CHAPTER 13

German Perspectives on Japanese Heroism during the Nazi Era

Gerhard Krebs

In the German imagination of Japan during the Nazi era, the heroism of Japanese soldiers and the Japanese people played a crucial role. It went beyond a simple interest in a foreign country and its people to embrace political aims as well. Prominent Japanologists such as Walter Donat (1878–1970) and Wilhelm Gundert (1880–1971), for example, felt that Japanology should be utilized to serve the aims of German propaganda (Donat 1938a: 2; Gundert 1936: 249–50, 255–58). However, popular attitudes toward Japan as an alliance partner were mixed, and the potential to intimidate the Allies with Japanese-German cooperation remained ambiguous. On the one hand, Japan could serve as a model for motivating the German people to fight even more fervently in the war, possibly even to the extent of adopting kamikaze-like attacks by German fighter pilots (Miura 2009). On the other, many in Germany also feared Japan as a potential enemy, with the German propaganda machine imaging Japanese soldiers as possessing an extremely strong fighting spirit (Donat 1938a: 2; Bichler 1936: 358).

It was precisely this notion of Japanese heroism that the Nazis tried to disseminate among Germans. According to the racial taxonomy of the Nazis, the Germans were the “master race” and therefore had the right to rule over other races. They also perceived themselves as a heroic people in terms of fighting spirit. This heroic heritage was believed to be manifest in the enthusiasm for epics of chivalry and war (Donat 1938a: 1–2; Haushofer 1939a: 31–32, 34; Schacht 1942: 24–25). The ardent Nazi propagandist Walter Donat and others drew parallels between the Germans and the Japanese, pointing to similarities between peasant warriors in ancient times as well as the later development of the caste of knights and samurai. Similarly, the Prussian officer came to be considered the counterpart of the Japanese samurai, while the “political soldier” of National Socialism invited comparison with the soldier-like attitude of the modern Japanese people, in general, and the imperial Japanese soldier, in particular (Donat 1943b: 9–10; Donat 1938a: 22–23; see also Rüdiger 1942: 58; Mossdorf 1943a: 101). The Chinese, by contrast, were viewed with contempt. They were stereotyped as a passive, pacifist people with little regard for the
This chapter introduces select aspects of Japanese history, philosophy, and society that Nazi supporters and German Japanologists looked to for military inspiration and held up as objects of fascination. Focusing on Germany in the 1930s and 1940s, this analysis explores the core of Nazi ideology and thought in an effort to understand the thinking of some of its most prominent leaders with special reference to their image(s) of Japan. At the center of this investigation is the question of how Nazi leaders and German Japanologists viewed Japan, which was at once Germany’s most promising ally and possibly its most frightening foe?

**Bushido, Yamato damashii, and the Ideology of the Honorable Death**

There was great admiration in Germany for the Japanese tradition of bushido—the “way of the samurai”—that emphasized honor, loyalty, and the sacrifice in death to a cause. And this admiration peaked in the wartime years (See Strunk 1934: 204; Donat 1938a: 11, 130; Schirach 1938: 6; Johann 1941: 441; Klingenberg 1941: 36–38; Eberhard 1942: 8; Schwind 1942: 18; Mossdorf 1943a: 97; and Heuvers 1939). During the early Hitler regime, a pro-Japanese attitude coexisted alongside an anti-Asian rhetoric of the “Yellow Peril” (Krebs 2008: 245–46). After the Anti-Comintern Pact of 1936, anti-Japanese rhetoric was censored and gave way to more positive descriptions of the Japanese.

Publications from the 1930s describe bushido as a religion or divine service (Strunk 1934: 14; Strunk 1938: 255). In this sense, it was occasionally compared to the spirit and ethics of the Nazi’s paramilitary units, the SA (Sturmabteilung) and SS (Schutzstaffel), and the virtues of the Roman Empire, the “soul” of Fascist Italy (Herzog 1938: 17). SS Reichsführer, Heinrich Himmler (1900–1945), wrote in a foreword to a book on the samurai that “Since ancient times the Japanese had retained the same laws of honor as the Germans, whose knights of the medieval world were similar to their Japanese counterparts” (Himmler 1937: 3; see also Heintze 1938: 469). On occasion the samurai were seen as an “order like the European crusaders” (Urach 1942a: 18) and were considered a model for the SS Himmler was attempting to establish (Ackermann 1970: 66; Ackermann 1989: 127; Kaufmann 2010: 645). The Japanese soldier was considered the “toughest fighter in the world;” he was glorified for tenacity, a willingness to sacrifice his life, an uncompromising code of honor, obedience, and the religious nature of his warfare.