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ARTICLE

Death-Defying: Voluntary Death as Honorable Ideal in the German-Japanese Alliance

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In August 1942, an internal *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD) memorandum raised concerns surrounding the media currently circulating in Germany about its Asian ally: "The previous view, that the German soldier is the best in the world, has become somewhat confused by descriptions of the Japanese swimmers who removed mines laid outside Hong Kong, or of the death-defying Japanese pilots who swooped down upon enemy ships with their bombs. This has resulted in something a bit like an inferiority complex. The Japanese look like a kind of 'Super-Teuton' [*Germane im Quadrat*]."[1] In its anxiety that the German public might be taking the wrong lessons from the incessant drumbeat of positive news coverage around Japan's string of victories in the winter of 1941–1942, this statement speaks to the ambivalent position of the Japanese within Nazi propaganda. On the one hand, these images of Japanese self-sacrificial loyalty to the nation reaffirmed the patterns of behavior and thought commonly valorized in the Nazi regime's captive media. At the same time, the reality that it was the Japanese—and not the Germans themselves—performing these feats of valor raised the comparison that the author found so demoralizing, and potentially even destabilizing. Nevertheless, despite the author's reservations, the conclusion was that this media's benefits outweighed the political risks because of its utility in highlighting the "*inner weaknesses of Europe*" for those elements of the German public still skeptical of National Socialism.[2] In effect, the memorandum conceded, images of Japanese heroism could be persuasive as propaganda because they revealed the weakness and corruption endemic to Western modernity by contrast, which in turn affirmed the Nazi regime's decision to stake its future on a utopian "counter-modernity" framed around a synthesis of *völkisch* cultural authenticity and technological modernism.

Frequently discussed, and even more often misunderstood, the German-Japanese alliance during the Second World War has long been overdue for a critical reappraisal. Recent scholarship on the cultural and ideological dimensions of German-Japanese relations has provided new insight into the vitality and depth of a relationship once dismissed as "hollow," with much of this scholarship focusing on Nazism—and, to a lesser extent, Japanese fascism—as the underlying ethos informing the structure, content, and limitations of the relationship.[3] The consensus position of this scholarship, that the Japanese were represented within

[1] "Die Sicht Japans in der Bevölkerung." Security Division Report (No. 306), August 6, 1942; Heinz Boberach, ed., *Meldungen aus dem Reich 1938–1945. Die geheimen Lageberichte des Sicherheitsdienstes des SS*, vol. 11 (Herrsching: Pawlak Verlag, 1984), 4043.

[2] Boberach, *Meldungen aus dem Reich 1938*–1945, 4047; emphasis in original.

[3] Hans-Joachim Bieber, *SS und Samurai. Deutsch-japanische Kulturbeziehungen, 1933–1945* (Munich: Iudicium Verlag, 2014); Erin Brightwell, "Refracted Axis: Kitayama Jun'yū and Writing a German Japan," *Japan Forum* 27, no. 4 (2015): 431–53; Till Philip Koltermann, *Der Untergang des Dritten Reiches im Spiegel der deutsch-japanischen Kulturbegegnung 1933–1945* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2009); Ricky W. Law, *Transnational Nazism: Ideology and Culture in German-Japanese Relations, 1919–1936* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Danny Orbach,

German propaganda as a politically and culturally sympathetic nation in order to justify a politically expedient and ideologically justifiable alliance, echoes a broader reevaluation of the Axis alliances advanced recently by scholars such as Christian Goeschel, Stefan Ihrig, and Benjamin Martin, among others.[4] Although this scholarship has offered important insights in highlighting the frequently performative nature of Nazism's transnational entanglements, this framing can potentially occlude the longer historical context in which these relationships developed, as well as the underlying prejudices and preconceptions that made certain claims more tenable than others. In other words, it may explain why the Nazi state would have been invested in producing propaganda about Japan that aligned with its own strategic and ideological interests, but it has a harder time in locating the source of this propaganda's apparent success.[5]

Nazi Germany's positive representations of Japan did not emerge in response to the two states' signing of the Anti-Comintern Pact in 1936 or the Tripartite Pact in 1940; indeed, one could credibly argue that Japan's visibility in German media during the 1930s actively undermined the German state's foreign policy agenda in East Asia, given its longstanding—and highly profitable—relationship with republican China.[6] Neither was the alliance with Japan a product of political pragmatism, as was the case with the patronage of anticolonial activists in Berlin recently analyzed by David Motadel.[7] To be sure, the emphasis on certain ideas and tropes echoed the political priorities of the Nazi state, but never without a degree of ideological friction. Far from having the luxury of constructing from whole cloth what the German people knew and thought about the Japanese, the Nazi state was obliged to build upon a longer history of cultural fantasies, stereotypes, and projections. Ultimately, what made the German-Japanese alliance, at least within German media, not just viable but successful—arguably much more so than the German-Italian alliance—were the preexisting popular narratives of Japan in Germany that aligned, more or less, with specific elements of Nazi ideology.

Central among these was a critique of Western liberal modernity as soulless and corrupt, which aligned with the claim that Japan had successfully evaded the "trap" of modernization by virtue of its superior cultural values. This positive appraisal of Japanese culture first emerged during the Russo-Japanese War in the German liberal media, and then—after the brief rupture of the First World War—resurfaced in the 1920s, this time on the political right.[8] Despite some differences in political orientation and emphasis, what connected the rhetoric of the Wilhelmine and late Weimar eras was its shared projection of Japan as an alternative and preferable model of modernity. In this regard, Nazism's subsequent fascination with Japan represented the convergence of several parallel intellectual trajectories in Germany during the early twentieth century, including the growing strength of the

"Japan through SS Eyes: Cultural Dialogue and Instrumentalization of a Wartime Ally," *Yōroppa Kenkyū* 7 (2008): 115–32.

[4] Christian Goeschel, *Mussolini and Hitler and the Forging of the Fascist Alliance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018); Stefan Ihrig, *Atatürk in the Nazi Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Benjamin G. Martin, *The Nazi-Fascist New Order for European Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

[5] As Ian Kershaw observed, individual SD reports can be considered more credible if they are discussing behavior running counter—or, in this particular case, diagonally—to regime expectations or goals. Ian Kershaw, "Consensus, Coercion, and Popular Opinion in the Third Reich: Some Reflections," in *Popular Opinion in Totalitarian Regimes: Fascism, Nazism, Communism*, ed. Paul Corner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 33–46, esp. 38.

[6] William C. Kirby, *Germany and Republican China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1984).

[7] David Motadel, "The Global Authoritarian Moment and the Revolt against Empire," *The American Historical Review* 124, no. 3 (June 2019): 843–77.

[8] For all of the German public indignation in 1914 in response to Japan's entry into the war and occupation of German Asian colonial possessions, the brevity of the actual hostilities between the two countries and Japan's good treatment of its German POWs enabled a relatively quick rehabilitation of good relations between the two nations. Christian Spang and Rolf-Harald Wippich, "Introduction—from 'German Measles' to 'Honorary Aryans': An Overview of Japanese-German relations until 1945," in *Japanese-German Relations, 1895–1945: War, Diplomacy and Public Opinion*, ed. Christian Spang and Rolf-Harald Wippich (London: Routledge, 2006), 6–7.

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völkisch movement and the emergence of geopolitics as one among several "radical countermovements to Western modernity."[9] Like Japan's contemporaneous "revolt against the West," the purpose of this discourse was not to reject modernity per se, but rather to "overcome" it.[10]

Most immediately relevant, however, was the growing influence of a variant of Orientalism unique to central Europe and memorably described by Suzanne Marchand as "furious."[11] Rebelling against their predecessors' Eurocentrism, these intellectuals and iconoclasts offered a new perspective on the Orient that functioned simultaneously as a critique of contemporary Western civilization. Marchand has argued that this strain of neoromantic Orientalism, as reflected in high-profile literary works such as Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1922) and in institutions such as Hermann Graf Keyserling's *Schule der Weisheit*, was at the apex of its cultural influence in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, but that Germany's domestic stabilization in the mid-1920s and the consumption-oriented optimism of the era displaced these cultural critiques before they were sidelined entirely in favor of theories more explicitly aligned with Nazi racial ideology.[12] The ongoing German fascination with Japan, however, suggests that this may not have been entirely the case and that elements of this discourse continued to remain politically viable throughout the Nazi era. At its core, the prevailing image of Japanese culture in Nazi German—often to the chagrin of the Japanese themselves—was informed by an underlying skepticism toward liberal modernity. Yet whereas earlier intellectuals had looked to the East for "wisdom," the Nazis were more interested in the Japanese specifically for their purported cultural ideals surrounding honor and sacrifice. It was this narrative, in which Japan functioned as an idealized illiberal counter-modernity, that informed the German fascination with Japan, and which in turn animated the two countries' eventual alliance.

The Way of the Warrior Is to Be Found in Death

The specter of voluntary death had haunted the German-Japanese relationship since its beginning, first emerging out of the pervasive European fascination with the ritualized form of suicide known as *seppuku* or *harakiri*.[13] One of the first Western firsthand accounts of *seppuku* was written in 1868 by A. B. Mitford, secretary to the British ambassador, who observed the death of a samurai condemned for his involvement in an attack on foreign personnel stationed in Kobe and wrote a detailed account describing the full ritual.[14] What is notable about Mitford's account, aside from its "textbook" description of *seppuku*, are the conflicting emotions expressed by the author; Mitford was simultaneously fascinated by the precision and self-control that *seppuku* required and repelled by the act itself. Similarly, the first account of the practice by a German, while correctly noting that it was no longer widely practiced in Meiji Japan, marveled at the aesthetic refinement achieved

[9] Dominic Sachsenmaier, "Multiple Modernities—The Concept and its Potential," in *Reflections on Multiple Modernities: European, Chinese and Other Interpretations*, ed. Dominic Sachsenmaier, Jens Riedel, and Shmuel Eisenstadt (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 49–53.

[10] Tetsuo Najita and H. D. Harootunian, "Japan's Revolt against the West," in *Modern Japanese Thought*, ed. Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 207–72.

[11] Suzanne Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 212–27.

[12] Suzanne Marchand, "Eastern Wisdom in an Era of Western Despair—Orientalism in 1920s Central Europe," in *Weimar Thought: A Contested Legacy*, ed. Peter Gordan and John McCormick (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 341–60.

[13] The terms *seppuku* and *harakiri* both refer to the same act—and are written in Japanese using the same two characters—literally meaning "cutting the belly." In many cases, the "belly cutting" itself was symbolic, with the condemned presented with a wooden sword or fan rather than a functional weapon and the *coup de grace* delivered by the *kaishaku*. Eiko Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai: Honorific Individualism and the Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 253–57.

[14] Maurice Pinguet, *Voluntary Death in Japan*, trans. Rosemary Morris (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 151–52.

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by individual samurai in completing the ritual.[15] It was this combination of dread and fascination that defined Western associations with the ritual and, by extension, with Japanese culture, well into the early twentieth century; indeed, this was arguably the subtext of the pervasive "yellow peril" (*gelbe Gefahr*) discourse of the era, which both admonished Europeans to defend themselves and "their most sacred treasures" from an imagined threat emanating from East Asia and acknowledged that such fears were warranted.[16]

Throughout Europe, early accounts of *seppuku* converged with the contemporaneous Orientalist fascination with Japanese art, inspiring a range of artistic works set in Japan and prominently portraying suicide as central to the logic of Japanese society and culture, including Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* (1885) and Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (1904).[17] The cumulative impact of this material both familiarized the European public with these concepts and created an enduring association between suicide and Japanese culture. There is perhaps no more succinct summation of this stereotype than Emile Durkheim's famously dismissive attitude toward both *seppuku* and Japan itself in his sociological analysis of suicide: "We know how readily the Japanese slit their bellies for the most trivial reasons."[18] The irony of Durkheim's statement is that *seppuku* was rarely performed in Japan at the time he was writing, and even during the Tokugawa era the act had been tightly regulated politically and socially.[19]

Notwithstanding Durkheim's flippant dismissal, *seppuku* was historically a form of social privilege, an act that both required and reaffirmed personal honor. Institutionalized during the Tokugawa period as the "punishment of choice for the samurai class," it was an act that both allowed the condemned to redeem his personal honor through proper adherence to the norms of the ritual—as seen in Mitford's account—and served as a form of social policing between the samurai and the nonprivileged orders of Japanese society. As expressed through the symbolic performance of *seppuku*, honor was predicated on a samurai's willingness to voluntarily die by his own hand. This interdependence of self-reflexive violence and honor is a longstanding trope within Japanese martial culture, most famously but not exclusively represented through the frequently misunderstood ethos of bushido.[20] Perhaps the best summation of this concept comes from the opening line of Yamamoto Tsunetomo's eighteenth-century treatise on bushido, the *Hagakure*: "The way of the warrior [*bushido*] is to be found in death."[21] Although this text was not published—or even widely available in Japan—until after the Russo-Japanese War, it is this kind of sentiment that has subsequently defined the prevailing image of bushido for many as a "cult of death."[22]

Even Nitobe Inazō, whose *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* reframed Japanese ethics in order to specifically appeal to European sensibilities, devoted a chapter to the problem of suicide. As

[15] Heinrich von Siebold, "Das Harakiri," in *Mitteilungen der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunder Ostasiens* 1, no. 10 (July 1876): 26–28.

[16] Wilhelm's allegorical sketch from 1895 has come to function as a synecdoche for the entire yellow peril phenomenon, particularly in Germany, although his prejudices were not as pervasive as has often been claimed. Heinz Gollwitzer, *Die gelbe Gefahr. Geschichte eines Schlagworts. Studien zum imperialistischen Denken* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962), 174.

[17] Walter Gebhard, ed., *Ostasienrezeption zwischen Klischee und Innovation. Zur Begegnung zwischen Ost und West um 1900* (Munich: Iudicium Verlag, 2000); Ian Littlewood, *The Idea of Japan: Western Images, Western Myths* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996); Thomas Pekar, *Der Japan-Diskurs im westlichen Kulturkontekt (1860–1920). Reiseberichte—Literatur—Kunst* (Munich: Iudicium Verlag, 2003); Ingrid Schuster, *China und Japan in der deutschen Literatur 1890—1925* (Bern and Munich: Francke Verlag, 1977).

[18] Emile Durkheim, *On Suicide* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 240.

[19] Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai*, 253–57.

[20] Oleg Benesch, *Inventing the Way of the Samurai: Nationalism, Internationalism, and Bushidō in Modern Japan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[21] Tsunetomo Yamamoto, *Hagakure: The Secret Wisdom of the Samurai*, trans. Alexander Bennett (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2014), 42.

[22] Lawrence Fouraker, "'Voluntary Death' in Japanese History and Culture," in *Dying and Death: Inter-disciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Asa Kasher (Amsterdam: Brill i. Rodopi, 2007), 156.

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a Christian convert, Nitobe was particularly sensitive to Western perceptions of practices like *seppuku*. Hence, while reassuring his readers that he did "not wish to be understood as asserting religious or even moral justification of suicide," Nitobe did try to make them at least understand how a voluntary death in the Japanese context could be understood as a "question of honor."[23] Drawing parallels and connections with Western history, Nitobe suggested that an honorable, even heroic, suicide was not as foreign as it may have initially appeared: "I dare say that many good Christians, if only they were honest enough, will confess the fascination of, if not positive admiration for, the sublime composure with which Cato, Brutus, Petronius, and a host of other ancient worthies terminated their own earthly existence."[24] Nitobe never explicitly condoned or endorsed the practice of *seppuku*, but he did attempt to explicate it within the specific context of bushido. At the same time, Nitobe understood bushido as a moral system without a future; however meaningful it may have been in previous eras, he concluded that it is a necessary casualty of Japanese modernization, destined to be eventually replaced by one of two hegemonic global systems: Christianity or capitalism.[25] However sympathetically he portrays bushido, Nitobe understood it as a system of ethics irreconcilable with liberal modernity, much in the same way that chivalry had succumbed to obsolescence in late medieval Europe.

In drawing this connection between suicide and the evolution of social norms, Nitobe was echoing Durkheim, who theorized suicide as a manifestation of social dysfunction. Durkheim's theory, which foregrounded social structures rather than individual pathology, offered a secular perspective on the phenomenon in which the moral well-being of a society could be quantified, evaluated, and then subjected to intervention by the state and its agents.[26] Like many Europeans of his era, Durkheim subscribed to the prevailing Orientalist stereotype surrounding suicide in Japan, which he analyzed via his discussion of "altruistic suicide." It may be tempting to dismiss Durkheim's concept of "altruistic suicide" as little more than a series of Orientalist tropes, repackaged in his sociological analysis in order to explain the behavior and morality of "inferior" (i.e., non-Western) and premodern societies. Indeed, his single other reference to Japan is a secondhand account of Japanese "fanatics" throwing themselves into the sea or sealing themselves into caves in devotion to their "idols."[27] Yet, for Durkheim, "altruistic suicide" also encompasses acts of self-sacrifice by soldiers, which leads him to question whether "altruistic suicide"—carried out in the interest of preserving social well-being—necessarily belongs to a fundamentally different category of behavior than do the suicides carried out under more "individualistic" pretexts. He acknowledged that some of his readers might question whether acts of self-sacrifice should even be considered suicide, or alternatively considered as a subset of "heroic suicide."[28] Although Durkheim rejected this distinction as theoretically unsustainable, and as a fundamental misunderstanding of suicide as a sociological phenomenon, he recognized the "sentimental reasons" why individuals would be reluctant to categorize self-sacrifice as a form of suicide. It is precisely this distinction—between the modern, individualistic sociology of suicide and the communitarian-oriented concept of self-sacrifice—that Nazi propaganda would exploit in attempting to explain how suicide, in certain contexts, could be interpreted not as a symptom of social dysfunction but rather as a mechanism by which modernity itself could be redeemed.[29]

[23] Inazō Nitobe, *Bushido: The Samurai Code of Japan* (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2019), 132.
[24] Nitobe, *Bushido*, 133.
[25] Nitobe, *Bushido*, 182–84.
[26] Christian Goeschel, *Suicide in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1–2.
[27] Durkheim, *On Suicide*. 242–43.
[28] Durkheim, *On Suicide*, 260–61.
[29] Goeschel, *Suicide in Nazi Germany*, 146–48.

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Preparation for a Beautiful Death

More than any other single event, the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) redefined Japan's position on the global stage. Not only did Japan's victory secure its position as a rising great power, but its success in building a modern military capable of competing with its European rivals directly challenged the geopolitical status quo.[30] Observers in Germany watched the war unfold with interest, and not only because Russia's defeat had significant implications for German foreign policy.[31] What held the attention of the German press was the discipline and resilience of the Japanese military, even to the point of a seemingly pervasive "defiance of death" (*Todesverachtung*). Yet whereas Durkheim had attributed the sanctioning of suicide in Japan to a form of social dysfunction typical of the non-Western world, by 1905 the German liberal press was beginning to reappraise this position: "It has been expressed that the cause for their defiance of death can be found in the inferior culture of the people, that culture tempers wild battlefield fanaticism. Woe to us, if that were true! For then, culture would be a malady that would condemn all peoples influenced by it to ruin! But this is not so; culture simply converts fanaticism into a purposeful heroic defiance of death."[32] No longer was the Japanese tradition of voluntary death evidence of its social underdevelopment; rather, it was precisely these cultural values that enabled them to successfully wage a modern, industrialized war not just as soldiers, but as heroes.

This narrative, which gained purchase among elements of German society increasingly ambivalent about the presumed superiority of Western civilization, was a product of the Meiji state's gambit for recognition as a credible great power. As scholars such as Yoshihisa Matsusaka and Naoko Shimazu have demonstrated, the claim that Japanese soldiers were eager to sacrifice their lives in order to achieve an "honorable war death" was an invention of Japanese state propaganda, and media coverage of Japanese soldiers cheerfully sacrificing themselves for the nation—whether as "human bullets" at Port Arthur or otherwise—was actually more the exception than the rule.[33] The subtext of this propaganda, however, was still fundamentally the perceived interdependence of honor and voluntary death. Although personal honor had previously been a prerogative of the samurai, hence their exclusive right to a voluntary death, the transformation of the Japanese military into a conscription-based institution necessitated a "democratization" of the concept of honor from one contingent on social status to one premised instead on performative allegiance to the nation, with the ultimate expression of this loyalty being voluntary self-sacrifice. As domestic propaganda, this rhetoric had marginal impact; most Japanese soldiers, unsurprisingly, preferred to return home to their families.[34] German observers, however, unaware of the context in which this rhetoric was produced and already convinced that the Japanese were uniquely predisposed toward self-sacrifice, took this propaganda at face value as proof that the Japanese had somehow successfully synthesized national culture and technological innovation into a functional alternative to Western liberal modernity.

It was in this context that General Nogi Maresuke, the commander principally responsible for much of the needless bloodshed at Port Arthur, became a recognizable name in the German press, both during the war and then again in September 1912 when he and his

[30] Cemil Aydin, "A Global Anti-Western Moment? The Russo-Japanese War, Decolonization, and Asian Modernity," *Competing Visions of World Order: Global Moments and Movements, 1880s–1930s*, in ed. Sebastian Conrad and Dominic Sachsenmaier (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 213–36.

[31] Matthew S. Seligmann, "Germany, the Russo-Japanese War, and the Road to the Great War," in *The Impact of the Russo-Japanese War*, ed. Rotem Kowner (New York: Routledge, 2006), 109–23.

[32] "Der Zusammenbruch bei Mukden," *Berliner Tageblatt*, March 17, 1905.

[33] Naoko Shimazu, *Japanese Society at War: Death, Memory and the Russo-Japanese War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Yoshihisa Tak Matsusaka, "Human Bullets, General Nogi, and the Myth of Port Arthur," in *The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective. World War Zero*, vol. 1, ed. John Steinberg, Bruce Menning, et. al (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005): 179–202.

[34] Shimazu, *Japanese Society at War*, 104–05.

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wife died by suicide on the day of the Meiji emperor's funeral.[35] Although many Japanese observers were profoundly uncomfortable with Nogi's suicide, seeing it as an embarrassing relic of Japan's "feudal" past, the German press's response was uniformly sympathetic. The liberal *Berliner Tageblatt*'s coverage of the Meiji emperor's funeral, for example, was overshadowed by a pair of articles on Nogi's life and death, with one solemnly informing its readers that Nogi and his wife had died in adherence to "traditional Japanese custom."[36] A longer article in the following issue elaborated on the actual manner of Nogi's death, as well as its cultural significance: "He died as a samurai, as a knight … The manner in which he—the modern general, the master of European military technology—adhered to old tradition in ending his life, will be his legacy to his fellow countrymen: to strive for national greatness through the preservation of the Japanese national spirit along with the application of contemporary West European cultural elements."[37] What is perhaps most remarkable about this article is its ambivalence regarding the relative moral value of Eastern and Western culture. Rather than exoticizing Nogi, as would have been the case in mainstream Western Orientalism, the German nationalist media transfigured him into a symbolic avatar for the continued viability of traditional cultural values in an increasingly globalized world.[38]

General Nogi's suicide became a consistent touchstone for representations of Japan within the media of the German far right, regardless of political context; the geopolitician Karl Haushofer had already presented Nogi as a champion for traditional cultural values against the threat of soulless internationalism in his 1913 monograph *Dai-Nihon*.[39] In February 1935, however, the *Völkischer Beobachter* ran a five-part article, "Nogi, the Last Samurai," by the journalist Roland Strunk that more or less apotheosized Nogi as a National Socialist hero: "He lived and died as an exemplar for a nation whose hasty drive towards modernization could have resulted in ethical and *völkisch* deformation."[40] Strunk's article, one of the earliest full-throated endorsements of Japanese culture to appear in the Nazi party's dedicated media, established the basic narrative of suicide as a culturally redemptive act that was adopted and elaborated upon in later propaganda. Nogi, as the presumptive "last samurai," symbolized the triumph of *völkisch* culture against soulless internationalism through an act of self-sacrifice, an image that both resonated with and validated the National Socialist *Todeskult*.

In its appropriation and radicalization of earlier cultural beliefs around heroic self-sacrifice and voluntary death, the Nazi "death cult" was one particularly extreme manifestation of the broader "brutalization" of German politics during and after the First World War.[41] As examined by Jay Baird and Sabine Behrenbeck, Nazi ideology mobilized concepts such as martyrdom and redemptive sacrifice, as well as an evolving series of symbolic figures—both mythological and contemporary—in an increasingly elaborate ritualization of national heroism.[42] Suicide was a difficult concept to reconcile with this rhetoric, both because of its official condemnation by the Christian moral tradition and because of its more recent sociological associations with social and political dysfunction. Attempts during

[35] Doris Bargen, *Suicidal Honor: General Nogi and the Writings of Mori Ōgai and Natsume Sōseki* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006).

[36] "Der Selbstmord des Generals Nogi," *Berliner Tageblatt*, September 14, 1912, 3.

[37] "Der Tod des Generals Nogi," *Berliner Tageblatt*, September 14, 1912, 2.

[38] Sarah Panzer, "Der letzte Samurai. General Nogi as Transcultural Hero," in *Helden und Heldenmythen als soziale und kulturelle Konstruktion. Deutschland, Frankreich und Japan*, ed. Steffen Höhne, Gerard Siary and Philippe Wellnitz (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2017): 217–27.

[39] Karl Haushofer, *Dai-Nihon. Betrachtungen über Groß Japans Wehrkraft, Weltstellung und Zukunft* (Berlin: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1913), 47. For more on Haushofer as an intermediary in the interwar German-Japanese relationship, see Christian Spang, *Karl Haushofer und Japan* (Munich: Iudicium Verlag, 2013).

[40] Roland Strunk, "Nogi, der letzte Samurai," *Völkischer Beobachter*, no. 48, 1935.

[41] George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[42] Jay W. Baird, *To Die for Germany: Heroes in the Nazi Pantheon* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Sabine Behrenbeck, *Der Kult um die toten Helden. Nationalsozialistische Mythen, Riten und Symbole* (Cologne, Germany: SH-Verlag, 1996).

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the late Weimar era to imagine a moral defense of voluntary death (*Freitod*) emerged principally from the political left on the grounds that the act constituted the ultimate expression of individual self-determination; the Nazis, by contrast, categorically rejected the idea that any member of the *Volksgemeinschaft* had the right to decide how and when to end their life.[43] For much of its existence, then, the Nazi state's official position on suicide owed a debt to Durkheim's analysis, at least with respect to the demographics of the German *Volk* it deemed racially "salvageable."[44] In its representation of Japanese voluntary death, on the other hand, Nazi propaganda was only too willing to blur its otherwise rigorously policed distinction between self-sacrifice and suicide; spectacles of Japanese self-sacrifice provided an outlet for a more radical version of the Nazi "death cult" to be articulated without alienating the moral sensibilities of the German public, much less its religious institutions. In effect, Japan—by virtue of its idealization vis-à-vis the West—could serve as an existing model for National Socialist visions of a functional *Volksgemeinschaft* unconstrained by the social barriers impeding the full realization of their cultural revolution in Germany.

Thus, although the National Socialist state may not have invented this association between Japan and heroic self-sacrifice, it did enthusiastically exploit it in defining its own position on concepts such as honor, heroism, and self-sacrifice. One example of this phenomenon is Erwin Bälz's *On the Japanese Defiance of Death*, an edited collection of essays originally written in 1904 but only published posthumously by Bälz's son in 1936. Bälz occupies a unique position in modern Japan as one of the founding fathers of Western medicine in that country, having been employed as professor of internal medicine at what is now the University of Tokyo and as private physician to the Meiji emperor.[45] The younger Bälz explained his decision to publish his father's essays as an attempt to explain contemporary "parallels" between the Japanese and the German political systems through the lens of the "problem of the heroic."[46] The booklet was thus meant to situate Bälz's observations within the political context of the National Socialist state, lending authority to the Nazi narratives around Japanese culture coalescing during the 1930s.

It was in the work's longest essay, "On the Japanese Martial Spirit and Defiance of Death," that Bälz unpacked what he understood by the concept "defiance of death" (*Todesverachtung*), which he represented as the essential character of the Japanese soldier: "Yet defiance of death is not the correct word. It is more a matter of a disregard, of a contempt for one's own life, that comes from a different assessment of the self and that, in the case of war, demands and induces not just a defiance of death, but also a disdain for life."[47] Bälz argued that it was only through the cultivation of higher ideals—such as honor and duty—that individuals could transcend the biological law of self-preservation and thus be prepared to sacrifice their lives for a greater cause. In his words: "The entire education, the entire life of the samurai was actually preparation for a beautiful death."[48] More to the point, however, Bälz also drew an explicit connection in this essay between the honor of the samurai—as transmitted through stories like *Chūshingura*—and the behavior of the ordinary, modern Japanese soldier.[49] This essay established two basic ideas that were subsequently endlessly recycled in

[43] Goeschel, *Suicide in Nazi Germany*, 20–21.

[44] The Nazi state's condemnation of suicide thus excluded not just the many Jews who chose to die by suicide rather than suffer the indignity of persecution, but also the individuals targeted by the regime's "euthanasia" program.

[45] Hoi-Eun Kim, *Doctors of Empire: Medical and Cultural Encounters between Imperial Germany and Meiji Japan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 48–52.

[46] Erwin Toku Bälz, "Zur Einführung," in *Über die Todesverachtung der Japaner*, ed. Erwin Toku Bälz (Stuttgart: J. Engelhorns Nach., 1936), 7.

[47] Erwin Bälz, *Über die Todesverachtung der Japaner*, 14.

[48] Bälz, *Über die Todesverachtung der Japaner*, 26.

[49] Based on the historical Ako Incident (1703), wherein forty-seven former retainers of Lord Asano Naganori—sentenced to *seppuku* for a violation of imperial protocol—attacked and killed the man they blamed for their former master's death, *Chūshingura* (or *Kanadehon Chūshingura*) was adapted first for the puppet theater and later for *kabuki*.

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Nazi propaganda: that modernization had not abrogated Japan's tradition of self-sacrifice, but instead had transformed it from the exclusive prerogative of the samurai "aristocracy" to the national ethos of Japan, and that this same ethos had been lost during the West's transition to liberal modernity but could be reclaimed.

Given its preoccupation with personal honor and loyalty to the nation, it should not be a surprise that the *Schutzstaffel* (SS) both eagerly consumed and actively promoted this rhetoric.[50] The New Year's Day 1942 edition of *Das Schwarze Korps* was devoted entirely to a discussion of Bälz's work, with all of the participating authors specifically identifying self-sacrifice as the defining characteristic of Japanese heroism.[51] This was not the first time, however, that Japanese self-sacrifice was featured in a publication associated with the SS. During the final two weeks of December 1941, the *SS-Leithefte* published in quick succession three articles on recent Japanese military operations in the Pacific or mainland Asia, with each one highlighting an example of the "death-defying" behavior of Japanese servicemen. The first recounted the actions of the Japanese pilots who, during the attack on Pearl Harbor, had purposefully flown their damaged planes into American ships, and the third introduced the story of the so-called "samurai swimmers"—members of the 1936 Olympic squad recruited and trained to manually deactivate naval mines—during the attack on Hong Kong.[52] Beyond the content of this media, its timing anticipated Japan's utility as "counter-programing" for German morale after Stalingrad, redirecting public attention away from Germany's stalled offensive in the Soviet Union and offering a more optimistic forecast for the military prospects of the Axis alliance in the upcoming year.

Thus, the irony of the SD memorandum discussed previously was that the incidents it highlighted as potentially damaging to morale in August 1942 were only familiar to the German public because they had been deemed newsworthy by the group's own media eight months earlier. Yet these articles were not outliers in the media landscape of Nazi Germany, nor were heroic depictions of Japanese self-sacrifice exclusive to the SS. Beginning in 1937–1938 and intensifying during the war, the Nazi state exploited preexisting associations between Japanese heroism and voluntary death as an integral element of its propaganda surrounding the Japanese alliance. As articulated through a range of propaganda produced in Nazi Germany—by both German and Japanese authors—the key to Japan's successful modernization was its people's willingness to sacrifice themselves on behalf of the nation, regardless whether the act itself was strategic or symbolic.[53] The Nazi state's preoccupation with death in its coverage of the Pacific War is even more notable when compared with Japanese domestic propaganda, which instead emphasized a decidedly technocratic vision of itself.[54] Even with this divergence in content, both German and Japanese propaganda agreed on one fundamental point: namely, that Japan offered a uniquely viable model for the project of "overcoming" modernity because, rather than being constrained

Between 1938 and 1944, there were five different adaptations of *Chūshingura* staged in Nazi Germany. Detlev Schauwecker, "Japan in German Dramas during 1900–1945" — German Versions of *Chushingura* in the Nazi Period," in *Transactions of the International Conference of Orientalists in Japan*, vol. XXXI (Tokyo: Toho Gakkai, 1986): 70–78.

[50] For more, see Bieber, *SS und Samurai*; Orbach, "Japan through SS Eyes."

[51] "Über die Todesverachtung der Japaner," *Das Schwarze Korps*, January 1, 1942, 5.

[52] "Abschied auf ewig ... Vom Todesmut der japanischen Soldaten," *SS-Leithefte*, 7, no. 9b (1941), 7–9; "Koike und Ito siegten in Berlin—siegen vor Hongkong," *SS-Leithefte*, 7, no. 10b (1941), 9–10.

[53] One of the more interesting elements of the German-Japanese relationship was the extent that it was shaped by both German and Japanese interlocutors. See: Endo, "Japanisches Soldatentum," *Der SA-Führer* 8, no. 10 (1943): 8–14; Kitayama Jun'yu, *Der Geist des japanischen Rittertums* (Berlin: Limpert, 1943); Kitayama Jun'yu, *Heroisches Ethos. Das Heldische in Japan* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1944); Sakuma Shin, *Bushido—Soldatengeist von Japan* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1944).

[54] John Dower, "Japan's Beautiful Modern War," in *Ways of Forgetting, Ways of Remembering: Japan in the Modern World* (New York: The New Press, 2012); Barak Kushner, *The Thought War: Japanese Imperial Propaganda* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006); Janis Mimura, *Planning for Empire: Reform Bureaucrats and the Japanese Wartime State* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

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by the moral and spiritual baggage of liberal modernity, it had successfully synthesized the best elements of both East and West.

Of course, one of the central problems in any discussion of propaganda is the question of reception. In this particular case, an essay contest sponsored by the *Deutsch-Japanische Gesellschaft* (DJG) in the spring of 1944 provides an invaluable glimpse at how the German public thought about their alliance with Japan; indeed, that was arguably the point of the whole endeavor, which was organized at the request of the foreign ministry as a way of identifying new "effective opportunities for propaganda."[55] Contestants were prompted to discuss what united Germany and Japan in their fight against the United States politically, economically, and culturally, and the submitted pieces clearly reflect the influence of state propaganda in shaping how Germans thought about the Japanese.[56] Just under half of the submitted essays (205 out of 420 total) were written by a member of the German military, and so it is not surprising that many of them were explicitly framed around the claim that what united Germany and Japan was their shared right to "call themselves martial peoples [*Soldatenvölker*]... A *Volk* cannot be raised as true soldiers, if they do not carry the avocation within themselves."[57] Several of the surviving essays specifically referenced self-sacrifice as the quality that best exemplified this shared identity, offering parallels between the two countries' recent history: "That the young Germans storm into death with the song of their *Volk* on their lips, that the Japanese soldiers allow the ashes of their fallen comrades to participate in the conquest of the enemy fortress ... is in each case a distinguishing expression of the ethos of these *Völker*."[58] In effect, the quality that set the Germans and Japanese apart from other militarily advanced states was their supposed willingness to sacrifice themselves on behalf of their respective nations.

Yet as the SD memorandum had revealed, encouraging Germans to draw comparisons between themselves and the Japanese also inevitably raised some potentially uncomfortable questions ideologically. Several of the essays discussed the "death-defying" Japanese pilots in the Pacific, despite the fact that there was no obvious German parallel. Instead, Germany was forced to assume the uncomfortable position of spectator: "When the German *Volk* hear of a successful sinking by the Japanese air force, which occurs when one or more pilots plunge with their machines onto the enemy's ship ... they admire the bravery and the heroic courage of the Japanese *Volk* ..."[59] Reflecting upon the respective soldierly qualities of the two peoples, one essayist was forced to conclude that "In terms of the wartime surrender of life the sober matter-of-fact readiness for death [*Todesbereitschaft*] of the Japanese seems to exceed even the German willingness to sacrifice."[60] As much as this rhetoric might have undercut claims of German racial superiority, it reaffirmed self-sacrifice as one of the essential values of the Nazi state. To further emphasize this point, one of the consolation prizes awarded by the DJG to participants who failed to win one of the top prizes was a copy of Erwin Bälz's work, *On the Japanese Defiance of Death*.[61] Nevertheless, the Nazi state's anxiety that the German public was simply in capable of performing even the most minimal act of self-sacrifice lingered, as seen in a SD report from July 1944 complaining that the German

[55] Rundschreiben an die DJG-Zweigstellen, signed by Trömel, February 24, 1944, Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde [hereafter BArch] R 64IV/180, 91.

[56] "Preisausschreiben der Deutsch-Japanischen Gesellschaft," *Völkischer Beobachter*, March 16, 1944, 2. Similar notices appeared in several other major German periodicals during April–May 1944, including those meant for active German servicemen, such as *Panzerfaust* and *Wacht im Südosten*.

[57] BArch R 64IV/44, 191. The high rate of submissions by active members of the German military was seen by the DJG leadership as particularly noteworthy, especially given that these essayists had lacked access to adequate writing and reference materials. Letter from Dirksen to the DJG, June 21, 1944, BArch N 2049/64, 14–15.

[58] BArch R 64IV/48, 147.

[59] BArch R 64IV/52, 122.

[60] BArch R 64IV/46, 229.

[61] BArch R 64IV/49, 247.

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public failed to comprehend the need for restrictions on public services like theaters, cinemas, and restaurants that their Japanese counterparts had willingly accepted as a matter of "life or death."[62] It was this reading of the war as an existential crisis for the German nation—a war that it was losing—that informed the media coverage of the most spectacular manifestation of Japanese voluntary death: the *kamikaze*.

Only the Dead Withdrew from the Fight

On January 30, 1943, General Friedrich Paulus telegrammed Hitler from the besieged city of Stalingrad and the desperate Sixth Army. In his dispatch Paulus reaffirmed his determination to never capitulate, despite the hopelessness of the situation. On that same day in Germany, Hermann Goering addressed the ongoing fighting in Stalingrad in a radio broadcast, in which he compared the Sixth Army to King Leonidas's three hundred Spartans at Thermopylae, a comparison that was remarkable only in its utter lack of subtlety.[63] Paulus and most of his troops ultimately chose surrender, however, rather than a glorious death in battle or suicide. The German defeat at Stalingrad famously precipitated a major crisis of morale within the German public, which the regime responded to by doubling down with its exhortations to personal sacrifice, most famously in Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels's "total war" speech at the Berlin *Sportpalast* on February 18.[64] Yet it was also in this context that the theme of Japanese self-sacrifice assumed central significance within the media landscape of Nazi Germany. In contrast to the politically embarrassing surrender of the Sixth Army, the apparent willingness of the Japanese to die for the sake of their nation provided the German press with a seemingly endless supply of martyred heroes. In effect, the image of Japanese self-sacrifice increasingly served as a cudgel for German morale within German media, with the repeated insistence that the Japanese were not wavering in the face of military setbacks, but rather defying them through acts of heroic and suicidal bravery.

Christian Goeschel has argued that the Nazi state continued to distinguish between suicide (*Selbstmord*) and self-sacrifice (*Selbstaufopferung*) for the duration of the war, although he acknowledges that some leaders privately allowed for the possibility of "heroic death" as a third alternative—this was clearly the fate imagined for Paulus and his men in Stalingrad—but this distinction was always more than a question of semantics.[65] The Nazi objection to the interwar discourse of "voluntary death" had been predicated on the stigma of suicide as selfish; a willingly chosen death for the *Volk*, on the other hand, was an honorable act, potentially even more honorable than surrender. Although it would have been risky to articulate this point quite so explicitly in the mainstream German media, given the high likelihood of resistance from Germans still loyal to the Christian churches, Japan offered a useful proxy because of the longstanding association in the German popular imagination between Japanese culture and positive images of voluntary death. Moreover, unlike classical images of self-sacrifice like Thermopylae, premised on nostalgia for a long-dead past, the *kamikaze* offered a credible model for the heroism of voluntary death in a modern, mechanized war. As hope for victory faded and then disappeared, this association culminated in the figure of the *kamikaze* pilot, which represented the final synthesis of the German neoromantic image of Japanese heroism and the National Socialist state's apocalyptic vision of the *Endkampf*.

[62] Meldungen aus den SD-Abschnittsbereichen vom 29. Juni 1944; Boberach, *Meldungen aus dem Reich 1938*–1945, vol. 17, 6657.

[63] Helen Roche, "Wanderer, kommst du nach Sparta oder nach Stalingrad? Ancient Ideals of Self-Sacrifice and German Military Propaganda," in *Making Sacrifices—Opfer bringen. Visions of Sacrifice in European and American Cultures—Opfervorstellungenn in europäischen und amerikanischen Kulturen*, ed. Nicholas Brooks and Gregor Thuswaldner (Vienna: New Academic Press, 2016), 66–86.

[64] Joseph Goebbels, "Rede im Berliner Sportpalast—18. Februar 1943—Kundegebung des Gaues Berlin der NSDAP," in *Goebbels Reden, vol. 2: 1939-1945*, ed. Helmut Heiber (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1972), 208.

[65] Goeschel, *Suicide in Nazi Germany*, 141–48.

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On February 3, the day after Paulus's surrender at Stalingrad, the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* ran a short feature on the "Japanese admiration for the heroes of Stalingrad."[66] This kind of feature was not unprecedented—most of the major German dailies had correspondents in Tokyo commenting on the Japanese war effort—yet this article was more explicit in its framing by reporting on Japanese reactions to Stalingrad. Quoting from the prominent national newspaper the *Asahi Shinbun*, the article offers the Japanese reaction to Stalingrad as a model for how the German public should "read" the event: "The souls of the thousands of German soldiers that sacrificed their lives in Stalingrad have sparked a fire in the hearts of the *Volk* that cannot be extinguished. These soldiers died on behalf of the Fatherland, because they believed unwaveringly in its final victory."[67] Although it is unclear whether the resolute *Volk* referred to in this quote are the Japanese or the Germans, either interpretation would have forced the German reader to navigate an ideologically tricky comparison: either the Japanese, by interpreting the Germans deaths at Stalingrad as the necessary cost of ultimate victory, have more faith in the German army than do the Germans themselves; or the Japanese, by ascribing this renewed determination to the Germans, have more faith in the loyalty of the Germans to their nation than they had recently demonstrated. Either way, this comparison did not favor the Germans vis-à-vis the seemingly indefatigable Japanese, and that was precisely the point.

Nearly every piece published about Japan in Nazi Germany had reserved some space to consider the entangled concepts of honor and self-reflexive violence; this trend only accelerated as the necessity of self-sacrifice became less hypothetical. The *Völkischer Beobachter* supplied a graphic example of what this actually entailed in its report on the final defense of Tarawa in December 1943, which ended in the complete loss of the Japanese garrison. According to the article, "No Japanese allowed himself to be captured," and "The defenders stood resolutely [*todentschlossen*] at their posts and did not give a single foot's-breadth … Only the dead withdrew from the fight."[68] This article was explicit that the example of Tarawa's defenders should be admired and emulated, a point that was reaffirmed through the juxtaposition created between this article and the banner article from the same issue, which claimed that the Allies were having trouble opening a second European front because "the British balk at the sacrifice of their own blood." This point is worth highlighting in that it not only reaffirmed the positive evaluation of obviously suicidal behavior, but also in the explicit contrast it drew between Japan and the spiritually "bankrupt" West.

The Battle of the Philippine Sea (June 19–20, 1944), one of the most strategically significant defeats suffered by the Japanese military during the Pacific War, received ample press coverage in Germany, but the accuracy of reporting was uniformly marginal for several reasons that are important in bear in mind.[69] Like the German coverage of the Russo-Japanese War, the bulk of this information had been filtered through the Japanese censorship apparatus before it reached German correspondents; in much the same way that the German state had purposefully withheld information about the actual situation in Stalingrad, Japanese military authorities were also less than keen to publicly admit to losses, especially one on the scale of June 1944. As a result, this misinformation was duly repeated in the German press and the battle was presented to the German public as a Japanese victory, with vastly inflated figures for American losses.[70] Yet even as the Japanese were attempting to

[66] "Japanische Bewunderung für die Helden von Stalingrad," *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* [hereafter *DAZ*], February 3, 1943, 1.

[67] "Japanische Bewunderung für die Helden von Stalingrad."

[68] "Kein Japaner gab sich gefangen," *Völkischer Beobachter*, December 23, 1943), 1.

[69] Nicknamed the "Marianas Turkey Shoot" by American pilots, this engagement effectively destroyed Japanese carrier-based aviation capabilities. John Kuehn, "The War in the Pacific, 1941–1945," in *The Cambridge History of the Second World War, vol. One: Fighting the War*, ed. John Ferris and Evan Mawdsley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 448.

[70] For example, the German press reported that on June 19–20 the Americans had lost five aircraft carriers, one battleship, and more than one hundred planes, as compared to reported Japanese losses of one carrier and fifty

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camouflage the magnitude of their loss, these reports were again massaged by the German media in order to reinforce the narrative of Japanese infallibility to which it had committed itself. The result, which would only become more egregious during the last year of the war, was a ludicrously distorted image of the Pacific War, wherein the Japanese were seemingly scuttling the entire US Navy at every engagement and yet were still forced, with increasing frequency, to enact heroic "to the last man" defenses on devastated little islands.

The US landing on Saipan on June 15 touched off three weeks of brutal fighting between American forces and a single Japanese division. Although the unwillingness of the Japanese servicemen to surrender had already been demonstrated repeatedly, the final days of fighting on Saipan were especially brutal, culminating in a mass suicide charge by the remaining Japanese soldiers, many of them wounded, and by the unprecedented image of Japanese civilians committing suicide *en masse* by throwing themselves off the island's northern cliffs.[71] Initial reports about the fighting on Saipan conceded that a lack of direct information made accurate reporting more difficult, but most concurred that the battle was running in Japan's favor. Wilhelm Schulze, the Tokyo correspondent for the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, referred to Saipan as the "most important battle of the East Asian War," although his analysis of the contemporary situation hinged on secondhand accounts from official Japanese military sources, most of which reported that the American forces had already lost more than half of their initial offensive capabilities against Saipan in the Battle of the Philippine Sea.[72] All reports on Saipan in the German press published before the confirmation of Japan's defeat placed special emphasis on the high casualties suffered by the American invaders, even going as far as to openly question whether the Americans were deliberately underreporting their own casualties; the blatant cynicism of this reporting is shocking, if not surprising.[73]

Saipan received the most extensive coverage in the German press of any Pacific engagement up to that point, both because of the battle's perceived significance as the "decisive battle" of the war in Asia and because its conclusion seemingly confirmed and amplified existing beliefs about the supposed Japanese preference for death over surrender.[74] With the final defeat of the remaining Japanese defenders on July 9, however, there was a blackout in communications with the island, which meant that the German press also went suddenly and ominously silent; canny German media consumers might have recalled a similar sequence of events around the disaster at Stalingrad, and probably knew what it portended. A last cluster of articles about Saipan, beginning on July 20, reverted back to the by-now well-established narrative of valiant Japanese self-sacrificial defense; all evoked the image of the wounded Japanese soldiers enacting one final "banzai charge" against the American invaders, and all concurred that Japan was only defeated because of the overwhelming American numerical superiority.[75] Significantly, this coverage did not comment, however, on the mass civilian suicides; it is unclear whether this information was censored by the Japanese military or by the German media.

planes. "Die große Seeschlact bei den Marianen," *DAZ*, June 25, 1944, 2; "Die erste amtliche Meldung Tokios zur Seeschlacht von Marianen," *Völkischer Beobachter*, June25, 1944), 1; "Weitere japanische Erfolge gegen die USA-Flotte," *DAZ*, July 3, 1944, 2.

[71] An estimated twenty thousand civilians had lived on Saipan prior to the battle. Eight to ten thousand of them died over the course of the fighting, with approximately four thousand Japanese women and children committing mass suicide to avoid capture by American forces. Haruko Taya Cook and Theodore F. Cook, ed., *Japan at War: An Oral History* (New York: The New Press, 1992), 281–92.

[72] "Die wichtigste Schlacht des Ostasienkrieges," *DAZ*, June 26, 1944, 1.

[73] "Der Kampf um Saipan," *DAZ*, June 29, 1944, 2; "Schwere Kämpfe auf Saipan," *DAZ*, July 4, 1944, 1; "USA-Angriff auf die Iwo-Insel," *DAZ*, July 6, 1944, 5; "Weiter heftige Kämpfe auf Saipan," *DAZ*, July 10, 1944, 2.

[74] Meldungen über die Entwicklung in der öffentlichen Meinungsbildung vom 29. Juni 1944; Boberach, *Meldungen aus dem Reich 1938*–1945, vol. 17, 6621.

[75] "Ende des Heldenkampfes der Japaner auf Saipan," *DAZ*, July 20, 1944, 5; "Der letzte Sturm der Besatzung von Saipan," *Völkischer Beobachter*, July 20, 1944, 2; "Der letzte Angriffsbefehl von Saipan," *DAZ* July 21, 1944, 2.

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For both Germany and Japan, the military setbacks of June 1944 forced the nations' respective leadership to confront the specter of defeat; in both cases, this forced realization did not weaken resolve, at least within the upper echelons of the state, but rather precipitated a radicalization of both rhetoric and policy. In Japan, this manifested itself through new slogans preparing the Japanese to collectively die "like a shattered jewel" (*ichioku gyokusai*).[76] Likewise, German propaganda increasingly centered on the necessity of sacrifice within the context of "total war," despite—and perhaps even as a result of—the widespread recognition that Germany had already lost the war.[77] Privately, in the context of this decision by the Nazi state to "sacrifice" Germany itself, Goebbels referred to a possible new tactic in his July 8 diary entry:

> Soon our suicide pilots [*Todesflieger*] will also be deployed. They are currently at the point in their training that one can anticipate that this new weapon will be operational in the next several weeks. The *Todesflieger* are a bold corps of men that, just like their Japanese counterparts, fling themselves with their planes at the enemy's ships and thus find a certain death ... There will surely be in Germany thousands and tens of thousands of those who would enter such a formation if called.[78]

What Goebbels was referring to here was the "self-sacrifice squadron" (*Selbstaufopferer* [SO]-*Staffel*), assembled in February 1944 under the command of First Lieutenant Karl-Heinz Lange and intended to mitigate Germany's increasingly severe shortages of machines, fuel, and pilots.[79] This German program, code-named *Leonidas*, predated the *kamikaze* by eight months, although Goebbels clearly saw the Japanese as the original inspiration. To be sure, there had been numerous examples of Japanese pilots choosing to fly into enemy ships, most commonly after sustaining damage to their craft that made successful retreat or rescue unlikely, but this kind of behavior was fundamentally different from what the *kamikaze* or the *Todesflieger* were asked to do. Goebbels made an additional reference to this program in an entry from July 16, referring to the bold young men "for whom the Fatherland is worth more than their life."[80] This statement again ignored an important distinction between the normal risks associated with being a soldier or pilot, wherein death was one of multiple possible outcomes for a mission, and conscription into an explicitly suicidal operation like the *kamikaze*, wherein death was the primary objective and the desired outcome of the pilot's training.[81]

The *kamikaze* operation was launched on October 20, under the command of Vice Admiral Ōnishi Takijirō, as part of the Japanese defense of the Philippines. Officially designated the *tokubetsu kōgekitai* (Special Attack Forces), and abbreviated in Japan as *tokkōtai*, the *kamikaze* represented a functionally different approach to aerial warfare. Simply put, this was because —like the *Todesflieger*—the organization of the *kamikaze* was the result of a fundamental lack of resources and tactical options. Given the self-evident material superiority of the Allied

[76] Dower, "Japan's Beautiful Modern War," 75.

[77] Michael Geyer, "'There is a Land Where Everything Is Pure: Its Name Is Land of Death.' Some Observations on Catastrophic Nationalism," in *Sacrifice and National Belonging in Twentieth-Century Germany*, ed. Greg Eghigian and Matthew Paul Berg (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2002), 140.

[78] Joseph Goebbels, *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels* [hereafter *TB*], vol. 13 (München: K. G. Saur, 1995), 63.

[79] Ulrich Saft, *Das bittere Ende der Luftwaffe. "Wilde Sau"—Sturmjäger—Rammjäger—Todesflieger—"Bienenstock"* (Walsrode: Militärbuchverlag Saft, 1997).

[80] Goebbels, *TB*, vol. 13, 131.

[81] The *Todesflieger* remain an obscure chapter in the history of the *Luftwaffe* during World War II; the group was briefly disbanded and reassigned in early 1945, due to objections from Hitler. In April pilots from the SO squadron were recalled and sent into action against the Red Army. Their mission was to dive their planes into strategically important bridges on the Oder River in order to delay the Soviet advance into Germany. Thirty-nine pilots died during the April 16–17 mission, the only directed deployment of German "suicide" pilots during World War II. Saft, *Das Bittere Ende der Luftwaffe*, 124–37.

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forces arrayed against them, the idea of suicide operations, which had been debated by Japan's military leaders since August 1943, became increasingly attractive as a way of retaining an effective advantage. The young pilots, all nominally volunteers, tended to be both better educated and less experienced as pilots than their predecessors had been; many were former university students who had been exempted from earlier rounds of conscription.[82] Most only received basic flight training, which meant in practice that the attacks were mostly ineffective as military strategy, and the commanding officers had no expectations that the *kamikaze* would alter the war's trajectory. Instead, the *kamikaze* are better understood as a psychological weapon, a supposed testament to the superiority of the Japanese fighting spirit over that of its technology-dependent, "dishonorable" opponents.[83]

The German press covered the Philippines campaign and the Battle of Leyte Gulf (October 23–26) assiduously throughout the latter half of October and into November, often noting at the bottom of each article the suspiciously high number of American ships which the Japanese Imperial Navy claimed to have sunk or damaged.[84] The first mention of the *kamikaze* by name appeared in the *Völkischer Beobachter*'s November 1 issue, wherein it was reported to the German public that the *kamikaze* had already successfully sunk eight American ships and damaged an additional nineteen.[85] An article from November 4 reported that the *kamikaze* had, in one day, sunk five ships and damaged three more.[86] On that same day a separate short article provided additional information on the *kamikaze* pilots, their backgrounds, and their motives. This article was careful to note the difference between the *kamikaze* and the earlier pilots who had intentionally sacrificed themselves and their aircraft, noting that this new tactic fully mobilized the Japanese soldiers' "readiness for death" and explaining the significance of the *kamikaze* as the victory of "human will and spirit" against soulless technology: "Hundreds of living bombs wait for the hour of their victorious death [*Siegestod*]."[87] The key word here is *Siegestod*, which echoed the increasingly apocalyptic mood of the German war effort; by this point death and victory had become inextricably linked together in framing the war effort for public consumption as, quite literally, an existential battle "to the death" between the Axis and the Anglo-American West.

The German press duly reported on the steadily rising number of *kamikaze* "victories" in the Philippines during the last months of 1944; even without consulting the official American engagement reports, it is hard to view this reporting with anything other than skepticism, especially given the significantly reduced operational capacity of the Japanese Imperial Navy.[88] This overreporting of Japan's military victories was not a new phenomenon, nor was it likely that many Germans actually believed the reports. One particularly incredulous consumer of this media was the German propaganda minister, who recorded in his diary his skepticism regarding the numbers reported by the Japanese.[89] In a separate entry Goebbels drily observed that "Certainly their figures of ships sunk must be taken with a grain of salt. They sink battleships and aircraft carriers as if it were an assembly

[82] Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, *Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalisms: The Militarization of Aesthetics in Japanese History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[83] For a history of the *kamikaze* written by military officers involved in the program, see Rikihei Inoguchi and Tadashi Nakajima, *The Divine Wind: Japan's Kamikaze Force in World War II* (Annapolis: United States Naval Institutes, 1958).

[84] "Neuer Großerfolg der Japaner," *Völkischer Beobachter*, October 26, 1944, 1; "Abschlußbericht Tokios über die Seeschlachten," *DAZ*, October 28, 1944, 1.

[85] "Neue japanische Erfolge bei den Philippinen," *Völkischer Beobachter*, November 1, 1944, 1.

[86] "Neue Erfolge der Kamikaze-Flieger," *Völkischer Beobachter*, November 4, 1944, 1.

[87] "Japans Todesflieger," *Völkischer Beobachter*, November 4, 1944, 1.

[88] "Neue japanische Erfolge bei den Philippinen," *Völkischer Beobachter*, November 1, 1944, 2; "Luftherrschaft im Philippinen-Gebiet," *DAZ*, November 7, 1944, 1"Kamikaze-Flieger und U-Boote versenkten 2 Flugzeuträger," *Völkischer Beobachter*, November 7, 1944, 2; "Kamikaze-Flieger versenkten Schlachtschiff und 3 Transporter," *Völkischer Beobachter*, November 14, 1944, 3; "Der Befehl an 'Kamikaze,'" *DAZ*, November 18, 1944, 1; "Neue Erfolge der japanischer Luftwaffe," *DAZ*, November 29, 1944) 2.

[89] Goebbels, *TB*, vol. 14, 293.

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line. If these figures were correct, then the Americans could no longer maintain their position in the Pacific."[90] Despite this, Goebbels ultimately concluded that it was better to release the figures, even recommending that the German press increase their coverage of the Japanese military, because it was a useful sign of good faith to an easily offended ally.[91] Left unsaid, although certainly also a consideration, was the utility of the Japanese model for German public morale.

As a result, from the beginning of December 1944 it was common practice for the German daily press to include an update on the *kamikaze*, often on the front page. Most of these pieces simply reported on new Japanese "victories," although a few provided a bit of color commentary about the pilots and their preparations.[92] The *Völkischer Beobachter* proudly proclaimed that Leyte had effectively become a "battlefield without wounded," the implications of which were unmistakable even before the *kamikaze* were invoked.[93] A longer piece in the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* attempted to contextualize the *kamikaze* within Japanese culture and its military history.[94] This article was also one of the few German publications that directly addressed the number of Japanese pilots killed in each mission; although the ratio calculated, in order to bolster the claim that the *kamikaze* were a cost-efficient tactic, was again based upon a wildly inflated number of American ships sunk or scuttled. Using figures reported by the Japanese press, the *Völkischer Beobachter* reported that the *kamikaze* had sunk fifty-six enemy ships between October 25 and December 18, and seriously damaged an additional fifty-three.[95] The actual figure of Allied ships sunk or irreparably damaged by *kamikaze* attacks during this period was thirteen.[96]

This steady coverage of the Pacific War fell off dramatically after New Year's 1945. The lack of coverage in the public press should not suggest, however, that information about the Japanese war effort was unavailable in Germany. Joseph Goebbels's diaries, for one, show that the German propaganda minister was kept well informed about the war in East Asia. The entry for March 9 noted that the Japanese public had finally "gradually started to recognize the seriousness of the situation," and Goebbels expressed the hope that this realization would force the Japanese to "undertake much greater efforts against the enemy than has been hitherto the case."[97] He dismissed the accelerated Japanese mobilization of the homefront as basically what Germany had already done "two years earlier," although he did observe that Germany provided a good cautionary example of mobilization begun "too late."[98] He mentioned an aerial attack on Tokyo in the March 11 entry, a likely reference to the devastating firebombing of Tokyo on March 9–10, which leveled nearly sixteen square miles of the city and killed an estimated one hundred thousand.[99] Goebbels callously, if unsurprisingly, speculated that the Japanese would finally understand how much Germany had been suffering under Allied bombing.[100]

Given his position within the regime, Goebbels had privileged access to accurate information about the status of the Japanese war effort, both domestically and abroad; he noted the noticeable air of "defeatism" among the Japanese in Berlin, even within the embassy, and on

[90] Goebbels, *TB*, vol. 14, 376.
[91] Goebbels, *TB*, vol. 14, 382.
[92] "Japans Luftwaffe pausenlos am Feind," *Völkischer Beobachter*, December 2, 1944, 2; "Stark zum Todesflug," *Völkischer Beobachter*, December 3, 1944, 1; "Wieder drei Kriegsschiffe, fünf Transporter," *Völkischer Beobachter*, December 8, 1944, 2; "Neue Erfolge der Kamikaze-Flieger," *Völkischer Beobachter*, December 9, 1944, 1; "Japans Todesflieger gegen USA.-Geleitzüger," *Völkischer Beobachter*, December 14, 1944, 1.
[93] "Leyte, ein Schlachtfeld ohne Verwundete," *Völkischer Beobachter*, December 3, 1944.
[94] "Japans denkende Geschosse," *DAZ*, December 15, 1944, 1–2.
[95] "Die bisherigen Erfolge der Kamikaze-Flieger," *Völkischer Beobachter*, December 26–27, 1944, 1.
[96] Robert C. Stern, *Fire from the Sky: Surviving the Kamikaze Threat* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2010), 339.
[97] Goebbels, *TB*, vol. 15, 456.
[98] Goebbels, *TB*, vol. 15, 466.
[99] Richard B. Frank, *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 3–19.
[100] Goebbels, *TB*, vol. 15, 473.

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April 4 caustically observed that Japanese peace feelers toward the Soviet Union were likely the result of the Japanese having lost "their traditional peace and security."[101] Goebbels had never been one of the stronger supporters of the Japanese alliance, but his diary nevertheless reveals how useful he believed Japan to be propagandistically. The distance between the public narrative and the political reality reflects the growing significance of the Japanese example to German morale during the last year of the war, especially given how much effort had been devoted to portraying the Japanese as nigh-invincible.

One of the very last articles appearing in the German press about Japan before the end of the war appeared in the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*'s April 6 issue; it is only fitting that the article was about the *kamikaze*. Wilhelm Schulze, in his last dispatch from Tokyo, referenced battles that would undoubtedly have left his readers confused, considering that the German press had not reported on Iwo Jima or on the Allied advances in Burma. Implicitly acknowledging how badly the war was going, Schulze framed the *kamikaze* as the tactical response to this new reality: "In other words, in Japanese deliberations there are no more strategic retreats or voluntary evacuations. The troops that have been assigned the defense of a sector must hold it, and fight to the last man so that, with their sacrifice, they take as many of the enemy's number with them as possible."[102] This article represents, by far, the most starkly objective, and accurate, depiction of the *kamikaze*'s purpose. Even couched within this rhetoric of heroic self-sacrifice, the truth was inescapable; victory was never even mentioned, and it was clear that any "successes" by the *kamikaze* were strategically meaningless. If it had not been obvious before, this article made it unmistakably clear that defeat for the Japanese was only a matter of time and that the German-Japanese alliance's only remaining *raison d'être* was to provide context to the collective self-immolation of both regimes' citizens.

Conclusion

Many of the leading political and military figures of the Nazi regime committed suicide as the war drew to its final conclusion; in addition to Hitler himself, Joseph Goebbels, Heinrich Himmler, Walter Model, and Odilo Globocnik are just a few of the high-profile suicides during the last weeks of the war.[103] To be sure, not all of these individuals were acting out of some ideologically informed motive of heroic self-sacrifice; most were trying to avoid Allied justice or the shame of a less-than-honorable death at the hands of others. If we take a closer look at the situation in Germany at the end of the war, however, what is striking is that these cases represent the leading edge of what was a veritable German "suicide epidemic" over the course of 1945.[104] As analyzed by Christian Goeschel, ordinary Germans took their lives for any number of different reasons, but the cumulative influence of Nazi propaganda in making suicide "culturally and socially acceptable" cannot be discounted entirely in explaining this phenomenon.[105] Although the rhetoric surrounding Japanese voluntary death was a single element within this broader propaganda campaign, and so we must be cautious in drawing any direct causal link, it had nevertheless been associated with this shift in social and moral values and so must be considered in any conversation about suicide as a significant phenomenon in defeated Germany.

As Japan confronted the reality of its own defeat in August 1945, there were some high-profile suicides, including the architect of the *kamikaze* operation, Vice Admiral Ōnishi, who

[101] Goebbels, *TB*, vol. 15, 635, 690.

[102] "Kamikaze–Geist der Japaner," *DAZ*, April 6, 1945, 1.

[103] Goeschel, *Suicide in Nazi Germany*, 152–53.

[104] For example, 3,881 people were recorded as having killed themselves in Berlin in April 1945, and another 977 died by suicide in May. Christian Goeschel, "Suicide at the End of the Third Reich," *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 1 (2006): 157–73.

[105] Goeschel, *Suicide in Nazi Germany*, 165.

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committed *seppuku* the day after his country's surrender.[106] There were also several hundred reported suicides in Japan, mostly military officers, but the wave of civilian suicides that so many—both in Japan and the United States—had expected, simply failed to materialize.[107] Again, there is no simple explanation as to why this was the case, but Barak Kushner offers one theory in his study of Japanese imperial propaganda, namely that the agencies and individuals responsible for Japanese propaganda had mobilized toward the end of the war in "preparing" the Japanese public for defeat, an effort supported by political leaders looking to maintain their positions in the postwar era.[108] Of course, this was a perfectly sound strategy for these individuals to have pursued and for the Japanese government to have endorsed, and it is precisely this point that reveals the fundamental hollowness of wartime propaganda—whether produced in Japan, Germany, or the United States—claiming that the Japanese were innately more predisposed to voluntary death and self-sacrifice than other peoples. For whatever reason, it was the Germans—not the Japanese—who chose to accept death as the price of defeat.

Of course, truth is not really the point of propaganda. The utility of this rhetoric, from the perspective of the Nazi state, was not so much what it said about contemporary Japan as what it revealed about their own political and ideological priorities: namely, the project to define and construct a utopian New World Order predicated on the synthesis of modern technology and *völkisch* cultural ideals. Self-sacrifice and suicide figured in this rhetoric as a means to an end, and the preexisting associations between Japanese culture and honorable rituals of self-sacrifice proved uniquely attractive for Nazi propagandists attempting to persuade the German public that such actions were both strategically necessary and morally justifiable. As much as this rhetoric's success pivoted on the fact that much of it was an elaboration on older Orientalist themes, it was also distinctly fascist in its critique of liberal modernity as irreconcilable with authentic national culture. Much more than an "exotic" sideshow of the Second World War, the German-Japanese alliance thus warrants our attention in interrogating continuities between older patterns of transcultural engagement in German-speaking Europe and National Socialism, as well as the ways in which the Nazi regime evaluated and defined itself in its pursuit of death-defying immortality.

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[106] Ohnuki-Tierney, *Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalisms*, 160.

[107] John Dower estimates that the number of Japanese officers who committed suicide during the surrender was comparable to the number of Nazi officers who had killed themselves during the German capitulation. John Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: Norton, 2000), 33–39.

[108] Kushner, *The Thought War*, 156–83.

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