A Usable Past? Historical Museums of the Self-Defence Forces and the Construction of Continuities

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INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I will analyse the exhibitions of museums of the Japanese Self-Defence Forces (SDF or jieitai) and their representation of the Imperial Army and Navy. 1 Officially the SDF present themselves as entirely new organizations, founded in the 1950s, that are not connected to Japan’s pre-war military. Starting from the rearmament processes in the 1950s, I will describe the three Self-Defence Forces’ (Air, Ground and Maritime SDF) contradictory relation to their past and illustrate my observations with the presentation of military history in the SDF’s Public Relations Centres. The positions taken in these publicly orientated places differ profoundly from those taken by the only semi-public historical museums in SDF facilities. While the Public Relations Centres tend to deny or at least to downplay any connection between the SDF and the Imperial military branches, the non-public museums display items related to the Japanese military before 1945 rather prominently and thus construct continuities from the Imperial Army and Imperial Navy in Japan’s post-war military history.

WHAT ARE THE SELF-DEFENCE FORCES?

In 1954, the Japanese Diet passed the Defence Agency Law and the Self-Defence Forces Law and thus established these institutions as central pillars of Japan’s national security. To that date, post-war Japan had not possessed any armed forces, since the Imperial Army and Imperial Navy had been disarmed and dissolved in the aftermath of the Second World
War. The new Self-Defence Forces (*jieitai*) and their wartime predecessors did not have too much in common. The Imperial Army and Navy had been the most powerful organizations in modern Japan, dominating the political and social sphere for more than seventy years and finally pushing Japan into war and defeat. As a consequence, Article 9 of Japan’s post-war constitution renounces ‘war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes’, and states that ‘land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained’ in order to avert a repetition of the country’s experience.

Nevertheless, in 1950 Japan started to rearm and four years later, as mentioned above, the Air, Ground and Maritime Self-Defence Forces (ASDF, GSDF, MSDF) were founded. After having experienced the enormous influence the pre-war military had had on political affairs, the SDF were set under strict civilian control and vested only with limited scopes. Due to Article 9, the SDF were not declared an army (*gun*), but explicitly established as armed forces with the sole aim to defend Japan against external aggressions. The members were not called soldiers, but *toku-betsushoku kokka kōmin* (special civil servants), and even the rank system was newly defined. Until today, in the five decades after their foundation, the SDF’s character has become more and more ambiguous. In 2000, a NHK reporter asked SDF officers how to define the Self-Defence Forces. Most interviewees clearly stated that ‘it [was] not an army (*gun*)’. Nevertheless, one answered that ‘seen from abroad, we are an army’. Other comments stayed rather vague, describing the SDF as ‘not a police nor an army’ but something in-between, ‘a *chūtohanpa* (half-hearted) organization’, or, even more hazy, as ‘some kind of armed organization’.²

Just as character and status of the Self-Defence Forces fail to become evident, their relation to the Imperial Army and Navy remains ambivalent. In an interview in 2005, a retired GSDF Lieutenant General stated: ‘1945 was a watershed, the Imperial Army’s existence ceased and the post-war SDF were completely new organizations.’³ This mirrors the official Defence Agency’s position. The 2004-Defence-White-Book which commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of the SDF with a series of historical articles, neither mentions the Imperial Army or Navy as SDF’s predecessors nor takes notice of the influence some former officers had on the rearmament process.⁴ Obvious continuities or any kind of overlaps are negated or actively concealed. The establishment of the Self-Defence Forces in 1954 is presented as a completely new beginning in Japan’s military history. When asked about the SDF’s relation to Japan’s pre-war military, public relations officers of the different services answered firmly, if not a bit annoyed: ‘MSDF and Imperial Navy are not related at all!’, ‘ASDF does not have any precursor in pre-war Japan. The Army and Navy air forces do not have anything in common with the ASDF.’⁵

For a better understanding of personnel continuities and the SDF’s attitude towards the Imperial Army and Navy, the course of Japan’s post-war remilitarization should be taken into consideration.