christians, and the Japanese shoot like good soldiers.” (see figure 1)21

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20 “Japanische Zauberl,” in *Kladderadatsch* no. 32 (August 7, 1904); “Vom Kriegsschauplatz,” in *Simplicissimus* no. 19 (August 2, 1904).

21 “Diesmal stimmt es nicht,” in *Simplicissimus* no. 12 (June 20, 1905).
effectively redirects European stereotypes about superstitious “natives” back against the Russians and instead identifies the Japanese as the “civilizing” presence in East Asia.

This narrative about Japanese superiority vis-à-vis Russia was not just a product of the German satirical press; a two-part article published by the Berliner Tageblatt after the Battle of Mukden similarly attributed Japan’s success to the “excellent training” and “iron discipline” of its soldiers, as opposed to the “wild battlefield fanaticism” of less-civilized races. At the same time, however, the author speculated that the essential loyalty and dedication of the Japanese nation had helped to temper “the effeminizing effects of civilization.” Within the logic of a civilizational hierarchy, the Japanese were clearly the more effectively modern of the two combatant states, yet this latter statement also introduces the idea that the Japanese had managed to somehow surpass not just the Russians but also Europe itself, by virtue of some inherent quality which helped to shield them from the more decadent tendencies of Western civilization. This argument, which balanced the material benefits of Western modernity against its presumptive cultural costs, quickly established itself — at least within the German Bildungsbürgertum — as the fundamental “lesson” to be learned from the Russo-Japanese War.

With Japan’s victory over Russia — a victory tempered somewhat by the realities of international diplomacy — Japan’s position as a legitimate Great Power was secured. The question of how to interpret this state of affairs provoked growing efforts in Germany, as elsewhere, to better apprehend the Japanese and their culture. This new interest in Japan manifested itself in various forms, from the growth of transnational associational groups like the Wa-Doku-Kai — founded in 1890 by the Japanese philosopher Inoue Tetsujirō — and the publication of periodicals devoted to the popularization of Japanese contemporary culture like Ost-Asien, to the transplantation of elements of “traditional” Japanese culture to Germany like jiu-jitsu. What united these disparate efforts was the conviction that Japan could serve as an instructive model for contemporary Germany, a belief that the Japanese living in Germany enthusiastically encouraged and attempted — with varying degrees of success — to direct. Yet whereas Japanese authors writing for a Western audience often limited themselves to asserting the basic moral legitimacy of Japanese culture vis-à-vis the West, German authors writing on Japan instead increasingly valorized Japanese culture for its ability to adapt the

22 “Der Zusammenbruch bei Mukden,” in Berliner Tageblatt no. 136 (March 15, 1905), 1-2; no. 140 (March 17, 1905).
external signifiers of modernity without succumbing to its potentially deculturating influence.

It was because of this growing consensus regarding the significance of Japan for Germany that Karl Haushofer emerged as such a pivotal figure within the German-Japanese relationship. Haushofer had been posted to Japan during 1908-1910 as an official observer of Japanese military affairs for the Bavarian General Staff.24 Impressed by what he had observed, he published his first major work on Japan, Dai Nihon, in 1913 in order to “direct the attention of Central Europe towards the reinvigoration and regeneration that Japan owes to the baptism of fire provided by its wars.”25 The crux of Haushofer’s analysis was embedded in his conviction that contemporary Weltkultur — embodied in a cosmopolitan ethos of liberal capitalism and pacifism — was fundamentally destabilizing to authentic national culture. As he understood this trend towards increasing cultural homogenization framed through a discourse of modernization: “It [Weltkultur] fills the valleys and holes, but it also removes the peaks . . .”26 Germany and Japan, by virtue of their parallel historical development and shared cultural values — by which Haushofer explicitly meant martial values — were thus inextricably bound together:

Through their kindred — and yet also divergent — development, which was described at the beginning of this book, Japan and Germany could lend each other complementary values that they could never get from anyone else . . . that would both make them richer and not make any other nation poorer, which they both need as counterbalance against a leveling current that may be rich in commodities but is poor in ideas.27

Haushofer thus presented his audience with the common völkisch narrative of an ongoing struggle between international Zivilisation and national Kultur, framed through a discussion of contemporary Japan. Although his analysis shared many of its central premises with the liberal press coverage of the Russo-Japanese War, Haushofer’s conclusions anticipated and enabled the increasing monopolization of this rhetoric by the political right following World War I.

III.

The outbreak of the First World War disrupted the network of relations between Germany and Japan that had been established in

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26 Ibid., 339.
27 Ibid., 339.
the previous decade. Yet these were successfully reestablished and even strengthened relatively early in the interwar period. As the two nations renegotiated the terms of their relationship, both on the diplomatic level and within ostensibly non-political civil groups, one problem that became the topic of much discussion was the relative position of both Germany and Japan to China, and to mainland Asia more broadly. Even as the Weimar Republic officially pursued its program of advisors and training in China, in Berlin a faction coalesced around the idea that German interests in Asia were better served by an alliance with Japan. This belief was based on the image of Japan as a stabilizing factor within Asia and as a counterweight to the growing strength of the Communist presence in Eurasia. The fundamental question within interwar Germany vis-à-vis East Asia thus became whether the interests of the German people were better served by an alliance with Republican China or with Imperial Japan.

It quickly became clear to German observers — as the political situation in Germany stabilized during the early 1920s — that the relative status of Germany and Japan in the international community of states had shifted in favor of Japan. This new state of affairs was openly acknowledged and bemoaned by advocates for German-Japanese diplomatic rapprochement. Karl Haushofer observed in his 1923 monograph, *Japan und die Japaner*:

> We do not have so many friends in the world that we can continue to do without friendly relations with other nations on the basis of ignorance or misunderstanding, as we did in this case, when we could have discovered this priceless asset with a strong and an ambitious people, who engaged with us for years in a dignified manner and only sought revenge due to our lack of understanding and contempt.  

In placing the blame for the diplomatic falling-out between Japan and Germany squarely at the feet of the former German state, Haushofer formulated a claim that would become a common argument during the interwar period, namely, that Germany had taken the friendship and goodwill of Japan for granted in the years leading up to World War I and that Japan had only sided with the Allies after being shamed by the Germans; the implication being that the Germans and the Japanese were natural allies, even if the Germans had not realized this yet. For Haushofer, as for many other Germans sympathetic to Japan, the renewal of friendly relations between the two states was
essential both to the continued viability of German interests in East Asia and to the maintenance of German international prestige.

The Japanese also quickly grasped the significance of this new state of affairs, and as the Japanese returned as a visible presence within Berlin during the early 1920s — both as scholars and as representatives of Japanese commercial and industrial interests — efforts to create a new institutional structure for intellectual, social, and cultural exchange were quickly complicated by internecine struggles over national political priorities. The Japaninstitut in Berlin, founded in 1926 by Friedrich Trautz, was meant to replace the prewar Wa-Doku-Kai as an associational space for the cultivation of social and intellectual engagement between Germany and Japan, but — in an ironic twist — spent the first several years of its existence regularly beset by internal conflict between its German and Japanese members.\(^{30}\) The individual most responsible for this ongoing tension was Kanokogi Kazunobu, a visiting Professor of Philosophy who had arrived in Berlin in 1924. Kanokogi had a reputation as “an outspoken Japanese nationalist and the spiritual leader in the domain of identifying a purely Japanese Weltanschauung. Due to his radical and uncompromising position he was often hostile to liberal circles and was otherwise also found to be a difficult individual.”\(^{31}\) Relations between Kanokogi and his German colleagues at the Japaninstitut eventually deteriorated to the point that Kanokogi withdrew from the Japaninstitut and formed his own rival organization, the Deutsch-Japanische Arbeitsgemeinschaft (DJAG).\(^{32}\)

The formation of this new group, aside from reflecting the ongoing rivalry between Germans intent on reasserting their prior privileged position vis-à-vis Japan and an increasingly assertive Japanese community, also carried serious political implications, given Kanokogi’s public defense of a theory of totalitarianism (zentaishugi) and rumored relationship with members of extreme right-wing political groups, both in Germany and Japan.\(^{33}\) Although not an explicitly political group itself, the DJAG — which reorganized itself in 1929 as the Deutsch-Japanische Gesellschaft (DJG) and remained the dominant associational influence in the German-Japanese relationship throughout the National Socialist era — did signal the increasing monopolization of pro-Japanese rhetoric within Germany by specific political elements: namely, extreme right-wing and völkisch parties.

This increasing visibility of Japan within German political rhetoric during the interwar era was signaled clearly through German public

\(^{30}\) Telegram. Inhalt: Denkschrift Dr. Gunderts über die deutsch-japanischen Institute. Tokyo, 26.6.34. Politisches Archiv, Auswärtiges Amt (hereafter: PA AA), R85971.

\(^{31}\) Walter Donat. Vorschlag für Professoren-Einladung durch die DJG, 25.4.41. PA AA R61305.

\(^{32}\) Letter to Gundert from Trautz, 3.10.28. PA AA R85970.

\(^{33}\) In 1930, Kanokogi founded the Patriotic Workers’ Party (Aikoku Kinrôtô), which was explicitly modeled after the NSDAP. He was also known to begin his lectures during the 1930s with a Hitler salute. He was arrested as a Class A war criminal, but spared prosecution in consideration of his terminal case of tuberculosis. Christopher Szpilman, “Kanokogi Kazunobu: ‘Imperial Asia,’ 1937,” in Sven Saaler and Christopher Szpilman, eds., Pan-Asianism: a Documentary History, vol. 2: 1920-Present (Lanham, MD et al., 2011), 149-153.
responses to the Manchurian Incident in 1931 and Japan’s subsequent installation of the Manchukuo puppet-state. Japan’s actions in China were roundly condemned internationally, which eventually resulted in Japan’s withdrawal from the League of Nations in 1933. In Germany, however, coverage of Japanese actions in Manchuria was somewhat more ambiguous. Rather than criticizing Japan for its obvious breach of Chinese national sovereignty, the general trend within the German press was instead to focus on the League of Nation’s impotent efforts to rein in Japan. In an editorial choice that recalled earlier narratives about Japanese-German parallels, the German satirical press framed the controversy through comparisons to German grievances against the post-WWI international order, whether in regard to the refusal by the Allies to consider an Austrian Anschluss with Germany or in respect to the contested border with Poland. In another image from Kladderadatsch, Japan was depicted as Goethe’s anti-hero Götz von Berlichingen defying the demands of the League’s gentlemen, with a caption sardonically observing that Japan would now demonstrate how much it had learned from its thorough study of German literature. In all of these images, German readers were clearly meant to identify with the Japanese against the League of Nations. The Chinese themselves, in stark contrast to the policies of the Weimar Republic, received little sympathy as the object of Japanese aggression; rather, China was more commonly depicted as an acceptable site for Japanese empire, given its inability to successfully modernize.

Even without a definite shift in stated policy towards supporting the Japanese against the Chinese, Hitler’s appointment as Chancellor in 1933 did have immediate and important consequences for the community of advocates for Japan in Germany. Indeed, it was during the first two years following Hitler’s ascension to power that the racial status of the Japanese emerged as a potentially insurmountable barrier to friendly relations. This incipient crisis was not provoked by any specific action by the National Socialist state itself, but rather by concerns within the Japanese press that racially discriminatory legislation and rhetoric could be “misapplied” against the population of Japanese then resident in Germany. The visibility of the Japanese as a community within Germany, as well as the existence of a small yet socially and politically well-connected population of mixed-race individuals (Mischlinge), made it apparent to the leadership of the DJG that the racial status of the Japanese required clarification. The subsequent attempt to definitively “place” the Japanese within the Nazi racial hierarchy collapsed under the weight of a substantive debate...
between the racial ideologue Johann von Leers and Dr. Walther Gross from the Office of Racial Policy during 1934-35 regarding whether the Japanese could be granted the status of an Aryan or Nordic race; Leers claimed to have identified traces of Nordic culture in Japanese heraldry and funerary rites, and contended that, not only should the Japanese be understood as a “Nordic” people, they actually represented one of the few remnants of authentic Nordic culture. Gross rejected Leers’ conclusions, on the basis that any official recognition of the Japanese as a Nordic people could destabilize official Nazi racial policy, but suggested instead that, given the small number of German-Japanese Mischlinge, it should not be unduly difficult to make special accommodation for them, judged on a case-by-case basis. In effect, as the very model of an image-conscious bureaucrat, Gross’ official recommendation was to avoid the problem and hope that no one pressed the issue further.

For the duration of the Third Reich, the Japanese remained an unresolved problem in respect to racial policy, yet Leers, among other influential figures, continued to argue — in the absence of any official statement to the contrary — that the Japanese were a “kindred people,” as evidenced by cultural similarities. The developing German-Japanese relationship may have raised uncomfortable questions in regards to Nazi racial science, yet it was still understood as important enough to warrant the protection of bureaucratic double-talk, hence Gross’ concern that the Japanese should be privately reassured that their racial status would be respected. Although this attempt at compromise functioned better in theory than in practice, it is nevertheless suggestive of the value assigned to the Japanese within certain circles of the National Socialist state.

As early as 1935, the publication of pro-Japanese literature increased dramatically in Germany, both in volume and in visibility. Although not yet allied formally with Japan — and indeed still engaged in substantive cooperative projects with Republican China — the National Socialist party signaled its sympathies through the promotion and patronage of authors espousing a particular reading of Japanese culture. In February 1935, the Nazi party newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter* published a special four-part article on General Nogi Maresuke, the “last samurai” and hero of Port Arthur during the Russo-Japanese War. Nogi, whose suicide in 1912 following the death of the Meiji Emperor had received considerable interest in Germany, was presented in this article series as a cultural intermediary.  

36 Denkschrift der Deutsch-Japanischen Gesellschaft zur Frage der Anwendung der Rassen-Gesetzgebung auf die Abkömmlinge aus deutsch-japanischen Mischehen. Signed by Admiral Paul Behncke. 10.24.34. BArch R 64IV/31, pp. 26-37.

37 Walther Gross, Antwort auf die im Dezember erschienene Denkschrift der Deutsch-Japanischen Gesellschaft, 30.1.35. BArch R 64IV/31, pp. 16-20.


between tradition and modernity, which both echoed earlier arguments regarding the unique position of Japan and gestured towards the increasing importance of bushido as a central theme in German writings about Japanese culture during the second half of the 1930s.

Although the 1936 Olympics generated considerable press coverage in Germany about the Japanese team and its home nation, the single most important event of 1936 for propelling the German-Japanese relationship was the signing of the Anti-Comintern Pact on November 25th. This agreement expressly forbid either Germany or Japan from signing treaties with the Soviet Union and provided some assurance that either partner would aid the other in the event of an attack by the Soviets.40 Although this agreement did not prevent Hitler from pursuing a separate arrangement with the Soviet Union just a few years later, it did signal a shift by the German state away from the Chinese and towards an official alliance with the Japanese. The symbolic importance of this agreement is perhaps best symbolized by a cartoon from Kladderadatsch published in December 1936 (see figure 2): The two sides of the frame flanked by figures of a Germanic knight and a samurai warrior, both with drawn swords, defending their “threshold” from the Komintern “worm.”41 That the two figures were depicted equivalently, both in their stature and in their posture, reflects the terms of the German-Japanese cultural relationship as much as it does the contemporary political climate. The outbreak of war on the Asian mainland in 1937 may have noticeably increased the public visibility of this rhetoric, yet it did not fundamentally change its content or ideological basis, rooted in an idealization of Japanese culture framed through the National Socialist ethos.

IV.

By the beginning of December 1941, the German army occupied much of Western Europe and had successfully advanced as far as

40 “Deutsch-japanisches Abkommen unterzeichnet,” in Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung (hereafter DAZ) no. 553 (November 25, 1936); “Erklärung der Reichsregierung zum deutsch-japanischen Abkommen,” in DAZ no. 554 (November 26, 1936).

41 “Ein gebieterisches Halt,” in Kladderadatsch no. 50 (December 13, 1936).
Moscow in the East, although a Soviet counter-offensive beginning on December 5 quickly pushed German forces back from the city. The Japanese army had moved into the southern half of French Indochina in July, which precipitated the oil embargo that would ultimately compel Japan to take military action against the allied nations of the West. The attack finally began on December 7, 1941, when the Japanese Navy attacked Pearl Harbor in Hawai’i; in quick succession the Japanese then launched successful attacks on Hong Kong, Malaya, the Philippines, and Thailand. The astonishing rapidity with which the Japanese military forces inflicted devastating losses on the Western Allies was met with general acclaim across Germany. Although German coverage of the military conflict in East Asia had already increased dramatically since 1938, the events of December 1941 unleashed a wave of material within Germany that attempted to identify the roots of Japanese military success within its culture. During the war itself, the cultural images and associations deployed about Japan within Germany remained generally consistent with the earlier depictions. The most noticeable change, however, was the escalating availability of this material to the general public, both in terms of frequency and of sheer volume; the rate at which materials associated with this particular image of Japan steadily increased throughout the war, even to the extent that an inverse relationship can be identified between the actual status of the German military campaigns in Europe and publicly available, politically glamorized images of Japanese martial heroism.

From December 8 onward, the Japanese military was, quite literally, daily front-page news in Germany. Even in the first week of fighting, major dailies like the Völkischer Beobachter and the Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung, in addition to more “objective” reports detailing troop movements and the territory captured by the advancing Japanese military, published a series of laudatory articles about the heroics of Japan’s soldiers. In anticipation of future trends, several of these initial articles focused specifically on the nine Japanese pilots at Pearl Harbor who had consciously sacrificed themselves by dive-bombing their planes into American ships, or alternatively the so-called “human torpedoes.” Other articles highlighted the continuity of Japanese military glory from the Russo-Japanese War into the current conflict. In short, for about six months after Japan’s official entry into World War II in December 1941, German newspaper readers were inundated with articles testifying to the martial prowess and heroism of the Japanese military. Although the quantity of

42 “Japans Volk kampfentschlossen,” DAZ no. 586 (December 8, 1941), p. 2; “Die Helden von Hawaiii,” DAZ no. 592 (December 11, 1941), 2; Otto Mossdorf, “Soldatenvolk der Japaner,” DAZ no. 597 (December 14, 1941), 3; “Der Kampfgeist der Japaners,” VB no. 351 (December 17, 1941), 2.

43 Wilhelm Schulze, “Jibaku,” DAZ no. 597 (December 14, 1941), 2; “Die Neun von Pearl Harbor,” VB no. 68 (February 9, 1942), 2; “‘Niku-Dan.’ Menschliche Bomben,” DAZ no. 99 (February 27, 1942), 2.
reporting on the progress of the war in Asia fluctuated throughout the duration of the war, these articles on the unique martial qualities of the Japanese assumed a constant and unavoidable presence in the German press.

Germany’s magazines and journals also dramatically increased their coverage of Japan and Japanese culture following the dramatic events of December 1941. The first articles written directly in response to the expansion of World War II into the Pacific appeared in Germany’s more explicitly military-oriented periodicals, although these were followed by a wave of articles and special issues in more general and popular magazines. All of these articles were explicit in their focus. Every title included at least one of the common keywords: “chivalric,” “soldiers,” or “martial.” Some of the authors had established ties to the community of German-Japanese experts, but most did not. The bulk of them are interesting, again, only in that they so closely echoed the established images and associations surrounding Japanese culture, and in the fact that these periodicals were, more or less, intended for a more general audience.

The surge of interest in Japanese culture that began in December 1941 also permeated into organs of the Nazi party including, most notoriously, Heinrich Himmler’s Schutzstaffel (SS). During the last two weeks of December 1941 the SS-Leithefte — the organization’s official magazine — produced three articles about the Japanese military spirit in quick succession. All three took their inspiration from the current fighting in the Pacific, each one highlighting an example of exceptional bravery or martial spirit of the Japanese servicemen. The first, “Abschied auf ewig . . .,” gave an account of the Japanese pilots who, during the attack on Pearl Harbor, purposefully dove their planes into American ships as a means of inflicting greater damage. The second, “Feldwebel Ischizuka im Dschungel,” recounted the story of a downed Japanese pilot who spent seven days stranded alone in the jungles of Malaya during the Japanese invasion. The third, “Koike und Ito siegten in Berlin — siegen vor Hongkong,” introduced the story of the so-called “samurai swimmers” in the attack on Hong Kong, who were led by two members of Japan’s 1936 Olympic squad. Taken together, the three articles thus presented an overview of contemporary Japanese heroism in the air, on land, and at sea. In addition to their obvious jingoism, these articles were also quite sentimental in their attitudes towards wartime heroism, as reflected in the first article’s conclusion that: “The men are no longer, just as the ships that they


45 "Abschied auf ewig . . . Vom Todesmut der japanischen Soldaten,” in SS-Leithefte 7, no. 9b (1941), 7-9.

46 "Feldwebel Ischizuka im Dschungel,” in SS-Leithefte 7, no. 10a (1941), 8-10.

47 "Koike und Ito siegten in Berlin — siegen vor Hongkong,” in SS-Leithefte 7, no. 10b (1941), 9-10.
struck are no longer. Japan has proven to the world that its mothers are capable of giving their people men and heroes.”

In interrogating the reception of Japanese martial culture by the SS, the central text is undoubtedly Heinz Corazza’s *Die Samurai: Ritter des Reiches in Ehre und Treue*. The work, a concise pamphlet detailing the history of the samurai and bushido, first appeared in the SS periodical *Das Schwarze Korps*. Subsequently published for the general public in 1942, it received the special distinction of having its introduction written by Heinrich Himmler, who recommended the text specifically to all SS officers for its edificatory content. In a passage that recalled both Oswald Spengler’s *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* and Karl Haushofer, Himmler stressed the utility of observing the trajectories of other peoples’ development, because “The laws by which all Völker become great apply just as much as the laws by which all Völker decay.” For Himmler, the example of the samurai in Japan was especially instructive:

This short history of the samurai means to recall to our thoughts something long-forgotten: the reality that, until recently, this Volk in the Far East had the same principles of honor that our fathers had in a former, prematurely destroyed past; and moreover the knowledge that it is usually minorities of the highest caliber that bestow a Volk with eternal life here on earth.

Himmler thus bridged the conception of honor articulated within bushido with his own idealized vision of medieval Germanic honor; he also, in the second half of this statement, linked the samurai to the SS as the bearers of their respective nation’s honor and virtue. This connection between the SS and the samurai, made explicit in Himmler’s introduction, constituted an important thematic element throughout Corazza’s work.

This valorization of Japan as a nation of warriors was so pervasive by August 1942 that the Security Division of the SS finally broached the question of whether this propaganda was not, in fact, too effective: “The former view, that the German soldier is the best in the world, has been confused by descriptions of the Japanese swimmers who removed mines laid outside Hong Kong, or of the Japanese pilots who, with their disdain for death, swooped down upon enemy ships with their bombs. This has resulted in something a bit like an

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50 Ibid., 3.
inferiority complex. The Japanese look like a kind of “Super-
Teuton” [*Germane im Quadrat*]."51 This statement speaks to
the complicated position of the Japanese within the propaganda
of National Socialist Germany. On the one hand, these images
of Japanese heroism and self-sacrificial loyalty affirmed the patterns of
behavior and thought commonly valorized within Nazi propaganda.
At the same time, however, the fact that it was the Japanese — not
their German counterparts — that were performing these feats of
valor necessarily forced the comparison that the author found so
potentially demoralizing.

A subtle shift in how the Japanese were represented within Germany
did occur, however, after the defeat at Stalingrad in early 1943 and the
German state’s efforts to mobilize the German people for “total war.”
Although the Third Reich and its ancillary organizations — among
which the DJG must be counted, owing to the group’s active involve-
ment in generating propaganda about Japan — had already estab-
lished its Japanese ally as a brother-in-arms to the German soldier,
comparable to him in bravery, moral rectitude, and spiritual purity, the
representation of the Japanese in Germany evolved after Stalingrad,
to reflect the growing crisis of morale in Germany. The presumed
willingness of the average Japanese conscript to die for his nation
was gradually transformed into a didactic tool by the German press
to impress upon the Germans the worthiness and beauty of such
a sacrifice. The problem of death, and especially suicide, came to
occupy a central role within the public rhetoric surrounding Japan,
with the added subtext that the German public should be ashamed
for their own lack of willpower.

Although the quantity of monographs and articles published in Ger-
many about Japan declined precipitously during the last two years of
the war, this trend was more likely due to the changing exigencies of
the German publishing industry than to a fundamental shift in the
German-Japanese relationship. Indeed, the continued popularity of
topics related to Japan was clearly reflected in the astonishing com-
mmercial success of Albrecht von Urach’s [*Das Geheimnis japanischer
Kraft*], a genuine bestseller of the latter war years with multiple printing-
runs and over 700,000 copies sold.52 In this work, Urach argued
that the “secret” to Japanese strength lay in their relative isolation
geographically, which allowed them to “only adopt what they need
from foreigners, and to regulate what they choose to adopt.”53 As a
result of this unique ability to control the process of cultural transfer,

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the Japanese had achieved — according to Urach — an exceptionally coherent cultural core identity centered on martial virtue. More specifically, he identified the samurai as the purest expression of the Japanese ethos and as the guiding principle of Japanese history, knitting together the aristocratic ideals of the samurai and the simple loyalty of the people. This identification of a direct line of transmission between “traditional” Japanese martial virtues and contemporary Japan was echoed in the cover art for the work (see figure 3), which depicted two symbolic figures: a modern Japanese infantryman and an idealized samurai warrior. By placing the samurai behind and slightly above the modern soldier, Urach — and/or his editor — clearly intended to evoke the idea that these values were not simply the inheritance of contemporary Japan, but were rather a vital and intrinsic part of modern Japanese culture.

As hope for victory faded, this emphasis on martial values increasingly centered on the image of a beautiful death for the nation, embodied first in news reports from the Pacific Theater that “no Japanese allowed himself to be captured,” and that: “The defenders stood resolutely [todentschlossen] at their posts and did not retreat even a single foot’s-breadth . . . Only the dead withdrew from the fight.”54 Later, this same image of a sacrificial death was expanded to include the figure of the kamikaze pilot, who represented the final synthesis of the German romantic image of Japanese heroism and the National Socialist state’s apocalyptic vision of the Endkampf. The first mention of the kamikaze by name in the German press appeared in an article from November 1, 1944 in the Völkischer Beobachter, wherein it was reported that the kamikaze had successfully sunk eight American ships and damaged an additional nineteen.55 A short article from November 4 introduced the program and its pilots, suggesting that this new tactic fully mobilized the Japanese soldiers’ “willingness to die,” and identified the kamikaze as an embodiment of Japan’s martial ethos, now arrayed against the soulless technology of the United States. From this point, the kamikaze and their exploits were
standard front-page news in the German press, even to the extent that one of the very last articles published about Japan during the National Socialist era — which appeared April 6, 1945 in the Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung — discussed the kamikaze as the literal embodiment of Japanese honor.56

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In his monograph on postwar German and Japanese historiography, The Quest for the Lost Nation, Sebastian Conrad describes the postwar “temporalization of space” that stripped “East” and “West” of their geographical connotations and “instead used spatial references as abstract markers of progress and backwardness.”57 In his analysis, this process realigned (West) Germany and Japan with the Western Allies and effectively sealed off both nations’ access to the East, not just physically, through the creation of new geopolitical borders and barriers, but also imaginatively, through a revitalization of the cultural binary of Occident and Orient. Although framed as a comparative study of postwar German and Japanese historiography, his analysis on this point carries broader implications for the German-Japanese transnational relationship during the first half of the twentieth century. Specifically, the notion that postwar Germany and Japan had to be Westernized — in addition to being de-Nazified, demilitarized, and democratized — is a point that deserves more reflection.

Within the German-Japanese relationship, the “West” was invariably viewed with ambivalence. On the one hand, no modern nation-state could survive without the technological and industrial benefits that the West had to offer, yet these material goods often were understood to come with a cultural cost. In an era of Western geopolitical hegemony, anxiety about deculturation and the spread of an international monoculture fed directly into resistance against the West. The forms that this resistance assumed within the colonial context have been well documented, but what about the nations that were “neither here nor there”? For Germany and Japan, the articulation of national identity during the early twentieth century was premised on this idea of geographical and cultural liminality. The dual impulses in Germany towards East and West — as captured in the concept of Mitteleuropa — translated politically into a kind of spatial schizophrenia. Similarly, Japan’s modernization project during the Meiji era placed it in a somewhat unique position during the early twentieth century as an “Eastern”

56 “Kamikaze — Geist der Japaner,” in DAZ no. 82 (April 6, 1945), 1.
57 Sebastian Conrad, The Quest for the Lost Nation: Writing History in Germany and Japan in the American Century (Berkeley, CA, 2010), 175.
nation that had successfully remodeled itself after the West. In effect, Germany and Japan had to be Westernized after 1945 precisely because neither state was fully or exclusively of the “West” geopolitically or culturally.

It was this shared exceptionality that Germany found appealing in Japan, and which was articulated through the language of a shared destiny. The success with which Japan had synthesized West and East — a point of pride for Japanese nationalists — was understood by German advocates for Japan as confirmation that it was possible to be simultaneously national and modern, and instrumentalized as a template for a new conceptualization of the relationship between geography, culture, and modernity. This romantic reading of Japanese culture in Germany was therefore not anti-modern or a form of “reactionary modernism”; rather, it was an attempt to reconcile the binary of East and West in the modern era through the language and imagery of heroism. The Anglo-American nations of the West were mobilized as the antagonists in this relationship because they represented a universalizing model of modernity that allowed little room for national or cultural particularity. The German representation of Japanese martial culture therefore should be understood as an attempt to destabilize an imperial narrative about the inevitability of the West.

This critique, premised on the shared position of Germany and Japan as the fulcrum between East and West, used the figure of the hero in order to construct an alternative narrative about modernity, one in which cultural values could co-exist with technology. Over the course of the era between the Russo-Japanese War and the Second World War, multiple variants of this argument were explicated, contested, and debated, but the basic assumption of a common identity, fate, or destiny shared by Germany and Japan remained a consistent thread. One reason for this was the sheer tenacity of a community of advocates for Japan within Germany. Another was the specifically romantic register of the relationship, which allowed for a greater sense of common interest across national borders. This type of imagery depicted the Japanese in a manner that was generally flattering and amenable to their own preferred narratives of self-representation — even if it did subordinate Japan’s real advancements as a technological and scientific innovator to the iron law of culture — but it also tapped into specific German narratives about themselves and their national mission, both within Europe and globally. The denouement of 1945
delegitimized these narratives, both in Germany and in Japan, and forced both nations to negotiate a new identity within the global community.

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