

CURES Report

Continuities and Discontinuities in modern German and Japanese History
Some preliminary remarks (PART I)

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Germany and Japan's modern history are often said to share a lot of similarities. The late national unification and the late start of industrialization brought both states into an awkward position in an imperialist world, which was bound to be divided up in colonial empires and spheres of influence. Germany as well as Japan tried to find niches for their expansion overseas and in the neighbourhood which brought them into conflict with established powers. Germany's defeat in World War I as well as Japan's dissatisfaction with the Western Powers' conduct after World War I (racial discrimination problem, arms control) led both countries into militarism after a short interlude of democratization – the Taishō democracy in Japan and the Weimar Republic in Germany. Allying each other, Japan and Germany fought against the Western Powers in World War II and lost. After 1945, a new Japan and a new Germany joined the Western World in the Cold War against the communist bloc and enjoyed a rapid resurrection, soon finding themselves to be economic world powers.

In spite of these sometimes amazing parallels, there are in fact more differences than similarities

in modern German and Japanese history, which have been widely underestimated. Even though it is true that both Germany and Japan were latecomers in terms of national unification, industrialization and overseas expansion, the starting points of the two countries were completely different. At the eve of the Meiji Restoration, Japan was still a feudal-agrarian society, while some regions in Germany were already economically and politically developed. The Taishō-democracy and the Weimar Republic are hardly comparable either, since the emergence of the Weimar Republic followed a full-scale revolution and a civil war in some parts of Germany, while the Taishō-democracy was only a shift in the balance of power within the existing Meiji state and under the same constitution. Also the fact that the alliance between Germany, Japan and Italy in World War II was an 'alliance without backbone', an 'alliance without allies'¹ was made clear long before and need no further mention. But the biggest difference in Japan and Germany's



modern history is the change after the defeat in 1945. For both countries, the year 1945 was indisputably an important turning point in history. But the extent to which Japan and Germany changed after 1945 is completely different.

While in German history, the year 1945 is a clear turning point, in Japan – at least from a German point of view – there is an incredible amount of continuity. German historiography after World War II was not much concerned with the question of discontinuity or continuity after 1945, since the complete change in postwar Germany seemed quite clear. The historians' debates focus has been more on the singularity of Nazi crimes ('Historikerstreit'²) and on the continuity of German expansionism and authoritarianism from Wilhemian Germany to Hitler's Nazi Germany ('Fischer-Kontroverse'³).

'1945' in German and Japanese history

In Japan, there are surprisingly few studies about the question of continuity after 1945. The fact that the year 1945 was a decisive turning point in Japan's history has been widely taken for granted. Only the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II brought new life to the discussion. The controversial study of Noguchi Yukio titled '1940–System – The Wartime *Economy*'⁴ for example showed major factors of continuity in the Japanese *economy*. The characteristic form of Japanese enterprises, the monetary system, the tax system and the centralized form of the

Japanese economy are patterns still prevailing today, as Noguchi proved. Noguchi's study has received a lot of criticism as well, since it can be said that he overstressed continuity factors while ignoring others. Compared to Germany, Noguchi's findings are extremely interesting. After the defeat in 1945, it was unimaginable that a major institution – like the 'Bank of Japan' which was established in 1940 – or law survived the reforms which the Allied Powers introduced in Germany. Hardly any major law introduced under Hitler could have survived the German defeat. But in Japan, there was a surprising amount of continuity, not only in the economy, as Noguchi shows, but in politics and bureaucracy as well. Although some German historians like Hans Mommsen stress the fact that even in Germany a lot of continuities existed beyond 1945⁵, continuing political traditions from Weimar Germany and not allowing the complete revolutionary changes hoped for by members even of the conservative resistance movement like Helmuth James von Moltke, a comparison with Japan does make the changes in Germany look revolutionary.

Germany, surrendering completely defeated in May 1945, was occupied and directly governed by the Allied powers from June 5th, 1945. There was no German government from 1945 to 1949, no head of state, perhaps even no state at all (this question is still a matter of discussion). Legislation, executive powers and jurisdiction lay in the

hands of the Allied Powers – France, Great Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union. It was only on the communal level that German institutions existed throughout the occupation period. Equipped with such vast authority, the Allies introduced reforms in Germany aimed at ‘De–Nazification, Democratization, Demilitarization and Decentralization’ (the four De’s). Thus, former Nazi Germany was transformed into a stable democracy. The British diplomat Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick described the success of denazification and democratization in a part to German tradition of obedience to superiors: “They seem to be friendly. The habit of obedience is so strong, they accept military orders without grumbling”⁶.

But there were other reasons for the success of the democratization of Germany as well: aiming for decentralization, the Allies could count on the old tradition of federalism in Germany. To attain de–nazification, the Allies prosecuted War Criminals and shut out former politicians, bureaucrats and officials from public life on the one hand, on the other hand they called back former resistance members and proven democrats or anti–Nazis, who were in exile abroad, in the Nazi’s concentration camps or just had withdrawn from public life in the so–called ‘inner emigration’. Almost all former members of the Nazi party were expelled from official duties and politics and many were arrested for the sake of denazification⁷. On the other side, anti-nazi

politicians, unionists, journalists and so on were called back by the Allies to take over official posts on the communal level⁸. Of course, not all Germans considered the defeat to be liberation from Nazi tyranny. But the members of the former resistance could exert considerable influence in the new Germany and it was on this basis that political life in Germany was revitalized in 1946/7 with the foundation of new parties and the establishment of the ‘Länder’ (States). Thus the Resistance Movement became an integral part of the ideology of the Western German state, which was finally founded in 1949. The German historian Hans Rothfels, who had emigrated to the United States under the Hitler regime, held a series of lectures at University of Chicago in 1947, stressing the wide range of German resistance against Hitler, which ranged from the far left to conservative groups on the right, and laid the foundation to postwar German historiography⁹. It was only the resulting ‘constitutional patriotism’ which found the legitimisation for national pride in the 1949 constitution and the following successful democratic development, together with the complete refutation of national pathos and national emblems which can explain the unexpected success of German integration into the European Community.

Japan and Germany after World War II

In Japan, the development went in a different direction. First, Japan’s defeat in World War II

came months after the German defeat. Condemning the German capitulation as a violation of the Tripartite Pact of 1940, Japan continued its fight until August 1945. At that time, there were already new tendencies in world politics which made the Allied Powers take a different occupation policy in Japan than in Germany. When Truman, Stalin and Churchill met at the Potsdam Conference in July 1945, first rifts in the Alliance showed. Stalin claimed Eastern Europe as his sphere of influence, but the West insisted on free elections and did not want to let Stalin create puppet regimes in whole of Eastern Europe, especially not in Poland, on whose account France and Great Britain had entered the war against Germany in 1939. But in the end, Stalin confronted the West with a *fait accompli* and could bring Eastern Europe under firm Soviet control. Tensions were rising over the question of occupation zones and policies in Germany and the Cold War was beginning to throw its shadow over Europe.

This had implications for Japan as well. Aware of a coming conflict with the Soviet Union, the United States took a firm policy in the Far East, not allowing the Soviet Union to participate in the occupation of Japan. In the first phase of their occupation policy, the United States under Douglas MacArthur introduced far – ranging reforms in Japan : the secret police was disbanded, war criminals were arrested and expelled from government and bureaucracy, state and religion

were separated, educational reform was introduced as well as a reform of the agrarian sector. Disarmament was successfully enforced and the *zaibatsu* were dissolved. In the sphere of politics, Japan was given a new constitution introducing parliamentary democracy.

At first glance, this might appear as a complete reform of Japan's economic, social and political systems. But the factors of continuity under the surface were very strong. One is the factor that, unlike Germany, Japan had a sovereign government and a head of state – the Tennô – continuously and never was directly governed by the Allies or the United States. Japanese interests were always strongly represented in the talks with the occupation forces, Japan could speak with one voice, while in Germany there were only local representatives. Moreover, the political leadership did not change fundamentally. Of course, war criminals were arrested and expelled from the government. But there was, unlike in Germany, no resistance movement in Japan the Allies could count on in rebuilding postwar Japan. The first postwar cabinets of Japan were dominated by the same kind of politicians that dominated Japanese politics in prewar Japan, even though most of them had turned their back on politics due to the domination in wartime politics of the Imperial Army.

After the Cold War was a fact from the time of the Berlin Blockade in 1947, the United States further loosened its grip on occupied Japan. Japan,

as well as Germany, were to be transformed into Allies against the Communist threat. Thus, plans to completely destroy the industry of the former enemies were abandoned, Germany and Japan received assistance from the West to rebuild their economies (*Marshall-Plan*). Because of this new policy, after 1947 the United States did not insist on the completion of reforms any longer. The *zaibatsu* could be partially re-established and war criminals were not prosecuted vigorously any longer.

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