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The Other Japan: Back to Japan's Religious Roots for a New Japanese Nationalism?

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Abstract: *The purpose of this article is first to elucidate the nature and worldview of the ideology of pre-World War II Japan that inspired the Japanese elite to embark on global conquest and that mobilized the Japanese masses to fight to the death even after the dropping of the atomic bombs. Second, the aim is to examine how this ideology first emerged in the Meiji period and how it came to dominate Japanese politics until the end of the war. Third, it will illustrate not only what has survived of this form of ultranationalism in the postwar period, identifying the ideas of core thinkers and organizations, but it will also examine the emergence of different, or perhaps more moderate, forms of Japanese nationalism, pinpointing their key ideas and describing their visions for a future Japan. Finally, I will attempt to shed light on the historical forces and scenarios that might return Japanese ultranationalists to the center of political influence and power in the Japanese state and overturn Japan's postwar pacifist constitution and noninterventionist military foreign policy.*

Keywords: Douglas MacArthur, Constitution of the Empire of Japan, Hozumi Yatsuka, Uesugi Shinkichi, Japanese Shinto ultranationalism, Japanese nationalism, Nippon Kaigi

On August 15, 1945, after fifteen years of military expansion and fighting on the Asian mainland and in the Pacific, Japan was a defeated nation in ruins. After months of devastation by America's strategic bombing operations, including massive incendiary attacks on Japan's major metropolitan centers, culminating with the dropping of atomic bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the announcement of the entrance of the USSR into the war against Japan, Emperor Hirohito finally intervened with the highest decision-making body ruling Japan, the Supreme Council for the Direction

of the War (最高戦争指導会議),¹ and enunciated Japan's acceptance of the terms of the Potsdam Proclamation, thus ending the Greater East Asian War. Many Japanese were shocked beyond disbelief by the emperor's broadcast, and a spate of suicides followed. On the same day, thousands of Japanese flocked to the imperial palace and to branch Shintō shrines around the country, prostrated themselves, and *apologized* to their emperor for losing the war. Two weeks later foreign troops arrived on Japanese soil to occupy the "Land of the Gods" for the first time in Japan's recorded history. General Douglas MacArthur,² Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP), landed at Atsugi Air Base on September 30, 1945, to begin the American occupation, followed by the arrival of a force of approximately 350,000 troops and US personnel to carry out the occupation, which would last until 1952.

MacArthur's mandate for the occupation of Japan originated with the Potsdam Proclamation. Section 6 stated that "[t]here must be eliminated for all time the authority and influence of those who have deceived and misled the people of Japan into embarking on world conquest, for we insist that a new order of peace, security and justice will be impossible until irresponsible militarism is driven from the world." Section 7 stated: "Until such a new order is established and until there is convincing proof that Japan's war-making power is destroyed, points in Japanese territory to be designated by the Allies shall be occupied to secure the achievement of the basic objectives we are here setting forth." And section 10 stated: "We do not intend that the Japanese shall be enslaved as a race, or destroyed as a nation, but stern justice shall be meted out to all war criminals, including those who have visited cruelties upon our prisoners. The Japanese Government shall remove all obstacles to the revival and strengthening of democratic tendencies among the Japanese people. Freedom of speech, of religion, and of thought, as well as respect for the fundamental human rights shall be established." Still more, section 12 reads: "The occupying forces of the Allies shall be withdrawn from Japan as soon as these objectives have been accomplished and there has been established in accordance with the freely expressed will of the Japanese people a peacefully inclined and responsible government."³ Section 12 meant, of course, that with the new order

1 The Supreme Council for the Direction of the War consisted of the following six members: Prime Minister Admiral Suzuki Kantarō, Foreign Minister Tōgō Shigenori, War Minister General Anami Korechika, Navy Minister Yonai Mitsumasa, Army Chief of Staff General Umezu Yoshijirō, and Navy Chief of Staff Admiral Toyoda Soemu.

2 General MacArthur was a towering figure throughout the American occupation years. This cannot be overemphasized. As John Dower stated, MacArthur for the Japanese became the "new sovereign, the blue-eyed shogun, the paternalistic military dictator." See his *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company/New Press, 1999), 203. Dower further noted that "MacArthur was the indisputable overlord of occupied Japan, and his underlings functioned as petty viceroys" (205).

3 "Potsdam Proclamation [July 26, 1945]," Birth of the Constitution of Japan (website), National Diet Library, copyright 2003–2004, accessed May 10, 2023, <https://www.ndl.go.jp/constitution/e/etc/c06.html>.

sovereignty would reside in the people—popular sovereignty—and not with the emperor as stated in the Constitution of the Empire of Japan.

America's occupation policy was articulated in depth in the United States Initial Post-Surrender Policy Relating to Japan. In broad terms, the goal of the occupation was the demilitarization and democratization of Japan. Included in the US policy was constitutional revision, the breakup of the large Japanese corporate conglomerates called *zaibatsu*, and the separation of the Shintō religion from the state, as well as the destruction of Japan's physical war-making capabilities. Accordingly, the replacement of the Constitution of the Empire of Japan, the supreme law of the land, was a top priority. MacArthur moved swiftly to advance this. The recalcitrant Japanese leadership, unable to implement fundamental change to the Constitution of the Empire of Japan that would satisfy the Allies, compelled MacArthur to direct the Political Section of SCAP to write a new constitution for the Japanese. The preamble of the postwar Constitution of Japan opens with the following statement:

We, the Japanese people, acting through our duly elected representatives in the National Diet, determined that we shall secure for ourselves and our posterity the fruits of peaceful cooperation with all nations and the blessings of liberty throughout this land, and resolved that never again shall we be visited with the horrors of war through the action of government, do proclaim that sovereign power resides with the people and do firmly establish this Constitution. Government is a sacred trust of the people, the authority for which is derived from the people, the powers of which are exercised by the representatives of the people, and the benefits of which are enjoyed by the people. This is a universal principle of mankind upon which this Constitution is founded. We reject and revoke all constitutions, laws, ordinances, and rescripts in conflict herewith.⁴

In the constitution's first chapter, Article 1 reads as follows: "The Emperor shall be the symbol of the State and of the unity of the people, deriving his position from the will of the people with whom resides sovereign power." Article 4 states: "The Emperor shall perform only such acts in matters of state as are provided for in this Constitution and he shall not have powers related to government." Another part of the Constitution of Japan relevant here is Chapter 2, Article 9, which reads:

Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes.

4 "The Constitution of Japan," Birth of the Constitution of Japan (website), National Diet Library, copyright 2003–2004, accessed May 10, 2023, <https://www.ndl.go.jp/constitution/e/etc/c01.html>.

In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.⁵

The Constitution of Japan went into effect on May 3, 1947.

The American occupation authorities went beyond democratization in the sense of establishing a democratic institutional framework in a new constitution based on fundamental democratic ideals. More fundamentally, they wanted to destroy the ideology that they believed inspired the Japanese elite to embark on war in Asia and the Pacific—the same ideology that mobilized the Japanese masses to fight to the death. Accordingly, occupation authorities ordered a series of directives designed to instill a new set of core beliefs and values in the next generation of Japanese people that would cripple Japan's war-making potential, thus fundamentally changing Japan's political culture and values. On December 15, 1945, MacArthur and the General Headquarters of the Allied Forces (GHQ) issued the Shintō Directive (SCAPIN 448), an official order titled "Abolition of Governmental Sponsorship, Perpetuation, Control, and Dissemination of State Shintō." This directive was issued because State Shintō was thought responsible for conditioning the Japanese people for authoritarian government and wars of aggression. As a result, they sought to turn the next generation of Japanese into pacifists as a guarantee to other nations in the region that Japan would never wage war on them again.

But what has happened to Shintō nationalism in the postwar period? Was it totally snuffed out by MacArthur's occupation policies? Has it resurfaced again? Or, has it reappeared again in different or disguised forms? This article has several purposes. First, it will elucidate the nature and worldview of a radical form of Shintō ultranationalism in the prewar period and examine how this ideology came to dominate Japanese politics until the end of the Second World War. Second, it will illustrate not only what has survived from the remnants of radical Shintō ultranationalism in the postwar period, identifying the ideas of core thinkers and organizations, but also examine the emergence of different, or perhaps more moderate, forms of Shintō nationalism, pinpointing their key ideas and describing their visions for a future Japan. Third, this article will hopefully shed light on the possible historical forces and scenarios that might return Japanese Shintō nationalists to the center of political influence and power in the Japanese state and overturn Japan's postwar pacifist mentality and noninterventionist military foreign policy.

Some clarification of terms may be needed for readers not familiar with Japan's religious and cultural traditions or with modern Japanese political thought. First, Shintō, which literally means the "Way of the *kami*," or the "Way of the Gods," is Japan's

5 "The Constitution of Japan."

indigenous religion.⁶ Second, State Shintō is the linkage of the Japanese state structure to the Shintō religion in the Constitution of the Empire of Japan.⁷ Third, Shintō nationalism is the combining of the Shintō religion with nationalism, which Benedict Anderson, in *Imagined Communities*, defined as an “imagined political community.”⁸ Fourth, Shintō ultranationalism, as the words suggests, is an extreme form of Shintō nationalism. As the reader will discover, this article further differentiates between forms of Shintō ultranationalism, for example between Hozumi Yatsuka’s “reactionary Shintō ultranationalism” and Uesugi Shinkichi’s “radical Shintō ultranationalism”—the latter of which was a revolutionary, mass-based religion of ethnic nationalism.

Radical Shintō Ultranationalism in Prewar Japan

The occupation’s reform policies were designed to fundamentally alter Japan’s political culture. But what exactly was the ideology and culture of the prewar Japanese state that they sought to overturn? Simply put, MacArthur and the American occupation forces had a poor grasp of it. According to the propaganda documentary film *Prelude to War* (1942), which was part of *Why We Fight*, a series of documentary films produced by the War Department between 1942 and 1945 and directed by Frank Capra, America’s ideological enemy in the case of Germany was said to be National Socialism, or Nazism for short; in the case of Italy, it was Fascism; however, when the documentary came to identify the ideology of Japan, it simply stated that “they had lots of names for it.” In other words, the War Department did not know. Incredible as it may seem, three quarters of a century since the war ended, Americans still cannot identify the ideology of prewar Japan! Consequently, widely used textbooks in American colleges and universities, when discussing Japan’s prewar ideology, refer to it with a multiplicity of terms such as “fascism,” “emperor-system fascism,” “Japanism,” or simply “militarism,” which, of course, tells you nothing about the ideology.

6 As I explain in my book, *Japan’s Holy War: The Ideology of Radical Shintō Ultranationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), the *kami* were the objects of worship of the Japanese people prior to the introduction of divinities derived from foreign religions originating on the Eurasian continent. At the center of this *kami* worship were the divine beings that created the universe and their descendants, the divine ancestors of the Japanese people. For the purposes of this article, religion may be defined simply as a belief in the supernatural.

7 Shintō religion was the defining characteristic of a distinctly Japanese civilization. In *Japan’s Holy War*, I note that “Shintō was inherently political and linked to particular notions of state and society that gave the Japanese a *Weltanschauung*, a comprehensive philosophy of the world and human life” (2). The first book in English to extensively explore the link between Shintō religion and the Japanese state was Daniel Holtom, *The National Faith of Japan: A Study in Modern Shintō* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubnet, 1938).

8 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 6.

My 2009 book, *Japan's Holy War*, was the first major publication in the English language to deal systematically with the origins, development, diffusion, and triumph of the ideology of wartime Japan.⁹ It explored the ideology that inspired the Japanese elite to embark on global conquest, and that mobilized the Japanese masses to fight to the death. The book refers to that ideology as “radical Shintō ultranationalism.” What is the nature and what are the core values of radical Shintō ultranationalism? In the book, I describe radical Shintō ultranationalism as a

revolutionary mass-based form of ethnic nationalism that has at the center of its ideology the Shintō creation story of the Japanese islands by Izanami and Izanagi, the divine origins of the imperial line, the divinity of the emperor, the ethnic divinity and superiority of the Japanese people, the belief in a divine world mission for the Japanese state, [and] global imperial rule under the emperor.¹⁰

To understand the birth, development, diffusion, and triumph of the ideology of radical Shintō ultranationalism in the modern Japanese state, one must start with the promulgation of the Constitution of the Empire of Japan (大日本帝国憲法) on February 11, 1889.¹¹ The Constitution of the Empire of Japan, created by Itō Hirobumi and his colleagues,¹² contained the core Shintō doctrine in Chapter 1, Article 1 of the Constitution, which stated that “[t]he Empire of Japan shall be reigned over and governed by a line of Emperors unbroken for ages eternal.” Article 3 proclaimed that “[t]he Emperor is sacred and inviolable.”¹³ And Article 4 stated that “[t]he Emperor is the head of the Empire, combining in Himself the rights of sovereignty, and exercises them, according to the provisions of the present Constitution.” Despite these articles, which are characteristic of traditional absolute monarchies, the Constitution of the Empire of Japan also contained elements of democracy. For instance, Article 5 stated that “[t]he Emperor exercises the legislative power with the consent of the Imperial Diet.” Chapter 2, containing fifteen articles, was titled “Rights and Duties of Subjects.” Chapter 4, “The Ministers of State and the Privy Council,” contained two articles. One of these, Article 55, stated: “The respective Ministers of State shall give their advice to

9 See note 6. To my knowledge, there is only one other work on this topic in a European language. It is Klaus Antoni, *Shintō und die Konzeption des japanischen Nationalwessens (kokutai)* (Lieden: Brill, 1998).

10 Skya, *Japan's Holy War*, 19.

11 To trace the constitution's ideological roots, one must go back to the Shintō revival movement in the Tokugawa period and to the debate over the type of constitution to adopt. But this is beyond the scope of this article.

12 It should be noted that Japanese names are given here in the Japanese order: family name first.

13 Very similar articles were contained in the Constitution of Prussia and the Constitution of the Kingdom of Italy.

the Emperor, and be responsible for it. All Laws, Imperial Ordinances, and Imperial Rescripts of whatever kind, that relate to the affairs of State, require the countersignature of a Minister of State.”¹⁴

The *Guide to Japan*, a document prepared by the American government for US occupation forces, commented that the Constitution of the Empire of Japan, “with Prussian tyranny as its father, and British representative government as its mother, and attended at its birth by Sat-Cho [Satsuma and Chōshū] midwives, was a hermaphroditic creature.”¹⁵ In other words, the Constitution merged contradictory elements of both absolute monarchy and democracy in the same document. Flawed in theory, it proved to be unworkable in practice. Accordingly, it led to constant gridlock in government in the first decades of politics under the Constitution.¹⁶

Alarmed that the political system was starting to unravel and that Japan was rapidly heading toward a constitutional crisis, astute politicians and constitutional legal scholars sought to find a way out of the crisis of politics under the Constitution of the Empire of Japan. Two fundamentally opposing solutions were proposed: one was to place all power in the emperor, making the parliament a rubber-stamp parliament, thus reverting back to a traditional absolute monarchy. This position, a kind of reactionary Shintō ultranationalism, was advocated by Tokyo University constitutional legal scholar Hozumi Yatsuka. For Hozumi, the Japanese state was a “*Völkisch* family state.” He further defined it as follows: “the state is a *völkisch* group (*minzoku dantai*) protected by the sovereign power.” A *völkisch* or ethnic group consisted of “blood relatives of the same womb.”¹⁷ The “same womb” referred to here was the originator of the line of descent of the unbroken line of emperors, Amaterasu Ōmikami. The sovereign power, of course, was the emperor, who was the deity Amaterasu Ōmikami existing in physical form in the present.

The second essential characteristic of Hozumi’s state was Japan’s unique *kokutai*, or “form of state.” Japan’s *kokutai* posited that the Japanese state was inherently hierarchical because the originator deity of the unbroken line of emperors, Amaterasu Ōmikami, gave descendants the authority to rule over everyone who came after. The Shintō nationalists have adamantly maintained that what changed governmentally in Japan over the centuries was the *seitai*, or “form of government,” not the “form of state.” (It is important to point this out because US scholarship mistakenly claims that Kita Ikki was

14 “The Constitution of the Empire of Japan,” Birth of the Constitution of Japan (website), National Diet Library, copyright 2003–2004, accessed May 10, 2023, <https://www.ndl.go.jp/constitution/e/etc/c02.html>.

15 Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, 346.

16 There were eighteen prime ministers and cabinets between 1885 and 1918.

17 Skya, *Japan’s Holy War*, 56.

the chief ideologue of the radical nationalists;¹⁸ however, because Kita argued that the form of state changed as well as the form of government, this position fundamentally contradicted Shintō nationalism.) The final characteristic of Hozumi's state was that it was a "family-state." That is to say, Hozumi adhered to the patriarchal construction of society. In terms of comparative state theory, his was much like Sir Robert Filmer's theory of traditional absolute monarchy in England.¹⁹

The other solution to the problem of politics under the Constitution of the Empire of Japan was to place all power in the parliament and make the emperor a figurehead, thus allowing Japan's political system to evolve into a British-style constitutional monarchy. This solution was advocated by Tokyo University constitutional legal scholar Minobe Tatsukichi. These two diametrically opposed positions generated the greatest debate over state and sovereignty in modern Japanese history, widely known in Japan as the debate between Hozumi's "emperor-as-sovereign theory of state (天皇主權説)" and Minobe's "emperor-as-organ theory of the state (天皇機關説)." As real-life politics actually unfolded under the Constitution of the Empire of Japan, Japan started sliding into an English-style constitutional monarchy in the 1920s.

However, if one examines the trajectory of Japanese political thought into the 1930s, one finds that neither Hozumi's theory of absolute monarchy nor Minobe's theory of parliamentary government based on the emperor-as-organ theory of the state would survive the ideological contestation throughout the pre-1945 Shōwa period. The reason for this is simple: neither was a theory of state that the newly politicized Japanese masses could identify with. The Hibiya Riot of 1905 signaled the emergence of the Japanese masses on the political stage. The riots toppled the Terauchi cabinet, thus ending rule by the oligarchs who had created the modern Japanese state. And, with the expansion to universal male franchise in 1925, it became impossible to revert to Hozumi's traditional ideology of absolute monarchy, where the masses were politically children. Accordingly, the political application of Hozumi's theory of state was doomed.

On the other hand, neither could the masses identify with the German-derived organ theory of the state, a theory formulated in Germany specifically to avoid the adoption of popular sovereignty. That is to say, in Minobe's theory of the state, sovereignty resided in the state, not in the people, and this presented a very weak and unstable ideological underpinning for parliamentary democracy; nevertheless, for a period in the more

18 I believe this notion started with the publication of *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, vol. 2, compiled by Ryūsaku Tsunoda, William Theodore de Bary, and Donald Keene (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958). In chapter 27, "The Rise of Revolutionary Nationalism," there is a section on Kita Ikki titled "Kita Ikki and the Reform Wing of Ultrnationalism," and within that section a translation of a few pages of his 1919 work "Taikō Nihon Kaizō Hōan" ("An Outline Plan for the Reorganization of Japan"). However, in his major 1906 work *Kokutairon oyobi Junsei Shakaishugi* (On the kokutai and pure socialism), Kita launched a devastating attack on Hozumi Yatsuka's theory of the Shintō Japanese state. Kita was a leftist, not a rightist.

19 Skya, *Japan's Holy War*, 64.

liberal 1920s, Minobe's organ theory in support of parliamentary government did in fact emerge to become the dominant state theory following the end of World War I.

Hozumi's Shintō theory of absolute monarchy was superseded, however, by radical emperor-centered totalitarian Shintō ideologies in the 1910s and 1920s. This suggests that the creeping democracy and secularization of Japan's early twentieth-century political order were the principle causes of the radicalism and terrorism of the 1930s, which ultimately led to a holy war against Western civilization. What is truly remarkable about the interwar period is the amount of political violence and the number of acts of terrorism that plagued Japan. Three serving prime ministers (Hara Takashi, Hamaguchi Osachi, and Inukai Tsuyoshi) and two former prime ministers (Saitō Makoto and Takahashi Korekiyo) were assassinated between 1921 and 1936. And others, such as Prime Minister Okada Keisuke, narrowly escaped assassination.²⁰

One of the leading theorists of radical Shintō ultranationalism was Uesugi Shinkichi. Written in 1921, Uesugi's book, whose title translates as "a new thesis on the state (*Kokka Shinron* 国家新論),"²¹ set forth the framework of a theory of state that had profound influence on Shintō ultranationalist thought. The acts of terrorism to bring about a political revolution and usher in a worldwide war were justified and encouraged by Uesugi's radical Shintō thought. In other words, by the 1930s, widely accepted doctrinal developments in Shintō religious thought not only condoned but encouraged the wave of assassinations of prime ministers and cabinet members in an effort to overthrow the government. Thus, while Shintō ideology had been the religion and ideology of the Japanese state since the beginning of the Meiji period in 1868, it was not the radical mass-based Shintō ideology that would emerge in the 1920s. Rather, the radical Shintō backlash against the secularization and democratization of the Japanese state in the 1920s emerged with a vengeance to destroy Japan's nascent experiment with parliamentary government. Mark Juergensmeyer, a renowned scholar of religious terrorism who endorsed *Japan's Holy War*, noted that "State Shintō transformed from an ideology deeply supportive of entrenched authority to one profoundly and violently opposed to it."²²

In his book providing "a new thesis on the state (国家新論)," Uesugi Shinkichi defined the Japanese state as "ultimate morality."²³ What did he mean by the state as ultimate morality? Uesugi's state theory was built on a moral philosophy that in turn rested on his theory of metaphysics. Thus, a prerequisite for the knowledge of ultimate morality was the possibility of knowledge of the ultimate nature of being. In his ontology, being in its totality could not be defined in terms of the self as a complete

20 Skya, *Japan's Holy War*, 230.

21 Uesugi Shinkichi, 国家新論 (Tokyo: Keibunken, 1921).

22 This is Juergensmeyer's endorsement on the back cover of *Japan's Holy War*.

23 Skya, *Japan's Holy War*, 166.

entity in distinction or differentiation from other selves. The self was merely a part of a greater “being as a totality.”²⁴

Further, being did not simply denote what might be referred to as “static-given being.” One’s individual being, as a constituent element of “being as a totality,” had movement. This movement of being related in a cause-and-effect relationship to the movements of other beings in a spatial environment—what Uesugi called a person’s *sōkan* 相関. Being’s movement, however, involved not only this spatial relationship. It involved this interrelationship with other beings in a spatial totality in time, which he called *renzoku* 連続. Each being, as part of “being as a totality,” mutually and interdependently developed and perfected the self in relation to other selves in a definite spatial-temporal matrix. Uesugi called this 人の相関と連続, and it was what he defined as morality. This perfection, or the object of being’s becoming, he called a person’s “essential being (本性).” One’s essential being constituted his or her real being, which inherently contained in it a moral nature that was to be perfected. The full realization of being’s essential nature was the goal of one’s becoming.

The final key component of Uesugi’s state theory was “organizational will (体制意志).” Organizational will was the moral force, the source of state cohesion and national solidarity. Ultimately, the emperor was the source of organizational will. To obey the emperor’s will was the highest realization of the self, one’s essential being. To absorb the self into the emperor, to become a part of the emperor, was to accomplish this essential being. In other words, organizational will was the emperor, one’s essential being, and ultimate morality.

Uesugi’s amalgamation of German metaphysics and Shintō doctrine furnished the Japanese individual with a license to kill. It gave the true believer a mandate to assassinate the emperor’s corrupt cabinet members, wicked members of the court entourage, other public officials, greedy business leaders, and for that matter anyone else they deemed harmful to the Japanese state. It also justified a holy war against the bankrupt global order dominated by secular liberal democratic nations and atheistic communist states because the emperor was rightfully the center and ruler of the world.

According to Uesugi’s state theory, each Japanese individual knew instinctively the emperor’s will since it was in their essential being. The purpose of the individual’s life and activity was to be proactive and carry out the emperor’s will. The terrorists felt that this gave them the moral authority to assassinate the ministers of state and members of the court entourage who they believed were not carrying out the emperor’s will. In Uesugi’s state theory, carrying out the emperor’s will and dying for the emperor meant closing the gap between one’s essential being and one’s existential being; it meant

24 Skya, 166.

merging the self into the mystical body of the emperor. In a nutshell, this was Uesugi's theory of the state as ultimate morality.²⁵

In his book on Japanese constitutional history, 日本国家思想史研究 (A study of the history of Japanese state thought), Tokyo University scholar Nagao Ryūichi stated that Uesugi's 1921 "new thesis on the state (国家新論)" was written in reaction to Hozumi's patriarchal, authoritarian theory of state: "The significance of enunciating that 'the state is ultimate morality' meant the exclusion of Hozumi's theory of an authoritarian view of the state."²⁶ This led to radicalization, that is, a process of conversion that leads to a fanatically driven person, which first started among the elites and then spread to the masses through massive propaganda campaigns.

According to the state theories and theologies of Uesugi Shinkichi and other Shintō ultranationalists such as Kakehi Katsuhiko, the fundamental purpose of life for the radical Shintō ultranationalist was to bring about a "Shōwa Restoration (*Shōwa Ishin*)" and to spread the divine emperor's rule throughout the world.²⁷ This ideology was spread rapidly throughout the military by Uesugi and other ideologues. For example, when the radical Shintō ultranationalist sublieutenant Itō Kamahiro was asked by the judge presiding in his trial for the killing of Prime Minister Inukai to explain his philosophy of "constructive destruction," he stated that his group was an "organization without organization. My life's desire will be fulfilled if a state is established on the principle that the Emperor and his subjects are one."²⁸ For Itō and many other likeminded military officers, the Japanese state was in trouble because the emperor was surrounded by corrupt cabinet members and members of his court entourage who were supposedly blocking the will of the emperor from being carried out, thus separating the people from the emperor. In brief, this was the ideological basis of radical Shintō ultranationalism.

Admiral Yonai Mitsumasa offers an extraordinary example of the alarming nature of prewar radical Shintō fanaticism. He was a member of Hirohito's decision-making ruling inner circle at the end of the war. Having realized that the ideology of radical

25 For those interested in comparative radical ultranationalist thought, his theory of state is very close to that of German National Socialism. As scholar Richard Koenigsberg pointed out, the German people in Nazi thought were imagined not as an "imagined community" as in the work of Benedict Anderson, but as a people fused into one organic being, with each person as a cell of the German body politic. It was a single organism, which, of course, was a biological fantasy. See Richard A. Koenigsberg, *Nations Have the Right to Kill: Hitler, the Holocaust and War* (Elmhurst, NY: Library of Social Science, 2009). Also, quoting Adolf Hitler directly: "We, as Aryans, can conceive of the state only as the living organism of a nationality which not only assures the preservation of this nationality, but by the development of its spiritual and ideal abilities leads it to the highest freedom." *Mein Kampf* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1943), 394. In Uesugi's thought, of course, every individual was fused into the mystical body of the emperor.

26 Nagao Ryūichi, 日本国家思想史研究 (Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1982), 36.

27 Takahashi, Masae, *Ni-Nijūroku Jiken: Shōwa Ishin no Shisō to Kōdō* (Tokyo: Chō Kōron Sha, 1965), 163–67.

28 Hugh Byas, *Government by Assassination* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1942), 46.

Shintō ultranationalism had driven the Japanese empire to the brink of mass national suicide, he confided to Rear Admiral Takagi before the surrender that the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to end the madness were “gifts from the [Shintō] Gods (天佑).”²⁹ This stunning statement speaks volumes about the mindset of Japan’s wartime leadership.

Survival of Radical Shintō Ultranationalist Thought in the Postwar Period

Despite MacArthur’s attempt to thoroughly eradicate the ideology of radical Shintō ultranationalism from Japanese society, remnants of it survived and resurfaced at various points in the postwar period. Not only that, MacArthur’s own occupation policies contributed to its revival. For instance, he ordered the release of Japanese communists from prison and made legal the Japanese Communist Party (JCP). Within a short time, the JCP started to focus on winning mass support, which was quite successful. As one historian noted, “Official membership rose from a mere 8,000 in 1946 to 37,000 in 1948 and 100,000 in 1949. By 1948 it is estimated that about half of organized labor was under varying degrees of communist control, many of the important unions, including those of transport, communications, electric power, and government-enterprise workers, being largely directed by the JCP.”³⁰ The significance of this fact here is that it led to a backlash and to the rebirth of antileftist nationalist Shintō movements.

Still more, it was during the latter part of the occupation, with the so-called “reverse course” policy, that we find a proliferation of nationalists and nationalist groups in Japan. The change in the course of the occupation policy from demilitarization to remilitarization, which according to some sources began in 1947, was accelerated by the intensification of the Cold War in Asia. In his book *Nationalism and the Right Wing in Japan*, the late Ivan Morris noted, “The steady intensification of the cold war, and in particular the Communist victory in China [1949], encouraged by the new policy of rehabilitation in Japan; and the outbreak of war in Korea [1950] added a new urgency to the objective of building Japan up as a partner in the anti-Communist camp.”³¹ This triggered the rise of new Shintō groups. One such group, for instance, was the fiercely anti-communist Japan Revolutionary Chrysanthemum Flag Association (日本革命菊旗同志会), led by former Imperial Army Air Corps fighter pilot Tagata Takeo 田形竹尾

29 I mention this in my chapter “The Great European War and the Rise of Radical Shintō Ultranationalism in Japan,” in *The New Nationalism and the First World War*, ed. Lawrence Rosenthal and Vesna Rodic (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 177. I originally found this in Takagi Sōkichi, *Takagi Kai-gun Shōshō Oboegaki* 高木海軍少将覚え書き [Remembrances of Navy Rear-Admiral Sōkichi Takagi] (Tokyo: Mainichi Shinbunsha, 1979), 351.

30 Ivan Morris, *Nationalism and the Right Wing in Japan* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 60.

31 Morris, 107. Morris’s book is the most comprehensive work on postwar nationalist movements in Japan, although it only documents this through around 1958.

(1916–2008). In 1951, the so-called red purge in Japan was carried out by the Japanese government and business circles under the guidance of the US occupation forces. According to Ivan Morris, “It was aimed primarily at Communists who had managed to infiltrate themselves into the civil service, trade unions, newspapers, universities, and elsewhere, but in many cases, it extended in practice to non-Communists of left-wing persuasion known to be opposed to the Government or the management.”³²

Shintō nationalism in the postwar period is a huge topic. Morris noted that “the number of rightest organizations in existence appears, if anything, to have been rather larger in post-war days than before the war.”³³ He noted that “Professor Kinoshita [Hanji] lists 350 right-wing groups for the pre-war period.”³⁴ Morris goes on to state that “of these some 210 were dissolved during the Occupation Period. With the re-emergence of rightist movements during the latter part of the Occupation, however, the total number of groups in 1951, including both old and new, grew to as many as 540.”³⁵ In other words, ironically, we find the revival of Shintō nationalism in the context of policies initiated by the occupation forces under MacArthur.

Obviously, this article cannot cover even a small fraction of these groups. Accordingly, I would like to take a look at some examples. One of them is that of Japanese radical Shintō ultranationalist Akao Bin 赤尾敏, who represents a continuity between the prewar and postwar periods. Akao was a close associate of Tokyo University scholar and activist Uesugi Shinkichi, whose radical theory of the Japanese state was discussed above. Akao had founded the radical Shintō ultranationalist organization the National Foundation Society (建国会) in 1928 along with Uesugi and Motoyuki Takabatake. As with many other radical Shintō ultranationalists, Akao was purged after the war by MacArthur’s GHQ as a wartime leader. However, he was released from prison in 1951 because of a change in US occupation policy—the “reverse course” whereby the United States began to urge Japan to rearm—and he became the first president of the Greater Japan Patriotic Party (*Dai Nippon Aikoku Tō* 大日本愛国党). He advocated a staunchly pro-American and anti-communist stance, believing the real threat to Japan at the time was the Soviet Union. Originally a socialist, he “converted” to radical Shintō ultranationalism in 1926. When the Japan Socialist Party staged massive protests against the renewal of the US-Japan Security Treaty in 1960, Akao came to the conclusion that Japan was on the verge of a communist revolution. Accordingly, he mobilized his small, close-knit group of radicalized followers to oppose the leftist movement of Marxists and anarchists. On October 12, 1960, Yamaguchi Otoyō, one of his followers in the Greater Japan Patriotic Party, assassinated Asanuma Inejirō, chairman of the Japan Socialist Party. In the now

32 Morris, 110.

33 Morris, 200.

34 Morris, 200.

35 Morris, 200–201. However, many of these groups were actually branches of parent groups.

infamous incident, at a nationally televised election debate held in Hibiya Public Hall in Hibiya Park, Yamaguchi leapt onto the stage where Asanuma was speaking, and with a samurai short sword (*wakizashi*) thrust it into Asanuma's body.³⁶ Asanuma died from massive bleeding moments later. Yamaguchi later committed suicide.

Another of Akao Bin's followers was Komori Kazutaka. He and other radical Shintō ultranationalists were angered over a Fukazawa Shichirō short story, "Furyū mutan" (The tale of an elegant dream), describing a sequence of dreams in which the emperor, empress, the crown prince, and the crown princess are beheaded with a guillotine by a mob of left-wing protestors. Komori and Shintō ultranationalists broke into the home of *Chūō Kōron* journal president Shimanaka Hōji with the aim of assassinating him. Shimanaka was not at home and Komori murdered Shimanaka's maid and wounded his wife. Akao died at the ripe old age of ninety-one in February 1990.³⁷

Moving on to the 1970s, Yukio Mishima, unquestionably one of Japan's greatest postwar writers, was a Shintō ultranationalist. On November 25, 1970, accompanied by four members of his Shield Society, he visited the commander of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces stationed in Roppongi, Tokyo. The group held the commander at sword point and demanded that the 32nd Regiment there be assembled in the courtyard to attend a speech that he was going to give from the balcony of the building. In his speech to the soldiers, he "exhorted the soldiers to rise up with him against a postwar democracy that had deprived Japan of her army and her soul."³⁸ After speaking only seven minutes to the eight hundred soldiers, he then "withdrew to the commandant's office and committed *seppuku* (hara-kiri). When he had driven the blade into his left side and drawn it across his abdomen, he grunted a signal to the cadet standing behind him; the cadet beheaded him with a long sword, completing the ritual."³⁹ Mishima's favorite book was *Hagakure* (In the shadow of the leaves), the classic on Bushido, the code of the *bushi* (samurai). In prewar Japan, almost everyone knew the opening lines of *Hagakure*: "The way of the warrior is to seek death."⁴⁰ Of course, in wartime Japan, the purpose of the individual was not to die for his feudal lord but for the emperor.

36 Photographer Nagao Yasushi's picture of Yamaguchi withdrawing the sword from Asanuma's body won the 1961 Pulitzer Prize.

37 For several decades Akao went almost daily to the Ginza district of Tokyo and preached through a loudspeaker from the top of the Greater Japan Patriotic Party truck to the thousands of Japanese passing by. I personally frequently used to go listen to Akao speaking while I was a graduate research student at the University of Tokyo in the late 1970s and early 1980s. While he spoke, a couple members of his group would usually be at a table next to the truck with literature on it.

38 John Nathan, *Mishima: A Biography* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1974), ix.

39 Nathan, ix.

40 See Walter Skya, "Bushido: Hagakure no Kanten kara mita Shiseikan to Shuju Kankei" 武士道: 葉隠の観点から見た死生観と主従関係 [The code of the warrior: outlook on death and lord-vassal relationship from the viewpoint of *Hagakure*], *Gunji Shigaku* 軍事史学 [The journal of military history], The

The Reemergence of Shintō Organizations at the Center of Japanese Politics and a New Japanese Nationalism

More important for the purpose of this article than the remnants of prewar radical Shintō ultranationalists such as Akao Bin and his Greater Japan Patriotic Party, or individuals such as writer Mishima Yukio and his Shield Society, has been the reemergence at the center of Japanese political life of large political Shintō nationalist organizations, which are the driving forces behind Japan's new nationalist agenda.⁴¹

One such organization is the Parliamentarians' Association of the Shintō Political Group (*Shintō Seiji Renmei Kokkai Giin Kondankai* 神道政治連盟国会議員懇談会). This political Shintō organization was established on May 11, 1970, and although at the time of its formation its rules stipulated that it was organized with the members of the Diet who agreed with the purpose of the Shintō Political Group, apparently members were not asked about religion when joining. Nevertheless, this Shintō political group is the political wing of the *Jinja Honchō*, the Association of Shintō Shrines, the religious organization that was formed in 1946 to oversee the some eighty thousand Shintō Shrines spread throughout the Japanese archipelago. The *Jinja Honchō* emerged from the abolition of the prewar Home Ministry's *Jingiin* (Institute of Divinities).⁴²

As of December 22, 2020, there were a total of 300 members of the Parliamentarians' Association of the Shintō Political Group in the Diet. Breaking this down further, there were 222 members in the House of Representatives, and 78 members in the House of Councilors. All the members of the Parliamentarians' Association of the Shintō Political Group are Liberal Democratic Party politicians. The chairman was former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō. During the second Abe government (December 2012–December 2014) most cabinet members belonged to this Shintō political organization.

Some political events involving members of this organization are worth noting. In May 2000, on the thirtieth anniversary of the organization's founding, then Prime Minister Mori Yoshirō (April 2000–April 2001) provoked controversy when he declared that Japan “was the land of the Gods, with the emperor at its center.”⁴³ Another way to translate this is: “Japan is a divine land with the emperor at its center.”

Military History Society of Japan, Spring 1982.

41 It should be noted here that while these organizations are Shintō-based nationalist organizations, it might not be best to categorize them as radical Shintō ultranationalist as in prewar Japan discussed above. Indeed, some members may not personally consider themselves Shintōists.

42 In her book *Shintō and the State, 1868–1988* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), Helen Hardacre noted that “[l]eaders of the major prewar Shintō organizations banded together and in January 1946 formed the Association of Shintō Shrines (*Jinja Honchō*), which continues to direct shrine affairs for the greater majority of shins today” (137).

43 See Jonathan Watts, “Japan Divine, Claims PM,” *Guardian*, May 16, 2000, <https://www.theguardian.com>.

Another large political Shintō organization is the *Nippon Kaigi* 日本会議 and its various affiliated organizations such as the Parliamentarians' Association of the Nippon Kaigi (*Nippon Kaigi Kokkai Giin Kondankai* 日本会議国会議員懇談会).⁴⁴ This organization was formed on May 29, 1997, by Obuchi Keizō 小渕恵三, who would be prime minister from July 1998 to April 2000, Mori Yoshirō 森喜朗, prime minister from April 2000 to April 2001, and Ōzawa Tatsuo 小沢辰男, who served as minister of health and welfare, minister of construction, and director of the Environmental Agency.

The purpose of this Shintō parliamentary organization is to support the goals of the *Nippon Kaigi* 日本会議, the largest Shintō nationalist organization in Japan. When launched in 1997, it had registered 189 members of parliament. Its membership grew steadily in its first decade, and then rapidly in the second decade of the twenty-first century. By 2013, the organization boasted 252 members, and by the following year, 2014, it had expanded to include 289 members. As of 2015, 281 members of parliament were associated with the organization.

Many people regard this parliamentary organization as an ultranationalist or extremist group, and it was viewed as a source of spiritual inspiration for Abe Shinzō. Whatever the case, it has had tremendous influence on several Liberal Democratic administrations. In 2016, there were approximately 38,000 members in the *Nippon Kaigi*, coming from all 47 prefectures throughout Japan, including large metropolitan areas as well as 241 smaller cities, towns, and villages.

The *Nippon Kaigi* (literally “Japan Conference”) was formed through the amalgamation of two earlier Shintō groups: the Society for the Protection of Japan 日本を守る会 (founded 1974) and the National Conference for the Protection of Japan 日本を守る国民会議 (founded 1981), which originally consisted of “rightist cultural luminaries, business leaders and Japanese imperial army veterans.”⁴⁵ Many of the original members were said to have been influenced by the thought of Taniguchi Masaharu, founder of *Seicho no ie* (literally “House of Growth”). However, the major religious/ideological influence on the *Nippon Kaigi* is the *Jinja Honchō*, publisher of a monthly journal called “the breath of Japan” (日本の息吹), which emphasizes the need for “building a proud nation” and setting the basis for a new future for Japan from a new perspective.⁴⁶

According to the *Nippon Kaigi*'s website, the organization describes six organizational objectives:

Fostering the beautiful tradition of the Japanese national character

com/world/2000/may/17/jonathanwatts.

44 It should be noted that not all the members of this organization may be categorized or counted as Shintōists.

45 Sachie Mizohata, “Nippon Kaigi: Empire, Contradiction, and Japan's Future,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 14, issue 21, no. 4 (November 1, 2016): 1–20, <https://apjif.org/-Sachie-Mizohata/4975/article.pdf>.

46 Quote is from the Nippon Kaigi's website: www.nipponkaigi.org/publication/details?id=224.

(美しい伝統の国柄を明日の日へ)

Moving toward a new constitution suitable for the new era (新しい時代にふさわしい新憲法を)

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Advancing politics that protect Japan's reputation and the lives of its people (国の名誉と国民の命を守る政治を)

Creating an education [system] that fosters Japanese sensitivity (日本の感性をはぐくむ教育の創造を)

Contributing to world peace by enhancing national security (国の安全を高め世界への平和貢献を)

Working toward a world linked together on a spirit of [peaceful] coexistence and coprosperity (共生共栄の心でむすぶ世界との有効を).⁴⁷

Nippon Kaigi rejects the basic principles upon which the present Constitution of Japan is based. First, it seeks to “[p]romote worship of the imperial household at the heart of our state and people, whose imperial lineage can be traced over 125 generations of unbroken descent (back to origins of the sun goddess).” Worshipping the emperor as a divine ruler goes against the ideal of popular sovereignty, the idea that sovereignty resides in the people. Second, *Nippon Kaigi* rejects “the universality of human rights” as well as popular sovereignty. Third, *Nippon Kaigi* asserts that the Constitution of Japan, the “occupiers-drafted constitution,” creates “problems that inhibit the independent will of the state to protect its security and [result in] turning national defense over to a foreign power.”⁴⁸

Nippon Kaigi has taken a stand on a number of foreign policy issues. For example, members of the Parliamentarians' Association of the Nippon Kaigi visited Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide and issued a statement in July 2020 demanding the canceling of China's President Xi Jinping's state visit to Japan, which was postponed. It emphasized that “[p]romoting a state visit to Japan today is contrary to Japan's national interest and the interests of the world.”⁴⁹ Members of the Parliamentarians' Association urged the government to make solving the issues between Japan and China a top

47 These six points were listed in Mizohata, “Nippon Kaigi,” 4. For the original, see: <https://www.nipponkaigi.org/about/mokuteki>.

48 Mizohata, 4–5, 14.

49 “Statement Calling for the Cancellation of President Xi Jinping's Visit to Japan as a State Guest,” *Nippon Kaigi* website, July 7, 2020, <https://www.nipponkaigi.org/opinion/archives/12748>.

priority. These issues included a guarantee of the autonomous status of Hong Kong, China's formal recognition of the Senkaku Islands as Japanese sovereign territory, and challenging the refusal of the Chinese government to take responsibility for the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.

Japan Institute for National Fundamentals

Another political Shintō organization that was formed more recently is the Japan Institute for National Fundamentals (JINF) (国家基本問題研究所).⁵⁰ Founded in 2007 by Sakurai Yoshiko 櫻井よしこ,⁵¹ who has had an illustrious and successful career as a journalist, TV presenter, and writer, JINF is a think tank established as a public interest foundation. Sakurai is president and chair of the board of directors (理事長). JINF publishes its own in-house journal called *kokkikenkiyō* 国基研紀要.⁵² Organizationally, it has three vice presidents, twenty-one directors, twenty-two council members, and seventeen planning committee members. Those who fill these positions in the organization are mainly lawyers, journalists, career military people, and academics. JINF also sponsors dozens of guest researchers.

In a short statement (令和時代の課題と展望), President Sakurai wrote that the main mission and purpose of her establishing the Japan Institute for National Fundamentals was to contribute to the revision of the Constitution of Japan so that Japan will no longer be a “nation that cannot be a nation” if “the right of belligerency of the Japanese state is not recognized.” She laments the fact that according to Article 9 of the current constitution, Japan does not allow for the “maintenance of a land, sea, and air force war-making capacity.”⁵³ She wonders why Japan cannot strengthen itself by legitimizing war-making as the inherent right to defend itself, and engage militarily on its own or in concert or cooperation with the United States. I personally interviewed her for forty-five minutes in a Zoom meeting on April 1, 2021 (April 2 Japan time). She mentioned that revisions other than Article 9 must be made in the constitution, including in the preamble. It was significant, I thought, that she added that Japan cannot merely return to the Constitution of the Empire of Japan of the Meiji period.

50 The home page of the Japan Institute for National Fundamentals is <https://jinf.jp>. Some people may question whether this organization is a Shintō organization, but when I talked to Sakurai Yoshiko personally, she had no objection to my characterization of it as a Shintō organization. This is not to say that all members are Shintōists. Actually, some members and those who publish in JINF's journal are foreigners.

51 Interestingly, she graduated with a degree in history from the University of Hawaii at Manoa.

52 This title is difficult to translate literally, but it is the “journal of the Japan institute for national fundamentals.”

53 Sakurai Yoshiko, “Reiwa Jidai no Kadai to Tenbō,” November 4, 2020, <https://jinf.jp/news/archives/32884>.

The vice president of the Japan Institute for National Fundamentals is Takubo Tadae 田久保忠衛. He also weighed in on the need for revision of the Constitution of Japan. In a newsletter titled “Amending the Constitution is the Only Way to Cope with Great Transition,” he stated: “Autocratic regimes are not limited to China, Russia, and North Korea. They can be seen in Iran, Turkey, Poland, and Hungary. Given such autocratic regimes and the growing populist movements in Europe, the international community is experiencing a sea change.” In light of this global transitional trend, he forcefully argued that “[w]hile the Japan-US alliance that depends heavily on US military power remains unchanged, Japan should urgently respond to changes of the times. Japan’s top national security priority should be the development of the Self-Defense Forces into true national armed forces. To accomplish this, Japan could not survive without attaining constitutional amendments that would pave the way for the development.”⁵⁴

In a subsequent article arguing that the “Senkaku affair highlights limitations of Japan’s constitution,” Takubo states that he has had concerns about “China’s gradual enhancement of moves toward effective control of Japan’s Senkaku Islands over a half century and the Japanese government’s empty opposition to such moves.” He finds it increasingly disturbing that China put into effect on February 1, 2021, its new Coast Guard law, which authorizes the Chinese Coast Guard to use military force to “control illegal acts in waters under its jurisdiction.” Of course, this development heightens tensions over the Senkaku Islands, which China has unilaterally claimed as its territory. He laments the fact that the Japanese government had only asked the new Biden administration to confirm that the islands were covered by the US-Japan Security Treaty, but that Japan had not taken any effective measures to secure its control of the Senkaku Islands, specifically mentioning that Japan had taken the position that it will not build a lighthouse on the islands. He sees this as an ineffective and weak stance by the Japanese government. Takubo regards China’s incremental encroachment policy toward the Senkaku Islands and the territories of other countries around the world as a “salami-slicing strategy.”⁵⁵ These salami-slicing tactics, and now more recently China’s “swarming tactics,” were noted in a piece by Joseph Bosco. Bosco stated: “From salami-slice aggression to invasion by swarm, China continues its successful gray-zone expansionism in the South China Sea, East China Sea and Taiwan Strait.”⁵⁶

54 Takubo Tadae, “Amending Constitution is the Only Way to Cope with Great Transition,” December 24, 2019, <https://en.jinf.jp/weekly/archives/6703>. Takubo is vice president of the Japan Institute for National Fundamentals and a professor emeritus at Kyōrin University.

55 Takubo Tadae, “Senkaku Affair Highlights Limitations of Japan’s Constitution,” February 1, 2021, <https://en.jinf.jp/weekly/archives/8045>.

56 Joseph Bosco, “With Salami-Slicing and Swarming Tactics, China’s Aggression Continues,” *The Hill*, April 6, 2021, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/546560-with-salami-slicing-and-swarming-tactics-chinas-aggression-continues/>.

The Japan Institute for National Fundamentals issued an “Appeal to Political and Business Leaders in Japan (日本の政財界指導者たちへ)” and placed this appeal in three of Japan’s top national newspapers on August 14, 2020: the *Nikkei*, the world’s largest financial newspaper; the *Sankei*, which is short for the *Sangyō Keizai Shimbun*, the industrial and economic newspaper that has the sixth largest circulation in Japan; and the *Yomiuri Shimbun*. In this appeal, President Sakurai and Vice President Takubo, endorsed by some forty-five other members of JINF, addressed Japan’s political and business leaders, pointing out to them what they had been saying for a very long time, that “Japan needs to rely on the United States for its security, while it has to rely on China for its economic well-being.”⁵⁷ In other words, JINF is telling Japanese politicians and business leaders that they cannot have it both ways. Japan, like America’s NATO allies, can no longer avoid making hard choices, and can no longer rely entirely on the United States for its national security as it has since the end of the Second World War. In this appeal JINF further chided Japanese politicians and business leaders, stating: “What kind of Japan do you want to leave for your children and grandchildren?”

On August 15, 1985, exactly forty years after the end of the Second World War, Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro paid an “official visit” to Yasukuni Shrine, where Japanese war dead are enshrined. Sakurai applauded the fact the Nakasone visited Yasukuni Shrine but lamented that he made a decision never to return to visit the shrine again in his official capacity as prime minister because the Chinese Communist Party condemned his visit, thus apparently caving to Chinese pressure.⁵⁸

Prewar Radical Shintō Ultrationalism and Japan’s New Postwar Shintō Nationalism

The above mentioned Shintō nationalist individuals and organizations I believe are representative of the new postwar Japanese Shintō nationalism and what it stands for. However, there are fundamental questions that are difficult to assess about the reemergence of postwar Shintō nationalism. Can there be a Shintō basis for a postwar Japanese nationalism that a vast majority of the Japanese people will accept? Would a takeover of the Japanese government by Shintō nationalists, accompanied by a change in the Constitution of Japan, launch the Japanese nation on a trajectory of radicalization as in the prewar period? For those who are still traumatized by prewar Japan, can there be a new Shintō nationalism that will not lead to fanaticism and another destructive war?

57 Sakurai Yoshiko, “Appeal to Political and Business Leaders in Japan,” *Japan Institute for National Fundamentals*, August 14, 2020, <https://en.jinf.jp/suggestion/archives/7643>.

58 Nakasone was prime minister of Japan and president of the Liberal Democratic Party from 1982 to 1987. Nakasone died in 2012 at the age of 101.

Japanese Marxists and socialists, many ordinary Japanese citizens, and foreign observers of Japanese politics have been wary of any possibility of a resurrection of Shintō nationalism. In this regard, the mere mention of amending the Constitution of Japan evokes heavy denunciation and condemnation. Others have severely criticized the *Nippon Kaigi* for believing that Japan liberated much of East Asia during World War II; that the Tokyo war crimes trials were illegitimate; that the rape of Nanjing was exaggerated or fabricated; that the forced prostitution of Korean “comfort women” never happened; and that the Japanese should return to worshipping the emperor. The well-known late Japanese political scientist Maruyama Masao argued:

If the progressive camp is bewitched for an instant by fragmentary forms of the old nationalism, either misjudging them as the buds of future national consciousness or knowingly mobilizing them under the temptation of securing immediate political goals, the effect will be disastrous. The “new nationalism” will inevitably turn harshly towards reaction and probably revert to its former nature.⁵⁹

But much of Maruyama Masao’s criticism must be taken with a grain of salt. Postwar Japanese nationalism must be seen not only in light of our analysis of prewar Shintō ultranationalism, but also within the dangerous current international environment in which Japan now finds itself. First, the Constitution of Japan is not fundamentally flawed structurally as was the Constitution of the Empire of Japan, and it is impossible to envision an exact rebirth of the prewar constitution as it was, with the emperor seen as sacred and inviolable—a constitution that did not even mention a prime minister or a cabinet responsible to the emperor or the Japanese parliament. In the Constitution of the Empire of Japan, the prime minister had no control over the military. One must not forget that Japan’s Asia war, starting from the Japanese army’s independent takeover of Manchuria in 1931, was justified by the military leaders on constitutional grounds, and carried out without the support of the prime minister and the civilian government.

Second, the international environment confronting Japan today is completely different from the prewar period. Dangers to Japan’s national security are real, especially from North Korea and the People’s Republic of China. It is inconceivable that Japan could militarily attack or invade anywhere in East Asia on its own as in the prewar period. China is not divided and weak as in the 1930s; just the opposite, it is emerging as one of the largest and most powerful authoritarian states the world has ever seen. Third, Japanese politicians are not being assassinated (Asanuma in 1960 and Abe in 2022 are exceptions) as we saw in the prewar period. Politically, Japan is not a premature, unstable democracy. Finally, postwar Japanese nationalists are strongly allied with the

59 Maruyama Masao, “Nationalism in Japan: Its Theoretical Background and Prospects,” trans. David Titus, in *Thought and Behavior in Modern Japanese Politics*, ed. Ivan Morris (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 152.

United States against China and North Korea. If anything, they are very pro-American, at least in terms of Japanese foreign policy.

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Impact of a Renewed Shintō Nationalism on Japanese Policymaking

Contemporary political Shintō organizations—including the Parliamentarians' Association of the Shintō Political Group, the political lobbying arm of the *Jinja Honchō*, which oversees the tens of thousands of Shintō shrines and its worshippers throughout Japan; the *Nippon Kaigi*, the largest Shintō nationalist/ultranationalist organization in Japan, and its parliamentary lobbyist group, the Parliamentarians' Association of the Nippon Kaigi; and the Japan Institute for National Fundamentals—have all been trying to push the Japanese government to revise or amend the Constitution of Japan and to break with the pacifist foreign policy that has been in place since the end of World War II. These nationalist organizations have gradually been gaining strength. Their popularity has been due to anxieties about domestic social issues in Japanese society as well as foreign policy issues, although foreign concerns are more of a factor.

Nevertheless, according to a survey published in May 2020 by the *Asahi Shimbun*, one of Japan's five largest national newspapers, 72 percent of the Japanese population did not believe it urgent to revise the Constitution of Japan; only 22 percent did. The annual survey was conducted before May 3, which is Constitution Day, a national holiday. The survey also asked respondents to choose one of three responses concerning a Liberal Democratic Party proposal for new emergency orders, including a measure to temporarily restrict people's rights to deal with natural disasters. Fifty-seven percent chose the response that the government should handle such emergencies without amending the Constitution of Japan, which was up from 55 percent in the previous poll.⁶⁰ Japan's present constitution, which went into effect on May 3, 1947, has never been amended. For historical reference, the prewar Constitution of the Empire of Japan was also never amended. As no constitution has ever been amended since the formation of the modern Japanese state 132 years ago, it may be more practical politically to leave the Constitution of Japan as it is, and instead concentrate on reinterpreting it to meet emergency situations.

In a more recent survey in May 2022 by the Kyōdō News Agency, only half the respondents believed Japan needs to amend Article 9, the war-renouncing article, to clarify the legal status of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces. This is not a significant change in public opinion, despite the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Interestingly,

60 Questionnaires were mailed to 3,000 voters nationwide from early March to mid-April. Valid responses were received from 2,053 individuals, 68 percent of the total. "Asahi Survey: 72% Say No Rush for Diet to Revise Constitution," *Asahi Shimbun*, May 3, 2020, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/13347656>.

however, 76 percent of the respondents supported an amendment to the constitution so the government can better respond to the coronavirus and other types of disasters. Any proposed revision of the constitution needs to be approved by a two-thirds majority in both the upper and lower houses of the Japanese parliament and then be put to a national referendum.⁶¹

In terms of foreign policy, the above political Shintō organizations seem to be successful in changing the attitudes of Japanese politicians and the general population. The expansionist sentiments and actions of the People's Republic of China are without question a major concern to Japanese Shintō nationalists, and this concern resonates well with the Japanese public. As historians of East Asian history know, there has been an intense rivalry between the Japanese and the Chinese in the modern period, and Japanese nationalists are terribly concerned about the possibility of a historic shift in power in the region toward China. They are fully aware that hundreds of smaller societies have been absorbed or exterminated by the Chinese over the last two thousand years, and that this is currently happening to the Tibetans, Uyghurs, and other ethnic groups within the Chinese state, which is also coercing and threatening other states on its periphery. Accordingly, holding the line against an expansionist China is the top priority of the Shintō nationalists' foreign policy. Sheila Smith, senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, seems to concur with this assessment. She noted that "Japanese perceptions of the alliance with the United States changed fundamentally when China's military began to exert pressure directly on Japan. Tokyo saw Beijing's challenge to its administrative control over the Senkaku Islands as a grave risk to Japan's security."⁶²

Organizations such as the Japan Institute for National Fundamentals and the *Nippon Kaigi* are pushing politicians and state bureaucrats to stand up to China, and Japanese politicians and bureaucrats as well as the general public seem receptive to this message. For instance, state minister of defense (防衛副大臣) Nakayama Yasuhide 中山泰秀, who is affiliated with *Nippon Kaigi* and is the second person in command in the Japanese Defense Ministry, is concerned that China will expand its aggressive stance into areas other than Hong Kong, notably Taiwan. Nakayama asserted that "[t]here's a red line in Asia—China and Taiwan."⁶³ This is a bold statement coming from the

61 The Kyōdō News Agency (共同通信社) distributes news to almost all newspapers and radio and television networks in Japan. The newspapers using its news have about 50 million subscribers, a very large percentage of Japan's total population of around 123 million people. The survey was taken from March 1 to April 11, 2022. "Japan Still Divided on Revising War-Renouncing Constitution: Survey," *Kyodo News*, May 2, 2022, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2022/05/a8faf66fd209-japan-still-divided-on-revising-war-renouncing-constitution-survey.html?phrase=constitution%20survey&words=survey,Constitutional,Constitution,surveying,constitute,surveys>.

62 Sheila A. Smith, *Japan Rearmed: The Politics of Military Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 215.

63 Ju-min Park, "Japan Official, Calling Taiwan Safety a 'Red Line,' Urges Biden to 'Be Strong,'" *Washington Post*, May 2, 2022.

Japanese Defense Ministry, something not seen previously. He reiterated this statement and the importance of Taiwan to Japan when he spoke more recently to the Hudson Institute think tank, questioning whether the decision since the 1970s of many countries, including Japan and the United States, to follow the “one-China” policy, which asserts the People’s Republic of China’s claim to Taiwan, would stand the test of time.⁶⁴

Much must still be worked out with respect to a joint US-Japan response to Chinese aggression in East Asia and a possible Chinese attack on Taiwan. In this regard, Sheila Smith noted that

dealing with the heightened threats that Japan faces today will require more than assurances of the United States’ commitment. It will necessitate contingency planning that involves both militaries, so as to anticipate when and how each military might initiate the use of force and to what end. If a conflict were to break out on the Korean Peninsula, U.S., Japanese, and South Korean forces would all be involved in a response. Yet there is no integrated command for all three allied militaries, nor is there a common understanding of how a conflict could be fought now that Japan is vulnerable to North Korean missiles.⁶⁵

Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide’s administration (September 2020–October 2021) also indicated that Japan is prepared to intervene militarily in case China tries to invade Taiwan. Japan’s stance has hardened under the current Kishida Fumio administration (October 2021–) as well. Sakurai Yoshiko of the Japan Institute for National Fundamentals did not support Kishida’s election as prime minister. Instead, she supported the more far-right candidate Takaichi Sanae, who has been serving as minister of state for economic security since August 2022. It is noteworthy that Japan has reinterpreted its Coast Guard laws, which now allow its Coast Guard to shoot at foreign vessels. Further military agreements between the US and Japan are underway.

Conclusion

Since the end of the Second World War, the Japanese have been haunted by the ghost of prewar Japan, so that many Japanese fear that anything beyond incremental change will lead again to extremism. In other words, an extreme pacifist sentiment remains strong in their psyche. Some people would argue that this dogged pacificism prevents

Newsmax, December 25, 2020, <https://www.newsmax.com/newsfront/biden-taiwan-japan-china/2020/12/25/id/1003131/>.

64 David Brunnstrom, “Japan Minister Says Necessary to ‘Wake Up’ to Protect Taiwan,” *Reuters*, June 24, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/japan-minister-says-necessary-wake-up-protect-taiwan-2021-06-28/>.

65 Smith, *Japan Rearmed*, 217.

a rational approach to foreign policy issues and national defense possibilities. But there is one thing that is joggling the Japanese out of this mindset: the growing awareness of the threat of the People's Republic of China as well as North Korea to Japan's national security.

The Japanese have been incrementally expanding their military capacities and their use of military power. Japan is now said to have one of the most sophisticated militaries in the world, but it is still a fact that they have never fought in a military conflict in the postwar period. And many questions remain. As outlined in this article, the prewar Japanese were gladly willing to die for the emperor since radical Shintō ultranationalism was at the center of the state ideology. It is now inconceivable that postwar Japanese would be willing to die for the emperor. But would they be willing to put their lives on the line for a democratic Japan or for the Japanese national community?

Historically speaking, religions were at the core of all civilizations. The Shintō religion has, without a doubt, been at the core of a distinct Japanese civilization. Even a casual observer who visits Japan today will notice that Shintō shrines are conspicuous everywhere. It has been estimated that around 70 percent of Japanese adhere to the Shintō religion. While Buddhism and Confucianism entered Japan from the Asian continent in Japan's early history, these universal religions and systems of thought never totally replaced the indigenous Shintō ethnic religion (a situation quite unlike Christianity's takeover of Europe). This might be difficult for Westerners, especially in English-speaking countries, to comprehend since the cultural history of the European world is so vastly different. To make an analogy that Westerners might understand: the rise of Shintō nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was as though the religion of the gods of the Greeks and the Romans had resurfaced in the modern period, pushed out Christianity, and become the state religion of European countries.⁶⁶ But this is exactly what happened in Japan.

This article has taken a hard look at Shintō nationalism and addressed some difficult questions. Would a new Shintō nationalist Japanese state necessarily drive Japan into overseas expansion and war once again? Can Shintō nationalists and a revived political Shintō Japanese state coexist peacefully with the rest of the democracies and the postwar rules-based world established by the United States at the end of World War II? These issues have never been seriously and openly discussed, but they need to be candidly addressed if the Japanese are to reemerge as a "normal" nation and amend the pacifist Constitution of Japan.

66 Walter Skya, "Culture of Death: Japanese Nationalism and the Second World War," *Library of Social Science* guest newsletter, May 3, 2019, <https://www.libraryofsocialscience.com/newsletter/posts/2017/2017-06-09-skya.html>.