

Japanese Fascism Revisited

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Impact of the IMTFE

On June 4, 1946, the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, IMTFE¹, convened in the former Imperial Japanese Army Ministry Building in Tokyo. In the course of his opening address, Chief Prosecutor Joseph B. Keenan² pronounced the following:

The evidence will show that [Japan's] militaristic cliques and ultra-nationalistic secret societies resorted to rule by assassination and thereby exercised great influence in favor of military aggression. Assassinations and threats of revolt enabled the military branch more and more to dominate the civil government and to appoint new persons favorable to them and their policies. This tendency became stronger and more entrenched until on 18 October 1941 the military assumed complete and full control of all branches of the government, both civilian and military.³

Keenan's indictment continues to fuel debate within academic circles over prewar Japan and the nature of its imperial government. The prosecution's contention that the Japanese government participated in

a "conspiracy to wage declared or undeclared war or wars of aggression. . .in violation of international law. . .with the object of securing military, naval, political and economic domination of East Asia. . . and ultimately the domination of the world"⁴ implicates all Japanese⁵ in the prewar era as accomplices in a sinister plot.

This analysis, while not without an element of truth, hopelessly obfuscates the actual train of events and their broader global and historical context, impeding deeper understanding of what happened in Japan. Western historians, journalists and authors of all types, whether consciously aware of the specifics of the IMTFE's indictment or not, have been responding to it in one form or another for nearly 60 years. For these people, the IMTFE has had a lasting impact completely disproportional to its effect on the rest of the world.

In 1946, the idea that Imperial Japan, like Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, was a criminal nation that had engaged in a conspiracy to take over the world was, in the wake of the dropping of two atomic bombs, a reassuring contention to the victorious Allies. In 2005, however, the IMTFE's indictment

¹ The IMTFE, otherwise known as the "Tokyo Trials," May 1946 to November 1948.

² Keenan made a name for himself in the 1930s as the man who prosecuted "Machine Gun" Kelly. His appointment, some have contended, signaled that the United States felt the IMTFE was dealing with nothing more than hardened criminals. Indeed, Keenan himself stated: "It is the contention of the prosecution that the positions held by these accused is no bar to their being considered as ordinary criminals and felons . . ." *International Military Tribunal for the Far East, Tokyo, 1946-1948*, "Record of Proceedings, Exhibits, Judgement, Dissenting Judgements, Preliminary Interrogations, Miscellaneous Documents," Proceedings, 434.

³ *Ibid.*, 442 and 443.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 435.

⁵ Keenan explained that under the usual law of conspiracy, ". . . it is always held that every member of the conspiracy is equally liable for every act committed by every other member of the conspiracy in furtherance of the common plan . . . All are liable who incited, ordered, procured or counseled the commission of such acts or have taken a consenting part therein." *Ibid.*, 434.

need not dominate discussions of Imperial Japan. The current accessibility of documents at the National Archives in the US and the National Diet Library and National Institute for Defense Studies' Military Archival Library in Japan give the modern scholar a vast array of information from which to draw, all of it free from the taint of victor's justice and the need to find Japan's wartime leaders guilty of crimes against humanity.

One critical aspect of the IMTFE's legacy that has never been satisfactorily dealt with is the issue of fascism in prewar Japan. A fresh analysis of the issues and the establishment of a dialogue by which the topic can be approached anew, without the biases of either the IMTFE or the Cold War, is sorely needed by the closed and insular world of scholars writing in English on the topic of Imperial Japan.

Imperial Japan, Fascism and the Right Wing

In the late 1920s, 30s and 40s the Japanese press was filled with discussions of fascism and hundreds of books written both before and after World War II discussed its applicability, either pro or con, to Imperial Japan. For the IMTFE and the victorious Allies there was never any question that Imperial Japan was a "fascist" nation cast from the same mold as Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. It was only in the immediate post-trial era that Japanese authors, like Maruyama Masao, began to discuss seriously the implications for historians of labeling the

prewar era fascist. In the intervening 50 years, consensus has seesawed on the issue and today there are as many scholars who use the term as reject it, both in Japan and the west.⁶

Fascism was an important and controversial topic in the early Showa period. The reformist right wing, *kakushin uyoku*, exhibited more than a passing fascination with the concept and many of its members, notably Nakano Seigo,⁷ made no secret of their admiration for Mussolini and the successes of his Fascist Party, the *Fascio di Combattimento*. The idealist right wing, *kannen uyoku*, on the other hand, rejected fascism as they rejected all things of obvious western origin. Broad gray areas existed, for

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example the Great Japan Production Party, *Dai Nippon Seisan To*, Imperial Japan's preeminent self-declared fascist party, was founded with the help of Toyama Mitsuru⁸—without

question the most powerful member of the idealist right wing. Modern scholars are often left with the unenviable task of merely concluding that the Japanese right wing was aware of, and influenced by, the existence of Fascism in Italy. This paper will largely avoid the debate over the meaning of fascism—a debate that has raged since Benito Mussolini coined the term in 1919—and instead focus on whether or not elements of Imperial Japan were consistent with the theory of Fascism as envisioned by Mussolini.

⁶ Abe Horozumi, *Nihon Fascism Kenkyuu Josetsu* [Preface to Japanese Fascism Research] (Tokyo: Miraisha, 1975), 209. Nihon Gendai-shi Kenkyuu-kai, *Nihon Fascism (2) Kokumin Tougou to Taishuu Douin* [Japanese Fascism (2) The Unity of the People and Public Mobilization] (Tokyo: Otsuki Shoten, 1982), 13–15. Nishi Yoshiyuki, *Dare ga Fascist ka* [Who is a Fascist?] (Tokyo: Goma Shobou, 1975), 160.

⁷ Nakano Seigo: 1886 to 1943; leader of the Eastern Society, *Toho Kai*, and onetime secretary-general of the Imperial Rule Assistance Association, *Taisei Yokusan Kai*. Following the 1942 elections Nakano came into conflict with Prime Minister (General) Tojo Hideki and in 1943 he was forced to commit suicide by the *Kempeitai*.

⁸ Toyama Mitsuru: 1855 to 1944; undisputed doyen of the prewar Japanese right wing.

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What is Fascism?

Any cursory perusal of prewar Japanese newspapers, political tracts, diaries, and periodicals of all types confirms the common use of the term *fashizumu*. One important aspect of this phenomenon was the lively debate over the meaning of fascism in Europe, and the implications for its rise in Japan, that raged in the prewar Japanese media.⁹ Beginning in the early 1930s Japanese writers increasingly gave vent to a gnawing fear that fascism might have already arrived in Japan. One example is a 1932 *Trans-Pacific* article titled “Conflict of Fascism and Parliamentarism,” which said:

Japan is inordinately afraid of what is implied by the term Fascism, but in reality much of it has arrived. The Saito Cabinet itself may be said to be one such instance in so far as it has suspended many of the functions of the Diet as a machine for the discussion of national plans.¹⁰

Postwar Japanese discussion of Imperial Japan embraces the basis for these fears and generally acknowledges the applicability of the term fascist to the period. This is not the case with western scholars, and perhaps no single topic—with the possible exception of the Nanjing Incident—so squarely divides research of current historians and social scientists in Japan and the west.¹¹ In general, western scholars reject the use of the term, while their Japanese counterparts largely embrace it.

In the prewar era, the situation was almost the exact reverse; western writers

overwhelmingly condemned Imperial Japan as a fascist nation and Japanese writers often denied it, choosing to describe events in terms of Japanism or *Nipponshugi*. Members of the right wing were routinely accused of being fascists, even in the Japanese press, but for reasons that remain unclear they often denied any connection. Why do modern scholars neglect this interesting phenomenon?¹²

One trend in research, especially in the west, is to dilute the issue and talk of isolated examples of fascism having existed, hence avoiding the bigger question of whether the prewar Japanese system of government was itself fascist. Acknowledging fascism’s existence in prewar Japan, however, is different, and much easier, than saying that the Imperial Japanese Government itself was fascist. On this question, there exists at least reasonable doubt, and this doubt justifies a more careful analysis of the government of Imperial Japan. It also requires a working definition of the term fascism.

In any attempt to explain fascism, care must be taken to differentiate between definitions of fascism as theory, as political movement and as a form of government. It is one thing to say that prewar Japanese institutions, groups or even the bureaucracy were preaching a form of fascism and quite a different thing to say that they were practicing fascism as we understand it to have been applied in Italy and Germany. There exist great discrepancies between what Mussolini and Hitler preached before they

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⁹ Miles Fletcher “Intellectuals and Fascism in Early Showa Japan,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. XXXIX, No. 1, (November 1979), 41. [Fletcher, however, argues that Fascism never existed as a system in Imperial Japan.]

¹⁰ Baba Tsunego, “Conflict of Fascism and Parliamentarism,” *The Trans-Pacific*, September 1, 1932, 4.

¹¹ McCormack, 32.

¹² Nishi, 159-160.

came to power and what are generally recognized to have been the policies their Fascist and National-Socialist governments put into practice. Therefore, at the very outset I wish to postulate that fascism as theory and fascism in application may be so glaringly different as to render them unrelated for all practical purposes.

When Ivan Morris writes, “‘Fascism’ has lost much of its semantic value since it came to be bandied about as a pejorative to describe unpopular people or ideas,”¹³ he unwittingly outlines the overwhelming problem with many postwar discussions of the term. In 2005 “fascist” is often an epithet for any group perceived as reactionary or authoritarian. Hence, we see left-wing groups referring to the United States Government as fascist at the same time that we find members of the government referring to hate groups such as the Aryan Nation and the Ku Klux Klan as fascist. This tendency has rendered many postwar discussions of fascism inapplicable, bringing to mind Hannah Arendt’s assessment of the earliest attempts to articulate fascism:

It is one of the oddities of the literature of totalitarianism that very early attempts by contemporaries at writing its “history,” which according to all academic rules were bound to founder on the lack of impeccable source material and emotional over commitment, have stood the test of time remarkably well.¹⁴

This situation has prompted the current intellectual revisiting of fascism through primary source material, specifically Benito Mussolini’s 1932 article “The Doctrine of Fascism” and the Fascist Minister of Justice

Alfredo Rocco’s 1925 work *The Political Doctrine of Fascism*. Both are oblivious to concepts of fascism as a pejorative and both purport to be blueprints for fascism in theory. Since neither attempts to draw parallels between their discussion and the actual infrastructure of the Italian government, they also neatly avoid the problem of how fascism in application and theory may differ. It is important to bear in mind, however, that by 1932 the Italian Fascist Party, *Fascio di Combattimento*, had existed for more than 13 years, and Mussolini had been in power for nearly ten years, three as prime minister and seven as dictator. One would assume then that it is possible to connect fascist theory with fascism as a form of government, and Mussolini appears to do just that when he writes,

Fascism is today clearly defined not only as a regime but as a doctrine. And I mean by this that Fascism today, self-critical as well as critical of other movements, has an unequivocal point of view of its own, a criterion, and hence an aim, in [the] face of all the material and intellectual problems which oppress the people of the world.¹⁵

Nevertheless, this article may have been a source of later confusion since Mussolini keeps the discussion on a theoretical level and never links Fascist doctrine with his own regime. Instead the article limits itself to bombastic and high-sounding guidelines for Fascism in theory.

Despite this shortfall, the use of Mussolini’s work—as the founder of the Fascist movement and the originator of the term *Fascismo*¹⁶—is without question valid.

¹³ Ivan Morris (Editor), *Japan 1931-1945: Militarism, Fascism, Japanism?* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1963), vii.

¹⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), xxix.

¹⁵ Carl Cohen, *Communism, Fascism, and Democracy: The Theoretical Foundations* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1972), 333. (Hereafter quotes from Mussolini’s “The Doctrine of Fascism” will be marked with M:DF)

¹⁶ Derived from the Italian word *fasciare* which means to bind or envelop. The intent being that Fascism would bind Italy into an organic entity. The symbol of the *Fascisti* being the fasces: a bundle of rods bound about an ax with projecting blade, carried before ancient Roman magistrates as a symbol of authority.

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Rocco's *The Political Doctrine of Fascism* is cited because it is one of the earliest published attempts to codify what was meant by the term and because Mussolini wholeheartedly approved of the content as presenting "in a masterful way the doctrine of Fascism."¹⁷ Fascism, in its original form, was a movement of action not formulae—the Italian Fascist regime's earliest slogan was: "No dogma! Discipline suffices!"¹⁸ As a result, confusion over the meaning of fascism has existed from the very start. Angelo Tasca, a prewar Italian Marxist, in attempting to define Fascism acknowledged the impossibility of the task and finally concluded that, "Fascism is a dictatorship; such is the starting point of all definitions that have so far been attempted. Beyond that there is no agreement . . . Our way of defining fascism is to write its history."¹⁹

Writing at the beginning of Fascism's history, Mussolini and Rocco²⁰ had no need to monitor consistency between theory and practice whether in Italy or in any other society. They were therefore able to avoid one of the more vexing questions now facing modern scholars—how to define Fascism so that it can be used as a comparative term. Rocco begins by identifying the salient points found in the political doctrines against which Fascism would position itself and then contrasts them with his vision of the movement:

Fascism never raises the question of methods, using in its political praxis now

liberal ways, now democratic means and at times even socialistic devices. This indifference to method often exposes Fascism to the charge of incoherence on the part of superficial observers, who do not see that what counts with us is the end and that therefore even when we employ the same means we act with a radically different spirit and strive for entirely different results.²¹

It is clear from this passage that Rocco embraces the idea that Fascism was multifaceted and at times contradictory²² and this has far-reaching implications for the current debate.

If we accept Rocco's admission that for fascism the goal and not the means is the key to any understanding of the term, then we accept the idea that fascism might assume many forms in different countries and situations. The end toward which Rocco and Mussolini were striving was the creation of an all-powerful State that would play the central role in organizing the lives and livelihood of all its citizens. How this was achieved was less important for them than its realization. This dispels many of the most ubiquitous complaints about the application of the term fascism to Imperial Japan, that the political realities of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and Imperial Japan defy a common definition. The position of many Japanese scholars that "sometimes incidental differences add up to an essential difference"²³ is a failure to come to grips with

¹⁷ Introduction by Mussolini to Rocco's *The Political Doctrine of Fascism*. In Cohen, 315.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 314.

¹⁹ Angelo Tasca, *The Rise of Italian Fascism, 1918-1922* (New York: H. Fertig Co., 1966), 337. As quoted in McCormack, 22.

²⁰ Both men were admirers of Niccolò de Bernardo Machiavelli, 1469-1527, and perhaps this can explain Fascism's expediency, craftiness, and duplicity of thought between theory and application.

²¹ Cohen, 321. (Hereafter quotes from Rocco's *The Political Doctrine of Fascism* will be marked with R:PDF)

²² Peter Duus and Daniel Okimoto, writing in the *Journal of Asian Studies*, comment that, "Definitions of fascism come in all shapes and sizes, some precise and some diffuse, some mutually contradictory." This is stating the obvious and—given Rocco's comments—falls far short of justifying their argument that the term fascism doesn't apply to Imperial Japan. Peter Duus and Daniel I. Okimoto. "Fascism and the History of Pre-War Japan: The Failure of a Concept," *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. XXXIX, no. 1 (November 1979), 65.

²³ *Ibid.*, 66.

the intentions of fascism's creators.

Giovanni Gentile, Mussolini's Minister of Education and a prominent Fascist theoretician, commented that Fascism, "by virtue of its repugnance for 'intellectualism,' prefers not to waste time constructing abstract theories about itself."²⁴ Given this reticence, modern scholars are misguided when they attempt a definition that depends on specificity of political methods and structures. It seems clear that the government of Fascist Italy exhibited a preference for pragmatic political action unfettered by political principles. François Furet, noted French historian, writes in *The Passing of an Illusion* about the Machiavellian nature of fascism and even goes so far as to draw tentative comparisons to Soviet Communism—its political and intellectual opposite—when he says that both embraced the "concept that anything that served the cause was good."²⁵

If Fascists saw their movement as one that was free to draw from myriad political resources and apply them to fit specific situations, then there seems no reason why fascism could not take very different forms in European and Asian countries. Although Gentile insisted that Fascism, ". . . is not a political theory which may be stated in a series of formulae,"²⁶ modern analysts generally understand fascism in application to be ". . . the totalitarian organization of government and society by a single-party dictatorship,

intensely nationalist, racialist, militarist and imperialist."²⁷ Obviously this is oversimplified, but this definition certainly applies to Fascist Italy; similarly, Japanese writers in the 1930s seem to have understood fascism in this light. Writing in 1932, the same year that Mussolini's article was published, Yoshino Sakuzo²⁸ wrote,

To define Fascism is an extremely difficult task. We can, however, say in general terms that it implies the rule of the disciplined and resolute few as against that of the undisciplined and irresolute many. It is anti-democratic, and particularly anti-parliamentarian; it is national rather than international; and it tends to dignify the State as against the

individual, or any group of individuals, except of course the resolute group in whose hands power is concentrated. These are the ideas which animate the various groups in Japan [. . .] and therefore, in spite of their occasional

repudiation of the title, they can reasonably be called Fascists.²⁹

Yoshino's comment poses an interesting question: why *was* it necessary for prewar Japanese, not only members of the *uyoku* but members of the military, the bureaucracy and the even the political parties—most notably the *Seiyukai*—to deny that they were fascist? And if these groups and individuals weren't fascist, why did so many writers describe them as such? What motivated the prewar media to discuss Japan's political dynamics

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²⁴ Cohen, 341.

²⁵ François Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 170 and 172.

²⁶ Cohen, 340.

²⁷ William Ebenstein, *Today's ISMS: Communism, Fascism, Capitalism, Socialism* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), 105.

²⁸ Yoshino Sakuzo: 1878 to 1933; Yoshino is considered to have been the foremost democratic theorist in the Taisho and early Showa Eras.

²⁹ Yoshino Sakuzo, "Fascism in Japan," *Contemporary Japan*, vol. I, no. 2 (September 1932), 185.

in terms of fascism? In 1936, *The Trans-Pacific* ran an interview with Colonel Hashimoto Kingoro³⁰ under the title “Head of New Party Denies He’s Fascist:”

Some people say that I am a Fascist or a semi-Hitler made in Japan, they do not understand my intentions. I am no ordinary retired soldier . . . Look at our party flag. It is a white sun against a red ground. In the white heat of the sun, we are to serve the Emperor with blood-red patriotism. Just watch me! Hashimoto is no man to sit still and just talk!³¹

Hashimoto’s flowery denial aside, contemporaries often described him as a National-Socialist and a Fascist. His Great Japan Young Men’s Party, *Dai Nippon Seinen To*, affected the imagery of Mussolini’s black-shirted Fascists with black versions of the Imperial Japanese Army’s uniforms and a flag that was little more than a copy of Hitler’s Nazi flag minus the swastika. Moreover, Hashimoto’s politics focused on a strong centralized government at home and an aggressive policy of conquest overseas. Should Hashimoto’s denials be believed? What quality other than the fact that he was Japanese, and not Italian or German, distinguished his agenda from fascism?

Was Imperial Japan Fascist?

Prewar Japan exhibited many of the traits that modern scholars ascribe to fascism. Japan in the early Showa Era was intensely nationalistic, racist (including the pervasive belief on the part of the Japanese that they were racially superior both to westerners and other Asians), militaristic and also imperialistic.³² What seems to be missing is, in Ebenstein’s words, a “totalitarian organization of government and society by a single party dictatorship.”³³

If, however, we accept that by 1940, following the disbanding of the *Minseito*, the *Seiyukai* and prewar Japan’s other political parties,³⁴ the Imperial Rule Assistance Association (IRAA) or *Taisei Yokusan Kai*, was the only political party in existence,³⁵ and if we acknowledge that the Meiji Constitution accorded the Emperor broad discretionary powers³⁶ and granted him *de facto* commander-in-chief status over both the Imperial Japanese Army and Navy, in addition to awarding him the power to initiate and institute legislation, then the basic framework for fascism appears to have been firmly in place in Imperial Japan in the immediate prewar period.³⁷

Some writers, notably John Holiday in his Marxist study of Japanese capitalism,

³⁰ Hashimoto Kingoro: 1890 to 1957; Hashimoto was a militant xenophobe and one of the founders of the Cherry Blossom Society, *Sakura Kai*. He was tried and convicted by the IMTFE as a Class “A” war criminal in 1948.

³¹ Staff, “Head of New Party Denies He’s Fascist,” *The Trans-Pacific*, October 29, 1936, 14.

³² Ban Hou, *Nihon Fascism no Koubou [The Rise and Fall of Japanese Fascism]* (Tokyo: Rakkou Shuppan, 1989), 146. Nakamura Kikuo, *Tennou-sei Fascism-ron [Fascist Emperor Worship Theory]*, (Tokyo: Hara Shobou, 1967), 68-74.

³³ Ebenstein, 105.

³⁴ Gordon Berger writes, “. . . by 1940, all political party organizations had disappeared from Japanese politics.” Gordon Mark Berger, *Parties Out of Power in Japan 1931-1941* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977), viii.

³⁵ Clearly, the absence of other political parties did not mean that the IRAA was an all-powerful totalitarian-style party. As Edward J. Drea says: “The IRAA, despite superficial appearances reinforced by strident new order rhetoric, was not a locus of authority or even of significant influence.” Nonetheless, the absence of other political parties cannot be overlooked when discussing the degree of change that took place in the Japanese government from the Meiji Era through the end of World War II. Edward J. Drea, *The 1942 Japanese General Election: Political Mobilization in Wartime Japan* (Lawrence: Center for East Asian Studies, The University of Kansas, 1979), 18.

³⁶ Granted, Emperor Hirohito may have exercised these powers sparingly; however, *The Japan Year Book: 1934* states, perhaps slightly facetiously, “The actual power of the Emperor at the present time is much greater than that of other constitutional monarchs.” Inahara K. (Editor) [The Foreign Affairs Association of Japan’s] *The Japan Year Book: 1934* (Tokyo: Kenkyusha Press, 1934), 129. (Hereafter referred to as JYB:34) Or as confirmed by the IMTFE’s prosecution team: “Basically, all executive power is vested in the Emperor.” IMTFE, 663.

³⁷ Nihon Gendai-shi Kenkyuu-kai (Editor), 34-35.

have even argued that we need not focus on the period immediately prior to the start of World War II concluding that, "If Japan was 'fascist' in 1941, it should perhaps be called 'fascist' in 1915."³⁸ And yet, the consensus that Imperial Japan was *not* fascist includes virtually every western writer on the topic of Imperial Japan, including Gordon Berger, James Crowley, Peter Duus, Richard Mitchell, Daniel Okimoto, Mark Peattie, Ben-Ami Shillony, Richard Smethurst, George Wilson and even the writers of general histories of Japan.³⁹

What quality of fascism as practiced in other countries was so glaringly different that western scholars reject it so universally when applied to Imperial Japan?⁴⁰ Could it merely be that there has been a failure to understand the spirit of fascism; a failure to understand that fascism in theory and practice might be quite different; a failure to understand the Machiavellian nature of fascism? Abe Horozumi states in the conclusion to his *Nihon Fashizumu Kenkyu Josetsu* (Introduction to Japanese Fascism Research),

One cannot escape the impression that research on Japanese fascism is very divided and confused on the theoretical level. Confusion in fascism theory is not confined to Japan but ... since the late 1960s is a worldwide phenomenon.⁴¹

This needn't be the case. If we return to primary sources, it becomes clear that

Mussolini's vision existed in Imperial Japan on many levels.

The Imperial Japanese military and bureaucracy placed great emphasis on collective belonging and a shared past. Starting in the Meiji, Taisho and certainly in the early Showa Era there was no lack of government-sponsored propaganda designed to help the average Japanese citizen to see his place in terms of the "family," the "household," the "nation,"⁴² and their relationship to the Emperor in an unbroken line through history.⁴³ This process stressed the sacred importance of Japanese language, culture and history. Part of this indoctrination was an emphasis on the importance of the *kokutai*, literally the "body of the State," in which the concept of the individual must be subsumed. This is an important element of Fascism as Mussolini saw it:

For the Fascist, everything is the State, and nothing human or spiritual exists, much less has value, outside the State. In this sense Fascism is totalitarian, and the Fascist State, the synthesis and unity of all values, interprets, develops and gives strength to the whole life of the people.⁴⁴

The leaders of the Imperial Japanese bureaucracy, notably Hiranuma Kiichiro,⁴⁵ saw the relationship of Japanese citizens to the *kokutai* in very similar terms, and it can be argued that this is what Prime Minister

³⁸ John Halliday. *A Political History of Japanese Capitalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), 139. Halliday, however, argues against the applicability of fascism for Imperial Japan because of what he terms its "Eurocentric resonance."

³⁹ McCormack, 28.

⁴⁰ It has been suggested that these writers reject the term fascism because it limits their ability to recast Imperial Japan as an emerging democracy that was sidetracked by the rise of militarism in the 1930s.

⁴¹ McCormack, 32. Abe, 5.

⁴² See: Robert King Hall (editor), *Kokutai No Hongi: Cardinal Principles of the National Entity of Japan*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949), 97-98.

⁴³ For a more in-depth discussion, see: Drea, 3. Drea in turn is working from Ishii Kinichiro's "*Nihon Fuashizumu to Chido Seido*" (Japanese Fascism and the Regional System) *Rekishigaku Kenkyu*, no. 307, (December 1965), 2.

⁴⁴ Cohen (M:DF), 330-331.

⁴⁵ Baron Hiranuma Kiichiro: 1867 to 1952; founder of the National Foundation Society, *Kokuhonsha*; president of the Privy Council from 1936 to 1939 (and again in 1945); prime minister January to August 1939; home minister and minister of state in both the second and third Konoye Cabinets 1940-1941; convicted as a Class "A" war criminal by the IMTFE in 1948.

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Konoye Fumimaro⁴⁶ was attempting, at the instigation of the Imperial Japanese military, with the passage of the National General Mobilization Law, *Kokka Sodojin Ho*.⁴⁷ This law aimed not merely to create an all-encompassing war economy but also to coalesce the Japanese citizenry into obedient and awe-inspired subjects of the State. For what was the *kokutai* supposed to represent if it wasn't the sum total of all that existed in Japan—a State that included every subject of the Empire under the divine rule of the Emperor. Not merely an absolute ruler, the Emperor was a divine ruler, and in his will was found the *raison d'être* of the Japanese nation. This is fascism as Mussolini envisioned it:

Individuals form classes according to the similarity of their interests, they form syndicates according to differentiated economic activities within these interests; but they form first, and above all, the State . . . Not a race, nor a geographically determined region, but a community historically perpetuating itself, a multitude unified by a single idea, which is the will to existence and to power.⁴⁸

In the case of Imperial Japan this will to existence and power was understood to be the will of the Emperor and the *kokutai* that he embodied. Had Mussolini written “The

Doctrine of Fascism” in the 19th century, the Meiji oligarchs might well have used it as a blueprint for their vision of Imperial Japan, since it so closely parallels what they attempted. As Carol Gluck writes, “It was not enough that the polity [*kokutai*] be centralized, the economy developed, social classes rearranged, international recognition striven for—the people must also be ‘influenced,’ their minds and hearts made one.”⁴⁹

Fascism may not have existed in 1868, but the ideals that form the core of Mussolini's vision are concepts and values that the nation-building Meiji oligarchs shared. They saw Imperial Japan not in the light of democratic European nations, not in the light of a nation of individuals like the United States, but as a nation of one heart and mind.⁵⁰ As Hiranuma Kiichiro outlined in a speech in 1932:

Our nation is constituted of one ruler, in an unbroken line of Imperial descent, and his subjects. It is a nation based upon the centralization of the Imperial Family, with the entire people assisting the ruler in the realization of national ideals. In other words, it is the duty of the people, under the Emperor, to exert their best efforts towards the accomplishment of the tasks allotted to them.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Konoye Fumimaro: 1891 to 1945; Konoye was prime minister three times during the critical period leading up to the start of World War II (1937-1941). In late 1945, following the end of the war, the Occupation Headquarters of SCAP (Supreme Command of the Allied Powers) issued an order for Konoye's arrest as a possible war criminal. On the last day for his voluntary appearance before the authorities, he committed suicide.

⁴⁷ Yanaga Chitoshi describes the National General Mobilization Law, *Kokka Sodojin Ho*, by saying that it “. . . was a *carte blanche* delegation of wartime legislative powers to the Cabinet, empowering the government to legislate by ordinance even in those areas of individual rights and freedom that were provided by the Constitution. It constituted a statutory suspension, if not virtual death sentence, of parliamentary government. In effect, the legislative body was superseded by the bureaucracy, which achieved a position of supremacy in the wartime structure created by the National General Mobilization Law.” Yanaga Chitoshi, *Japan Since Perry* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1949), 534.

⁴⁸ Cohen (M:DF), 331.

⁴⁹ Carol Gluck, *Japan's Modern Myths* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985), 3.

⁵⁰ Tetsuo Najita says of Ito Hirobumi's search for a model for the Meiji Constitution that British, American, Italian and French models were rejected for various reasons and that finally the constitution of newly unified Germany was chosen as a model specifically because Germany, “had written a constitution explicitly to accord with the realization of national unification.” Clearly, unification of the nation-state, not the establishment of popular-rights, was the goal of the Meiji oligarchs in adopting the constitutional form that they chose. Tetsuo Najita, *The Intellectual Foundations of Modern Japanese Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 83.

⁵¹ Staff, “Hiranuma Outlines Nationalist Ideals,” *The Trans-Pacific*, April 28, 1932, 12.

It didn't matter that, like puppet masters, the Meiji oligarchs told the Emperor what his vision would be; what mattered was that they created a particular cornucopia of modern myths and values that with the passage of time created the foundation for a "fascist" nation. Imperial Japan was fascist not because it successfully copied what was happening in Italy and Germany but because that is what the Meiji oligarchs intended it to be, though at the time they lacked the particular word to describe it as such.

***Kodo* as Fascism**

It is generally taken for granted that following General Araki Sadao's⁵² ousting from the position of Army Minister in 1934, and certainly following his forced retirement in the wake of the February 26th Incident, that Araki had not only fallen from favor, but had also been expelled from the halls of power. Nothing could be further from the truth. Araki never ceased to influence developments, and he used his frequent calls for *Kodo*⁵³ as a way to stay in the public eye. Certainly by the late 1930s, with his ascent to the position of Minister of Education in the first Konoye and then Hiranuma cabinets, Araki was assured a vocal role in the government, and he used his position aggressively to shape the minds of Japanese youth as he saw fit.⁵⁴

Much as Mussolini established an

educational system that glorified the military and was designed to place Fascism uppermost in the minds of Italian youth, Araki promoted *Kodo* through a highly centralized educational system. Mussolini's schools, with four-year-olds in Fascist uniform and eight-year-olds drilling with scale models of army rifles, certainly would not have seemed out of place in Imperial Japan in the 1930s. For Alfredo Rocco and the Italian Fascist State he described, education was part of the process by which the government ensured the guided development of the masses:

For Fascism, society is the end, individuals the means, and its whole life consists in using individuals as instruments for its social ends. The State therefore guards and protects the welfare and development of individuals not for their exclusive interest, but because of the identity of the needs of individuals with those of society as a whole.⁵⁵

Araki echoes these sentiments when he explains that the Emperor's will is the will of the nation:

Here in Japan the Emperor represents the highest welfare of the nation. We regard him much as Christians regard Christ and God. We are only doing his will; there is no room in any subject for his own selfish activities!⁵⁶

Clearly both *Kodo* and fascism sought to

“IMPERIAL JAPAN WAS FASCIST NOT BECAUSE IT SUCCESSFULLY COPIED WHAT WAS HAPPENING IN ITALY AND GERMANY BUT BECAUSE THAT IS WHAT THE MEIJI OLIGARCHS INTENDED IT TO BE...”

⁵² Baron Araki Sadao: 1877 to 1966; chief ideological exponent of the Imperial Way, *Kodo*; Army Minister in the Inukai, 1931-1932, and Saito Cabinets, 1932-1934; Minister of Education in the first Konoye, June 1937-January 1939, and Hiranuma cabinets, January-August 1939; tried and convicted as a Class "A" war criminal by the IMTFE in 1948.

⁵³ *Kodo*, literally the "Way of the Emperor," or Imperial Way, was a popular movement in Japan during the Showa Era that loosely traced its origins to the Chinese philosophy of *Wun Tao*, the Kingly Way, which preached the benefits of emulating the—theoretically—pure and enlightened way of the King.

⁵⁴ Ban, 69-71. Nakamura, 71-72.

⁵⁵ Cohen (R:PDF), 323.

⁵⁶ Charles Hodges, "In Japan—The Imperial Way: An Authorized Interview with War Minister Araki," *Asia*, vol. XXXIV, no. 2, (February 1934), 86.

Japan subordinate the needs of the individual to the needs of the state, and both saw the state benevolently protecting the individual in return for his or her commitment to the greater good.

In his attempt to explain the difference between fascism and *Kodo*, Araki reveals that he doesn't clearly understand the way Fascist Italy operated, and at the same time he attributes to the Showa Emperor political power out of all proportion to his actual role.⁵⁷ Araki does succeed, however, in showing that in many respects the role of the Army in Fascist Italy and its relationship to Mussolini were synonymous with *Kodo*'s view of the Imperial Japanese Army's role and relationship to the Emperor:

Here is the fundamental difference [between Fascism and *Kodo*!] In Italy the Black Shirts go to their King with certain demands; then they put them into execution and carry them out. In Japan the initiative is taken by the Emperor. The Emperor gets his inspiration divinely. Unless you have studied the principles known to the Chinese as *wun tao*—the kingly way—you can never understand the spirit of Japan's government and defense institutions . . . The position of the defense institution is historical. Japan's soldiers at present are inspired by the same spirit that moved them two thousand years ago . . . But we in the army wish to correct the errors which have crept into the actual operation of the government . . . If there is any obstacle in the way of its realization, it is the duty of soldiers to remove it. But the Emperor has always

commanded. Accordingly, the soldiers belong directly to the Emperor; none is responsible to any but the Emperor. This is a direct relationship of profound importance to our country; it expresses the true spirit of the Japanese Army!⁵⁸

The spirit of Araki's statements is reflected in the *Ten Commandments of the Italian Soldier*,⁵⁹ which states, "One thing must be dear to you above all: the life of the *Duce*."⁶⁰ Much as the Imperial Japanese Army owed its allegiance directly to the Emperor, the Italian military was to owe its allegiance directly to Mussolini, bypassing any aspect of the legislature. In return the State, in the person of Mussolini, was understood to embody the spirit of the nation. Allegiance to Mussolini was allegiance to the State. And in duty to the State, the Fascist found the highest goal possible for the individual. As Mussolini said,

Fascism is a religious conception in which man is seen in his immanent relationship with a superior law and with an objective Will that transcends the particular individual and raises him to conscious membership in a spiritual society. Whoever has seen in the religious politics of the Fascist regime nothing but mere opportunism has not understood that Fascism besides being a system of government is also, and above all, a system of thought.⁶¹

Kodo, as explained by Araki, ascribed this same quasi-religious status to concepts of duty to the State, in this case the Japanese state and Emperor. The loftiest goal for the individual was the sublimation of their will to that of the Emperor. This was an ideal to which all Japanese, and eventually all people,

⁵⁷ For a recent discussion of just how much power the Showa Emperor wielded, see Herbert P. Bix's *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000).

⁵⁸ Hodges, 87.

⁵⁹ Cohen, 363.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 330.

were supposed to subscribe.⁶² This is entirely consistent with Fascism as Mussolini describes it:

Fascism faces squarely the problem of the right of the State and of the duty of individuals. Individual rights are only recognized in so far as they are implied in the rights of the State. In this preeminence of duty we find the highest ethical value of Fascism.⁶³

In 1932, the same year that Mussolini made this statement, Hiranuma Kiichiro, a vocal proponent of *Kodo*, made a speech explaining the position of the National Foundation Society, *Kokuhonsha*. The speech contained the following:

The Japanese race loves life, and its national life is the greatest of all that it loves. The individual Japanese never hesitates to sacrifice his life for the maintenance of that great national life . . . In our country, militarism from time immemorial has been considered one of the most important national practices, because it is necessary for the realization of that morality which is the highest object of this nation. It is apparent that we must use militarism as a means of self-defense against any force obstructing the attainment of our highest ideal.⁶⁴

Hiranuma ends his speech by specifically mentioning fascism and offers the following

odd disclaimer:

Fascism, which has become popular of late, is the product of a foreign country resulting from national circumstances in that country. Our country has its [own] independent object and its [own] independent mission.⁶⁵

Hiranuma doesn't seem to be denying any similarities between *Kodo* and fascism, nor does he seem to reject fascism; rather he merely suggests that *Kodo* is indigenous and fascism is foreign. What then was *Kodo* if not fascism for the Japanese? Mussolini said,

Life as conceived by the Fascist, is serious, austere, religious: the whole of it is poised in a world supported by the moral and responsible forces of the spirit. The Fascist disdains the "comfortable" life.⁶⁶

Couldn't Araki or Hiranuma have said the same thing? One need only substitute "practitioner of *Kodo*" for Fascist and the quote could have come from any number of patriotic Japanese in the prewar era. Speaking in his capacity as Foreign Minister in the second Konoye Government (July 1940 to July 1941), Matusoka Yosuke⁶⁷ said:

. . . the mission of Japan is to proclaim and demonstrate *Kodo* throughout the world. Viewed from the standpoint of international relations, this amounts, I think, to enabling all nations and races to

⁶² On August 1, 1940 the Imperial Japanese Government released the following official announcement, "The world stands at a great historic turning point, and it is about to witness the creation of new forms of government, economy, and culture, based upon the growth and development of sundry groups of states. . . The basic aim of Japan's national policy lies in the firm establishment of world peace in accordance with the lofty spirit of *Hakko Ichiu* [The Eight Corners of the World Under One Roof], in which the country was founded, and in the construction, as the first step, of a new order in Greater East Asia, having for its foundation the solidarity of Japan, Manchoukuo and China." When this announcement speaks of "the firm establishment of world peace in accordance with the lofty spirit of *Hakko Ichiu*" it is referring to an eventual peace that will come to the world after the establishment of a new world order that recognizes Imperial Japanese hegemony in Asia and ultimately over the entire world. Documentary Material. "Japanese Government Announcement, August 1, 1940 (Tentative Translation)," *Contemporary Japan*, vol. IX, no. 9 (September 1940), 1223.

⁶³ Cohen (R:PDF), 324.

⁶⁴ *The Trans-Pacific* (April 28 1932), 12. Quote by Hiranuma)

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 12. Quote by Hiranuma.

⁶⁶ Cohen (M:DF), 330.

⁶⁷ Matsuoka Yosuke: 1880 to 1946; in addition to being the director of the South Manchurian Railway, Matsuoka had a long and successful affiliation with the Foreign Ministry culminating in his appointment as Foreign Minister in the second Konoye Cabinet. The IMTFE charged Matsuoka as a Class "A" war criminal but he fell ill and died soon after the trial began in 1946. See Matsuoka Yosuke, "Dissolve the Political Parties," *Contemporary Japan*, vol. II, no. 4 (March 1934), 661-667.

find each its proper place in the world . . . The immediate aim of our foreign policy at present is to establish in accordance with the lofty spirit of *Kodo*, a great East Asian chain of common prosperity with the Japanese-Manchukuo-China group as one of the links. We shall thus be able to demonstrate *Kodo* in the most effective manner, and pave the way toward the establishment of an equitable world peace.⁶⁸

When Matsuoka spoke of the need to “proclaim and demonstrate *Kodo*,” he meant invasion. When he spoke of “enabling all nations and races to find each its proper place in the world,” he refers to the imposition on these nations of a subordinate status to that of Imperial Japan.⁶⁹ *Kodo* on the international level was a colorful euphemism for Japanese imperialism. When Araki, Matsuoka, Hashimoto, Nakano, and others spoke of *Kodo* enlightening the Japanese people and eventually all of Asia, were they not speaking of a commitment to a racist and imperialistic concept predicated on the belief that it was Imperial Japan’s duty to militarize and eventually dominate all of Asia?⁷⁰ Isn’t this consistent with Mussolini’s view of the Fascist State?

The Fascist State is a will to power and to government . . . In the doctrine of Fascism Empire is not only a territorial, military or mercantile expression, but

spiritual or moral . . . For Fascism the tendency to Empire, that is to say, to the expansion of nations, is a manifestation of vitality.⁷¹

Why debate the form that fascism took in different nations when it is clear that Imperial Japan subscribed to a theory and policy largely consistent with Mussolini’s vision? Indeed, when Hiranuma Kiichiro became Prime Minister in January 1939, many feared that it signaled Japan’s abandonment of constitutional monarchy.⁷² So serious was this fear that *Seiyukai* Diet members required Hiranuma to explain why *Kodo* was not synonymous with totalitarianism during a session of the Diet on January 24.⁷³ *The Trans-Pacific*’s January 12, 1939 editorial commented,

Leaders in the principal Tokyo journals stressed that installation of Baron Hiranuma as Premier only means [an] extension of the Konoye Cabinet, not the opening of a new stringent period of Fascism, and attempted to assuage public misgivings by loud-peddling [the] belief that the baron has forsaken much of his former reformist ideals.⁷⁴

Kodo may never have been the official policy of the Imperial Japanese Government, but it was cited so often by officials that it is unclear at what point it deviated from official policy. Following the beginning of the war in China in 1937, *Kodo* suddenly joined “holy war”⁷⁵ in the average Japanese vocabulary.

⁶⁸ Documentary material, “Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yosuke’s Statement, August 1, 1940,” *Contemporary Japan*, vol. IX, no. 9 (September 1940), 1225.

⁶⁹ See: Chapter 10 “Global Policy With The Yamato Race As Nucleus” in John Dower’s *War Without Mercy* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 262-290.

⁷⁰ As Chief Prosecutor Keenan said in his opening address: “By the military alliance with Germany and Italy it was sought to create a new world order in which Japan was recognized as the leader in Greater East Asia, and Germany and Italy as the leaders in Europe.” IMTFE, 448.

⁷¹ Cohen (M:DF), 339.

⁷² *The Trans-Pacific* reprinted an article from the *Asahi Shimbun*, which attempted to allay these fears. See: “Shift to Right Unlikely,” *The Trans-Pacific*, January 12th 1939, 1.

⁷³ Yanaga, 536.

⁷⁴ Editor. “Japanese Press Views,” *The Trans-Pacific*, January 12, 1939, 5.

⁷⁵ See: “Hiranuma Seeks Greater Strength for Nation; Pledges to Surmount Crisis Confronting Orient,” *The Trans-Pacific*, January 12, 1939, 8.

Newspapers and official statements from the Cabinet Information Board became inundated with both terms and by 1941, no official statement of foreign policy was possible without some reference to *Kodo*. When officials like Hiranuma denied that Imperial Japan was fascist they often said that Japan's motives and theories were wholly Japanese in origin and in so doing they cited *Kodo* as the guiding light of Imperial Japanese foreign and domestic policy; but what was *Kodo*? Many attempted definitions, notably Araki Sadao, but the sum total of these explanations is such that no meaning of any substance results.

I would suggest that *Kodo*, like fascism, was a doctrine of action; a movement that freely drew from many different political, cultural, religious and social sources; that it largely defied definition and, as an anti-intellectual force, resisted codification. Nevertheless, certain characteristics may be ascribed to *Kodo*: it believed in the subordination of the individual to the will of the *kokutai*; it spoke of the superiority of the Japanese race; it stressed Japan's ancient origins and spoke of a historical mission that harked back to traditional Japanese concepts of militarism and expansion abroad. *Kodo* taught that duty and discipline came before freedom of thought and action; and perhaps most importantly, *Kodo* supported the trend toward Japanese totalitarianism in its glorification of Emperor worship. *Kodo* was in fact a form of fascism. The only thing stopping prewar Japanese from saying this directly was a stubborn sense of pride and a glaring case of ethnocentrism that didn't allow them to admit

“...KODO SUPPORTED THE TREND TOWARD JAPANESE TOTALITARIANISM IN ITS GLORIFICATION OF EMPEROR WORSHIP.”

to any similarities between Imperial Japan and a foreign country like Fascist Italy.

The Question of Democracy

William Ebenstein, a noted political scientist and expert on totalitarianism, argues that “Fascism is *postdemocratic* and *postindustrial*: Fascism is impossible in countries with no democratic experience at all.”⁷⁶ If we accept Ebenstein's view it raises important questions about the validity of holding up the democratic character of the prewar Japanese constitutional monarchy as proof that fascism could not, or did not, exist. When George M. Wilson argues that the concept of “Japanese Fascism” is mistaken because Japanese constitutional authority remained nominally intact,⁷⁷ he seems to be following an intellectual dead end. Ebenstein does not hesitate to disagree; he states quite clearly that “[Imperial] Japan became Fascist in the 1930s, gradually evolving totalitarian institutions out of its own native heritage.”⁷⁸ Maruyama Masao agrees with Ebenstein when he argues that,

... there is no *a priori* reason for thinking that the existence of legal provisions for a constitution and for a parliamentary system is of itself proof of the absence of fascist forms of control. The political forms of single-party dictatorship or the corporate state are only the clothes in which fascism has chosen to dress itself in particular circumstances—the most effective organizational means it can find for the forcible suppression of revolutionary forces.⁷⁹

Ebenstein expands on his discussion of the

⁷⁶ Ebenstein, 106.

⁷⁷ As cited by Stanley G. Payne in *A History of Fascism 1914-1945* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 329.

⁷⁸ Ebenstein, 105.

⁷⁹ Maruyama Masao, *Thought and Behaviour in Modern Japanese Politics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 163.

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prerequisites to fascism and raises further questions about how scholars should portray Imperial Japan's democratic experience. He writes,

. . . no fascist system can arise in a country without some democratic experience (as in Germany and Japan), [however] there is not much likelihood of fascist success in countries that have experienced democracy over a long period . . .⁸⁰

From Ebenstein's point of view the rise and fall of Taisho democracy, or what Andrew Gordon calls "the movement for imperial democracy," was a prerequisite to the establishment of fascism in Japan. Democracy in Japan was not necessarily an emergent movement that was interrupted by the rise of militarism and World War II, but rather the movement for imperial democracy was a necessary but transitory stage in the evolution of Imperial Japan toward fascism.⁸¹

Fascism, as a popular movement, whether initiated from above by the government, or below by the masses, requires that the subjects of the nation-state be mobilized and engaged in order for the movement to be maintained. The establishment of a literate society, access to a lively pluralistic mass media and the awakening in the masses of a desire for more tangible benefits of citizenship—in return for their active participation in the State—are critical factors for the creation and maintenance of a fascist state. Andrew Gordon's argument that the movement for imperial democracy was typified by contradictions that explain the existence of a

large and vocal body of subjects supporting the rise of ultra-nationalism and sympathetic to overseas expansion—at the same time that they were committed to a more active role in political decision-making—is consistent with Ebenstein's argument concerning the prerequisites for the rise of fascism. Without the existence of a mobilized and engaged population, one that has experienced the benefits of democratic representation, there is little chance that fascism will arise.

The general consensus that in the period after 1931 the movement for imperial democracy was crushed by the rise of militarism and ultra-nationalism⁸² describes a scenario that, from the point of view of the political scientist, is a ripe breeding ground for the growth of fascism. Tetsuo Najita, in *The Intellectual Foundations of Modern Japanese Politics*, explains the backlash against democracy by pointing out that although the existence of party politics gave hope to many elements of society, it also

. . . created great confusion and bitterness among bureaucrats, the military, and intellectual leadership. For a nation whose security had barely been achieved and whose cultural autonomy was still at issue, partisan politics appeared an indefensible luxury, reflective of a crass insensitivity to the wishes and needs of the people.⁸³

Japan's power elite had no desire to see the movement for imperial democracy proceed unchecked and wished to channel this dynamic toward something else. Ebenstein concludes that in this type of environment the military, which is particularly vulnerable to

⁸⁰ Ebenstein, 106.

⁸¹ Tetsuo Najita, in discussing Minobe Tatsukichi and his impact on how Imperial Japan interpreted and contextualized the Meiji Constitution, reminds us that Minobe's writings, "pointed the Japanese constitution in a liberal direction quite unintended by Ito [Hirobumi] and the other [Meiji] oligarchs who built the Meiji order." Najita, 109.

⁸² Robert A. Scalapino, *Democracy and the Party Movement in Prewar Japan* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1953), 389.

⁸³ Najita, 114.

fascist propaganda due to its belief in the virtues of discipline and unity, becomes a “political menace.”⁸⁴ In the case of Imperial Japan, he writes, “fascism developed with the active and enthusiastic support of the army, which had every reason to be the main pillar of a regime committed to imperialist expansion.”⁸⁵

Ebenstein sees fascism as a movement that is typified by adherence to the following tenets: distrust of reason, denial of basic human equality, a code of behavior based on lies and violence, government by the elite, totalitarianism, racialism, imperialism, and opposition to international law and order.⁸⁶ In the case of prewar Japan, much as it was a constitutional monarchy with, at the very least, the potential for a democratic political culture, Ebenstein’s list of fascist characteristics largely applies.

Fascism by Any Other Name

Many historians, who have chosen to use the term fascism in their discussions of Imperial Japan, have sought to avoid criticism by calling it something else. Hence we see O. Tanin and E. Yohan’s “military fascism,” Herbert P. Bix’s “emperor-system fascism,” Andrew Gordon’s “imperial fascism” and any number of “other fascisms.” Those who deny the existence of fascism in Imperial Japan often point to the fact that unlike Fascism in Italy and National-Socialism in Germany, no mass movement thrust a fascist party into power in Japan, hence the need to refer to what happened in Imperial Japan by terminology specific to the situation. But must fascism come to power in only one manner?

Japan has a historical precedent of change coming through the agency of a dedicated few. This political ethic fueled the multi-faceted Japanese right wing for much of the early Showa Era, as small groups of visionaries sought change through bold action. This is termed “fascism from below” by Maruyama Masao, who wrote that “. . . the Japanese fascist movement from below remained to the last a movement of a small number of patriots—visionary, fanatic, and lacking in plan.”⁸⁷

In order for us to use the term fascism, need we be describing violent change at the hands of a mass movement such as Mussolini’s March on Rome? Many Japanese scholars fully acknowledge that this never happened in interwar Japan and yet they hold on to the notion that Imperial Japan was fascist in the 1930s and 40s. Western scholars reject this notion for various reasons; however, Maruyama Masao argues persuasively that there are at least two types of fascism and that we must differentiate

. . . between fascism that comes mainly as a result of the seizure of power by a fascist party with some kind of mass organization, and fascism that succeeds largely by permeating the existing power structure from inside. Germany, Italy and Spain are obvious pre-war examples of the former type, and Japan of the latter type.⁸⁸

The popular Western contention that we cannot apply the term fascism to Imperial Japan because there was no mass movement in support of it, nor was there a radical disjuncture between the Meiji and the Showa Eras, may rest on a superficial understanding

⁸⁴ Ebenstein, 108.

⁸⁵ Ebenstein, 109.

⁸⁶ Ebenstein, 115.

⁸⁷ Maruyama, 57.

⁸⁸ Maruyama, 167. Nishi, 162-163, 168.

⁸⁹ McCormack, 31.

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Japan of the degree of change that took place during this period.⁸⁹ While the façade of the Imperial Japanese Government remained largely unchanged from the Meiji through the early Showa era, the growth in power and prestige of party politics during the late Meiji and Taisho eras was largely eradicated by changes to the composition of the Justice and Home Ministries, the death of the *genro*, and the gradual alteration in the relative roles of the bureaucracy and the Diet during the early Showa Era. The result was a return to a power structure more in keeping with the authoritarian and bureaucratic inclinations of the statesmen in the early Meiji period.

The passing of the National General Mobilization Law, in 1938, gave the government power out of all proportion to what it had exercised during the Meiji and Taisho eras. And while Yamagata Aritomo⁹⁰ was a powerful champion of the Army, by the 1930s the Army no longer needed a single champion as it exerted great control over every aspect of both the Imperial Japanese Government and the daily lives of its citizens. How great were these changes? At the time of Hiranuma Kiichiro's ascent to the premiership in 1939, Itagaki Seishiro,⁹¹ the Army Minister, made the following official statement,

The new Cabinet will adopt the policy of the previous Cabinet in order that it may deal effectively with the new stage of the China Incident, and it will carry it out with a fresh vigor. The basic policy regarding disposal of the China Incident has been established with Imperial approval. It is immutable and will not be

affected by the Cabinet change. It is the intention of the Army to pursue its fixed course and concentrate on attainment of the objectives in the holy war.⁹²

This is not the kind of statement that subordinate ministers made. This statement clearly shows that the Army considered itself, as a result of its right of direct access to the throne, *iaku joso*,⁹³ free to influence not only domestic government policy but also to institute and initiate foreign policy outside of the jurisdiction of the constitutional government. This is not indicative of a democratic constitutional monarchy but rather of totalitarianism and a fascist State.

Itagaki's statement is evocative of one of two things: either a systematic breakdown in the legislative process as developed and practiced from the late Meiji through the Taisho and into the early Showa era, or a return to the type of authoritarian bureaucracy that existed at the beginning of the Meiji era.⁹⁴ In either case, Itagaki's statement highlights the fact that by the late 1930s and early 1940s Imperial Japan's façade of constitutional monarchy actually concealed a government controlled by the military and a sympathetic civilian bureaucracy. Imperial Japan in this period was a state committed to its own preservation and aggrandizement, operating without any need for accountability to the masses, an elitist authoritarian and imperialistic government committed to a denial of basic human equality and a code of behavior based on lies; in other words, a fascist State.

⁸⁹ Prince Yamagata Aritomo: 1838 to 1922; powerful member of the *Genro*; founder of the Imperial Japanese Army; twice prime minister 1889 to 1891 and 1898 to 1900; president of the Privy Council until his death.

⁹⁰ Itagaki Seishiro: 1885 to 1948; vice-chief of staff to the Kwangtung Army, *Kantogun*; Army minister in the first Konoye, 1937 to 1939 and Hiranuma Cabinets, January to August 1939; tried and convicted by the IMTFE as a Class "A" war criminal and sentenced to death.

⁹¹ *The Trans-Pacific*, January 12, 1939, 8.

⁹² An important aspect of the military's independence of supreme command.

⁹³ As *The Japan Year Book: 1934* states, "Up to the first half of the Taisho era the political parties could not make much progress as independent bodies, and were almost always made use of by the clan statesmen or military leaders, not having enough power of their own to form a party cabinet, but allowing themselves to become tools of [the] bureaucracy." JYB:34, 159.

Scholarship and the Meaning and Origins of Fascism

For Marxist scholars such as Karl Radek, there has never been a question about the fascist credentials of Imperial Japan. Marxist theory, unlike any other, defines fascism concisely as the final stage in the decay of monopoly capitalism. As such it was possible for Marxist writers to point to certain objective facts and conclude that they proved the existence of Japanese fascism. Radek explains fascism by saying,

Fascist dictatorship is not simply a reactionary dictatorship, like the regimes of Horthy or Tsankov.⁹⁵ It is a dictatorship of finance capital, which has been able, by employing a number of new methods, to secure for itself the support of the petty-bourgeoisie by means of a demagogic policy and mass organizations. Do these two features of fascism—(1) the domination of a monopoly capitalism, which has already been shaken, which fears a proletarian revolution, which is seeking an escape from it by way of a fascist state organization within the country, and a new war with the object of a redivision of the world, and (2) a striving to create, as a bulwark for capitalism, a mass petty-bourgeoisie movement, hoodwinked by Social-Democratic slogans—exist in Japan? Undoubtedly these two features do exist.⁹⁶

George Wilson jokingly points out that since Kita Ikki's⁹⁷ *Plan For The Reconstruction of Japan* or *Nippon Kaizo Hoan Taiko* was first published in 1919 one might suggest that

Kita, not Mussolini, first articulated a theory of fascism.⁹⁸ Mussolini, after all, convened the *Fascio di Combattimento* on March 23-1919 and, as previously cited in "The Doctrine of Fascism," freely admitted that at that time Fascism was a movement without formulae. Kita, on the other hand, had been writing and developing his ideas for years. I don't mean to endorse this theory, nor does Wilson; however it does raise interesting questions about fascism's origins.

Japanese writers, unlike their western counterparts, have long seriously entertained the possibility that the Japanese case may represent a truer model of the fascist State than either Fascist Italy or Nazi Germany. They argue that the mass mobilization of the population to serve the needs of the state, at the hands of the military and the bureaucracy—what Hasegawa called "cool fascism," that Imperial Japan experienced in the 1930s may be the yardstick against which we must measure the meaning of fascism.⁹⁹

Why do the majority of US scholars on Japan generally ignore this issue? Why doesn't anyone ever seriously entertain the idea that Imperial Japan might have invented fascism, and merely called it *Kodo*? When Peter Duus and Daniel Okimoto ask the rhetorical question, "Was the fascist strain in Japanese thought during the 1930s anything more than a manifestation of cultural continuity?,"¹⁰⁰ aren't they unwittingly confirming this suspicion? As Ebenstein points out,

In countries like Germany and Japan, the clue to the understanding of fascist tendencies lies in broad social forces and

⁹⁵ In Hungry and Bulgaria.

⁹⁶ Tanin/Yohan, 14.

⁹⁷ Kita Ikki: 1883 to 1937; author and right-wing ideologue. Kita had ties to the Young Officer's Movement, *Seinen Shoko Undo*; executed in 1937, ostensibly for his role in the February 26th Incident.

⁹⁸ Abe, 59. Ban, 62-65. Eguchi Keiichi, editor, "*Nihon Fascism*" *Ron* ["*Japanese Fascism*" Theory] (Tokyo: Kousou Shobou, 1977), 165.

⁹⁹ Abe, 13. McCormack, 32.

¹⁰⁰ Duus/Okimoto, 68.

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traditions. In those countries, the authoritarian tradition has been predominant and democracy is still a very frail plant. As a result, a German or Japanese with fascist tendencies is no outcast and may be considered perfectly well adjusted to his society.¹⁰¹

Fascists don't have to wear black or brown shirts. Maruyama Masao reminds us that, "Just as God created man in his own image, so fascism often disguises itself in the image of its enemies."¹⁰² Ebenstein confirms this:

A politician with fascist leanings who denies that he is a fascist and who emphasizes his patriotism can do much more harm than the admitted fascist who is not permitted to work within the institutional framework of public life. The danger of not recognizing this prefascist attitude is that, should it become full-fledged fascism (as it well might in an economic depression or in some other disaster of the sort that periodically shakes men's faith in democracy), recognition of it as a threat may come too late for those whose earlier judgment was too lenient.

Parallels certainly exist between Ebenstein's warning and what actually happened in Imperial Japan. As the media backlash against fascism—and fascists in government—gained momentum, most if not all Japanese accused of being fascist, or having fascist tendencies, went to great lengths to deny any connection. Even as Japanese society took on more and more obvious fascist overtones, even as the Home

Ministry and the Cabinet Information Bureau seriously curtailed freedom of the press, newspapers continued to give vent to the public's fear of a collapse of the constitutional monarchy and the declaration of a full-blown fascist state. By the time that prewar western writers were announcing the *fait accompli* existence of just such a fascist Japanese State—one allied to Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany¹⁰³—it was too late for anything to be done.

By the late 1930s the basic structure of the Imperial Japanese Government had already developed beyond its democratic phase into one defined by its reliance on authoritarian and bureaucratically instituted legislation that often originated with the Army. Indeed, Imperial Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor only served to confirm what certain writers in *Contemporary Japan, Asia* and other periodicals had been predicting for years. It wasn't until the Cold War Era rehabilitation of Japan required that historians recast their interpretations of prewar events to explain Japan's development into one of the mainstays of the capitalist block in Asia that suddenly a new generation of western writers began to challenge Imperial Japan's brand of fascism, which until then had been assumed to be an immutable fact.

Conclusion

The IMTFE's casual grouping of Imperial Japan with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy was a position based on convenience and not a scholarly analysis of events. Today we can look back at early

“...MOST IF NOT ALL JAPANESE ACCUSED OF BEING FASCIST, OR HAVING FASCIST TENDENCIES, WENT TO GREAT LENGTHS TO DENY ANY CONNECTION.”

¹⁰¹ Ebenstein, 111.
¹⁰² Maruyama, 166.
¹⁰³ 1936, Anti-Comintern Pact; 1940, Tripartite Pact.

Showa Japan and conclude that this indictment was correct regardless of the taint of victor's justice and despite the intervening 60 years during which Cold War scholarship led academics to misinterpret and recast events to fit the geopolitical realities of the world. In 2005, with the Cold War long over, it is time for this backlash to be questioned anew. It is clearly based on an overly narrow interpretation of political theory, an overly narrow interpretation of events, and it was fueled by a generation of scholars whose research and interpretations were shaped by the dynamics of the Cold War Era, all of which made it difficult for them to admit what the Japanese had known all along—that Imperial Japan was fascist.

In fact, the steps in Imperial Japan's evolution into a fascist state are clear: Imperial Japan's withdrawal from the League of Nations in 1933; the controversy over the Emperor Organ Theory, *Tenno Kikan Setsu*, in 1935; the signing of the Anti-Comintern Pact with Nazi Germany in 1936; the

promulgation of the National General Mobilization Law, *Kokka Sodojin Ho*, in 1938; the New Structure Movement, *Shin Taisei Undo*, and the dissolution of the political parties in May 1940; the signing of the Tripartite Pact with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy in September of the same year; and then the inauguration of the Imperial Rule Assistance Association, *Taisei Yokusan Kai*, in October.¹⁰⁴ During this entire period the Imperial Japanese Government used ubiquitous calls for service to the state and allegiance to the ideal of *Kodo* to shape and mold the population into just the sort of motivated yet servile populace that Mussolini and his *Fascio di Combattimento* were working toward in Fascist Italy. Members of the Japanese right wing, the military and the government may have vehemently denied that they were fascists but this doesn't in any way change the political realities of what prewar Japan had become by the early 1940s—a fascist state.

¹⁰⁴ Maruyama, 72.