
Supporters of the Japanese Empire: Medical Doctors and the Colonization of Asia

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As soon as Japan took over Manchuria in 1931, its scientists began conducting biological and chemical warfare tests on animals and humans throughout the territory. Backing the scientists were high-ranking officials back home, who had no qualms with the scientists experimenting on humans. This arrangement would last until the Japanese surrendered in 1945.¹ With such horrors being committed by the scientists, several questions arise: What justified their actions? How were they able to distance themselves from their fellow human beings? Can we compare Japanese actions to those of the Nazis? This paper seeks to explain why the atrocities occurred, using the framework of racism that developed during the Meiji Era. It suggests that a discourse surrounding the racism developed through the exchanges of Japanese doctors and their confrontation with the West. These ideas then led to the atrocities committed in the name of Japanese medicine.

Pertinent to this study, the debates surrounding the Final Solution in Germany yield ways to understand Japan's atrocities. Scholars have long debated the cause for the Final Solution in Germany. Why would the Germans allow the top officials to experiment and murder people? Scholars have proposed several theories, but one claim stands out: Detlev Peukert put forth a particularly insightful argument about German scientific racism. The Germans conceived of a utopian society that could be achieved through a burgeoning military state promoting the conquest of reason and science over religion. Subsequently, a crisis emerged: in the absence of religion: death still existed, and science could not console. People embraced racism to cope with this existential crisis by focusing upon the *Volkskörper* or the heritable body of the German race. Individuals must die, yet, the German race could continue forever if it stayed healthy. This meant those unfit to contribute to the German race must be eliminated, which was why, according to Peukert, the Nazis embarked upon a program to obliterate the traces of the mentally ill and the races deemed inferior to Germans.²

Peukert's analysis of scientific racism can help us understand not only the Germans, but the Japanese as well. Both countries underwent rapid changes in technology and science all while confronting the rise of social Darwinism in the 1800s. They would go on to develop programs which experimented upon and killed other races thought to be inferior. Nationalism stressing the necessity of ethnic and racial purity also impacted both countries and fed motivation for the elimination of other ethnicities. Connecting the two countries to Peukert's ideas shows that the horrors in Germany were not exceptional.

¹ Sheldon H. Harris, *Factories of Death: Japanese Biological Warfare, 1932-1945, and the American Cover-Up* (New York: Routledge, 2002), xxix-xxx.

² Detlev Peukert, "The Genesis of the Final Solution from the Spirit of Science," in *Nazism and German Society, 1933-1945*, ed. David F. Crew (New York: Routledge, 1994), 274-275.

Historian Kenneth Pyle argues that Japan's relation with German is seminal:

...exposure to German economic, political, and legal thought, and particularly the German Historical School of Economics, helped nudge Japan in a conservative direction, providing its social scientists and bureaucrats with the technologies of collectivism, nationalism, and authoritarianism.³

Pyle's interpretation covers a wide array of subjects, but he does not include within his discussion the effects from the militarized medicine of Meiji through World War II doctors. He believes in the exceptional nature of Germany's movement toward Nazism and is clearly influenced by German historians' usage of modernization theory to explain the exceptional nature of German history.⁴

My study does not hold to the exceptional nature of these developments, nor does it assume that there was anything inevitable about the path to genocide. The atrocities seen in the 1930s and the 1940s in Germany and Japan could have happened anywhere. But simply put, the necessary tools were present for Germans and Japanese to commit to genocide.

Presenting a more recent interpretation of the German-Japanese relationship, Hoi-eun Kim explores the reciprocal nature of the exchange of ideas between Germany and Japan in terms of medicine. This transference of ideas influenced modernization in both countries.⁵ Kim's account focuses on the German side of the relationship and employs a multitude of German sources with few Japanese writings.

This paper contributes to the study of Japan's and Germany's relationship by applying Peukert's scientific racism to the Japanese. It specifically focuses upon the military medical establishment within Japan and its influence upon the Japanese government. From the Meiji period on to World War II, Japanese officials and scientists stressed the need to develop their country's medicine in accordance with Western standards. Japan's research infrastructure reached high international standards and made major contributions, especially within subfields like bacteriology. Making these advancements possible, the National Diet and Central bureaucracy always had funds for medicine-based programs, including sending students to the West.⁶ This study focuses upon the writings of Mori Ōgai, one such student who went west and contributed heavily both in terms of medical research and in literature. His literature-based writings provide information on the shift from Tokugawa to the Meiji era, especially in terms of changing notions of racism. For World War II, this study explores the case of Ishii Shiro, an ultranationalist responsible for much of Japan's research into biological warfare. Key Japanese doctors constructed a racist narrative related to colonial people that allowed the Japanese to distance themselves and commit atrocities across Asia.

As for the construction of this paper, I first focus upon the development of medicine in Japan during the Meiji era, exploring the influence of German medicine on Japan by focusing upon Leopold Müller, Erwin Baelz, and the students who went overseas to Germany to study medicine. After discussing the students, this study moves to pre-World War II and explores the military biological warfare development inspired by Ishii Shiro.

Doctors and laypeople had a strained relationship during the Meiji Era. The Japanese considered scientists as mere conduits that took knowledge from the West rather than those that

³ Quoted by Erik Grimmer-Solem, "German Social Science, Meiji Conservatism, and the Peculiarities of Japanese History," *Journal of World History* 16, no. 2 (June 2005), 190.

⁴ Grimmer-Solem, 191.

⁵ Hoi-eun Kim, *Doctors of Empire: Medical and Cultural Encounters between Imperial Germany and Meiji Japan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 13.

⁶ James Bartholomew, "Modern Science in Japan: Comparative Perspectives," *Journal of World History* 4, no. 1 (1993): 109.

developed new learning. Funding came from the state because of the lack of capitalism within Japan. Therefore, science relied heavily upon the state for money.⁷ Science became reliant upon the state; science and state entered a symbiotic relationship.

Japanese doctors needed to radically transform the medical industry of Japan at the request of the government and found inspiration from Germany. The first German doctor and military physician Leopold Müller arrived in 1871 and encountered a less than ideal group of Japanese students. Müller found the Japanese lacking in medical knowledge. Even when students had little knowledge of a foreign language, they would try to read difficult, specialized texts without fully understanding the material.⁸ Not until the 1870's, with the arrival of more government funding did the Japanese treat learning German medicine seriously. At that time, the government passed a measure to establish a commuter program at Tokyo Medical School to increase the nation's number of doctors. The program required Japanese assistants to Germans to teach the courses that took students three years to complete. A result of these two programs was to divide research-oriented, high class physicians from ordinary, clinical physicians.⁹

Erwin Baelz was the first civilian physician to be sent to Japan, where he set up a private practice, so he could interact more with the Japanese government. Despite having the practice, Baelz still taught courses through which he became concerned about the institutionalization of German medicine. He began to worry about the extreme reliance on German theoretical lectures and an emphasis on scientific aspects of medicine. Once 1900 arrived, Baelz retired voluntarily after seeing so many of his fellow Germans replaced by Japanese, trained in the Western medical tradition.¹⁰

Influenced by German doctors and seeking further Western medicine, the Japanese embarked on overseas study. The Charter Oath of 1868 mandated that "knowledge shall be sought throughout the world, so that the foundations of the Empire may be strengthened."¹¹ As a result, Japan sent its doctors, many of samurai background, overseas to study Western technology, medicine, and ideas.¹² According to James Bartholomew's research, "in 1880, some 79% of scientists were of samurai origin; in 1900, 54% still came from the former samurai population."¹³ That scientists were of samurai origin was not unusual for they received a strong education. Morality, a sense of duty to the government, and intensive training in reading and writing made up the samurai's education.¹⁴ Samurai, with the government's best interests at heart, became the vessels through which to understand Western culture and impart it to the Japanese government. With this mindset, the Japanese tried to utilize Western medicine to make it able to withstand Western imperial forces. Baelz documents how these students set up newspapers to disseminate Western ideas to the public, showcasing a desire to implement Western ideas among the Japanese.¹⁵ The Japanese who went overseas wanted to modernize and remove the backwardness of Japanese society to make it a competing power with the West.

After fully implementing German medical techniques into its school system, Japan sent many of its students to Germany, which provided ample opportunity for Japanese scientists to study the West. The average age of these students was 32.7 years old. Once in Germany, the Japanese met with both awe and frustration. Japanese students immersed themselves in German culture by visiting cultural hot spots, like the theatre, without the moral restrictions of the Meiji government. However,

⁷ James Bartholomew, *the Formation of Science in Japan* (Ann Arbor: Yale University, 1989), 1.

⁸ John Z Bowers, *When the Twain Meet: The Rise of Western Medicine in Japan* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1980), 67.

⁹ Kim, 44-45.

¹⁰ Kim, 50-52.

¹¹ Ardath W. Burks, ed, *The Modernizers: Overseas Students, Foreign Employees, and Meiji Japan*. (Boulder: Westview, 1985), 207.

¹² Burks, 154.

¹³ Bartholomew, "Modern Science in Japan: Comparative Perspectives," 102.

¹⁴ Burks, 255.

¹⁵ Baelz, 21.

German people constantly watched the Japanese students for they had not seen such people before now. Due to this constant surveillance and perhaps a condescending attitude by their hosts, many students began to feel inferior to Germans. Some even said Japan needed to change to a European lifestyle with European nutrition and clothing.¹⁶ In comparison to American contemporaries, the Japanese had a much harder time adjusting to German culture. Many of the Americans who studied within Germany came from a German ethnic background and adapted easily into German culture.¹⁷

In 1884, Mori Ōgai, a medical student and member of the Army Medical Corps, went to Germany to study military hygiene. Ōgai wrote about his experience in a personal diary.¹⁸ He recorded what the Japanese Minister of War said to him:

Discussions about hygiene are meaningless to people who go about with geta thongs between their toes...Learning isn't limited to reading books. If you carefully observe how Europeans think, how they live, and what their manners are, your trip abroad will have been warranted.¹⁹

The Japanese chauvinism toward “backwards” people originated in fact in their treatment by Western powers. This outlook would soon be transferred to colonized people; the Meiji rulers thought of the subjects as “...possessed of their own identity by a ‘conscience or self-knowledge.’”²⁰ After learning about the error of bowing low to Europeans, Ōgai wrote about how,

...in Europe, youths who have received any education at all learn from a dancing instructor how to stand, sit, pay their respects, and kneel politely so that, after having lived among Europeans for some time, Japanese find the crude manners of their fellow countrymen unbearably funny.²¹

He marked a distinction between the West and Japanese. Japanese people not exposed to the world lived a backward life frowned upon by the modernizing elite. The more cosmopolitan echelon wished to emulate certain behaviors to better their people in the world's eyes.

Comparing their country unfavorably to the West, Japanese intellectuals urged an emphasis on development. A document by the name of “On Reform of the Way of Heaven” attributed to Yokoi made its rounds through the people loyal to the shogunate. There Yokoi made the following statement:

... today there is a movement-indeed, since the beginning of time there has never been a greater one-toward renovation of political rule, and thus many foreign countries are striving to understand, to discover, and to attain a high level of culture on the basis of natural principles. However, Japan alone huddles to its isolated small islands... and so cannot achieve this. Its fall is inevitable. We must at once sweep away the great evils of narrow-mindedness and deep-rooted abuses, must, guided by

¹⁶ Kim 63, 72, 91-94.

¹⁷ Thomas Neville Bonner, *American Doctors and German University: A Chapter in International Intellectual Relations 1870-1914* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, 1963), 24-25.

¹⁸ Karen Brazell, “Mori Ōgai in Germany. A Translation of Fumizukai and Excerpts from Doitsu Nikki,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 26, no. 1/2 (1971): 77.

¹⁹ Brazell, 82.

²⁰ Takashi Fujitani, *Splendid Monarchy: Power and Pageantry in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California, 1998), 19.

²¹ Brazell, 81.

the idea that we are ‘eternal as heaven and earth,’ see through distorted opinions and must be intent on our land becoming the greatest in the universe.²²

Spurred by intellectuals, the Japanese were aware of western development and sought to produce similar advances within their own society. These intellectuals understood the development of Social Darwinism, which allowed for a rearrangement of society that fit well with the culture’s view of the hierarchical relationship among peoples. On January 19, 1904, regarding the Russo-Japanese war, Erwin Baelz wrote “the Japanese must not forget that they are trying to assume the leadership of the yellow races, and that many of them are inspired by thoughts of dominating the Far East.”²³ Baelz urged that Japan not forget its cause to lead the East out of backwardness and instead usher in a new future in which it relies heavily on Western ideas.

Alongside of Social Darwinism, Japanese intellectuals studied anthropology. Edward Morse’s ideas on Darwinian evolution, Hermann Roesler’s social constitutionalism, and of course German philosophical thinkers impacted the development of Japanese intellectuals. Morse laid the foundation for Japanese physical anthropological study and taught the Japanese to stress the physical rather than other areas of anthropological science. Political science came to be studied through these influences as well.²⁴ The questions that the Japanese started to ask concerned the origins of the Japanese people. They wondered about their relationship to the Ainu and Okinawan people, how the imperial family came about, and how the unique Japanese culture developed. Tsuboi Shogoro led the development of Japanese anthropology through his creation of *Jinrui-gaku no Tomodachi*, an anthropological association that published its own journal. Tsuboi also taught cultural anthropologist Torii Ryuzo, another leading anthropologist during the colonial age. The Japanese government employed anthropologists to conduct ethnographic surveys of potential colonial lands that became crucial in understanding Taiwan, Korea, and China. Japanese became important to the dissemination of information in these areas, and many of the older people still speak Japanese.²⁵ Even as the Japanese borrowed ideas from the West, they formulated them according to the Japanese agenda.

The government’s primary motive for studying Western medicine was to establish a superior military. Thanks to the specialization of medicine brought about by the doctors’ passionate study of Western medicine, the Japanese could implement hygiene within its military. Hygiene became part of the morality of the Japanese.

For bureaucrats, military officials, and pedagogues alike, hygiene became a concept that not only linked but intrinsically intertwined rules of cleanliness with those of morality, the health of the body with that of the mind, the individual with society, and Japan with other modern nations.²⁶

Western medicine became the way the Japanese would organize their morality, justifying their sense of superiority. They could exhibit perfect bodies—not only physically but also mentally ideal—to colonized subjects; thus, proving their own superiority.

22 Mori Ōgai, *Saiki Koi and Other Stories*, ed. David Dilworth and J. Thomas Rimer (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1977), 82.

23 Baelz, 243.

24 H. J. Jones, *Live Machines: Hired Foreigners and Meiji Japan* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980), 75.

25 Jerry S. Eades, “Anthropologists of Asia, Anthropologists in Asia: The Academic Mode of Production in the Semi-Periphery,” in *Asian Anthropology*, ed. Jan Van Bremen, Eyal Ben-Ari and Syed Farid Alatas (New York: Routledge, 2005), 82-83.

26 Sabine Frühstück, *Colonizing Sex: Sexology and Social Control in Modern Japan* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 25.

Ishii Shirō, a Japanese medical doctor with high ambition, sought to display his superiority over colonized subjects. Playing into fears about the nature of teaching medicine first set out by Erwin Baelz, Japanese medical schools did not offer courses in medical ethics. The focus was directed to hands-on instruction and clinical experience, as the medical educators believed their students already to behave in an ethical manner. They thought they impressed upon their students the goal of healing, rather than experimenting upon patients. However, sometimes professors would teach medical ethics to a select group of students in an informal manner. None of the graduates underwent the Hippocratic Oath, nor was there a Japanese equivalent of the famous vow.

Shirō graduated in 1920 after quickly going through school and joined the military as a doctor. In 1927, he acquired a doctorate at Kyoto Imperial University. After graduating, Shiro was posted by the army to work at the Kyoto Army Medical Hospital, where he then used his military connections to advocate for biological warfare development in Tokyo. Initially, he made little headway, but a shift in government in 1930 allowed him to gain traction for biological warfare research. At this time, Ishii attracted the attention of Koizumi Chikahiko, who was a prominent military scientist and nationalist. Koizumi also fancied himself a philosopher, believing the call of the doctor was to tend to the country itself, rather than cure individual illnesses. Through this partnership, the department of immunology would be developed. Through this department, Japan would contribute much to the study of immunology.²⁷ From these beginnings, Ishii had the resources necessary to develop camps, where he performed biological research on hapless prisoners.

In 1931 after the Japanese conquest of Manchuria, Shiro went on to form the Ping Fan camp located near the city of Harbin in China. In the camp, the staff performed experiments upon the prisoners, like tying them to logs and studying the effects of long durations in cold conditions. Shirō tried to ease the ethical doubts of his staff. He said:

Our God Given mission as doctors is to challenge all varieties of disease causing microorganisms; to block all roads of intrusion into the human body; to annihilate all foreign matter resident in our bodies; and to devise the most expeditious treatment possible. However, the research work upon which we are now about to embark is the complete opposite of these principles, and may cause us some anguish as doctors. Nevertheless, I beseech you to pursue this research, based on the dual thrill of (1) a scientist to exert efforts to probing for the truth in natural science and research into, and discovery of, the unknown world, and (2) as a military person, to successfully build a powerful military weapon against the enemy.²⁸

Doctors working with Ishii at the prison camp justified the atrocities citing nationalism and the utility of their research for the Japanese army, while distancing themselves from their subjects by holding onto the ideal of finding the truths of natural science.

Japan's colonial aims became clear with the publication of *An Investigation of Global Policy with the Yamato Race as the Nucleus*. This collection of volumes, published in 1943 and aimed at Japanese officials, outlined the policies to be implemented by the government. The documents lay out the rationale behind policies enacted against colonized people. According to the report, all countries adopt a racialized version of the world that connects to each countries' nationalism.²⁹ With this document, the Japanese government exposed its policies to be racially-based towards colonized people. Its justification for such policies came from the impression that other countries were just as

²⁷ Harris, 15-16, 18-21.

²⁸ Harris, 56-57.

²⁹ John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 263-264.

racist and nationalistic. Doctors utilized this narrative to perform experiments upon colonial subjects.

German and Japanese doctors, harnessing scientific racism, developed discourses that allowed them to commit atrocities during World War II. During the late nineteenth century, Japan studied Western medicine through German instruction. This experience transformed Japanese ideas about learning medicine. The Japanese fully implemented Western style medicine within Japan and contributed to highly specialized fields of research. Thanks to the doctors, the government could utilize this form of medicine to wage war, and it sought to fund more research and development of biological weapons. This led Japanese doctors like Ishii Shiro to perform cruel experiments upon colonized peoples that echoed the horrors committed by the Germans on the Jews. To justify such behavior and persuade those against the research-induced atrocities, the Japanese needed a discourse, an understanding of how these seemingly horrible acts contributed to a greater good. The doctors, since they were scientists, provided a narrative that stressed the inferiority of the colonized people, while emphasizing the need of pursuing unrestricted research. They stressed these ideas to their staff to make sure they would carry out the experiments. The government could also use the doctors' reasonings to justify its stance on colonizing Asia.

The preceding research is meant as an initial foray into a complicated topic. Further research must be completed to truly understand the racism that developed within Japan. This will require the further declassification of governmental documents and sensitive, skilled scholars.