

Herbert von Dirksen on Germany's relations with Japan (Retrospective account, 1952)

Abstract

Germany's relationship to the Far East during the 1930s was strained, as high-ranking officials within the German Foreign Office, Chancellery, and Propaganda Ministry disagreed about Germany's priorities in the region. To many in the Foreign Office, including Foreign Minister Konstantin von Neurath, China represented Germany's best interests, because Germany had a long standing (and extensive) trade relationship with China. Japan, by contrast, was initially viewed by many as a far less lucrative partner, both in terms of trade and political power. But Herbert von Dirksen (1882-1955), who served as ambassador to Japan during his diplomatic career, argued relentlessly for Germany to shift its interests from China to Japan. Dirksen saw the Japanese expansionist ambitions as a "civilizing mission" to China, and admired what he saw as the statist, rigid structure of Japanese society and government. He insisted that the Chinese communists were going to win the civil war, and that Japan represented Germany's best hope in the fight against communist expansion in the region, since China would undoubtedly ally with the USSR. In this excerpt from the English translation of his memoir, Dirksen reflects on his time in Japan and the forming of the German-Japanese alliance.

Source

[...]

It was in this way that a tendency to expand developed which threatened the peace of the world, and this danger was heightened by the existence in the characters of both nations and identical traits. In the fundamental problem governing the attitude of the individual towards the State, both the Germans and the Japanese had, for different reasons, reached the same conclusion. According to their philosophy, the State was the paramount and primary institution to which all the personal needs and desires of the individual had to be subordinated. By devoting his services to the concentrated community of citizens incorporated in and personified by the State, the individual could fulfill the highest duty incumbent upon him, namely to further the well-being of his fellow countrymen. This Spartan line of thought had been adopted in Prussia as well as in Japan, and had led to the growth of an authoritarian State with a highly efficient executive administered by a hierarchy of soldiers and officials.

This austere and strict frame of mind combined with the hardships of a poor and barren country had created types of men who compensated themselves for their self-abnegation and hard work by an imperative and autocratic method of ruling. The Germans, like the Japanese, became accustomed to being unpopular. The fact that the methods employed by this unpopular rule achieved results which did it great credit—such as in Korea, Formosa, and the Eastern provinces of Prussia—was overlooked by the rest of the world and did not earn any appreciation until after their destruction.

Neither Germany nor Japan succeeded in finding a solution to the problem as to how they should adapt themselves to that community of States which had developed on different lines—that is to say, to the Western democracies. When they felt that their very existence was being threatened by the increasing barriers erected to obstruct economic expansion or the emigration of surplus population, the dangerous *Lebensraum* philosophy evolved which, when put into practice by force, led to the catastrophe.

This resort to force was also a characteristic common to both nations. They are both disciplined; indeed,

intelligent obedience to a strong and efficient leadership is one of their outstanding qualities. If they become aware that they are being guided by inefficient government, this willingness to obey gives way to a sudden and violent explosion, and the same attitude characterizes their conduct in international relations. (Germany and Japan went a long way on the road of co-operation—the Germans during the period of the Weimar Republic and the Japanese during the liberal Shidehara epoch.) But when they feel frustrated in their endeavors, they stop abruptly and resort to peaceful efforts.

The great intimacy which developed between the German and Japanese nations after they had chosen the totalitarian way, and which led to the conclusion of an alliance in 1940, was thus particularly deep-rooted on both sides. Yet while the friendly feeling towards Germany was widespread throughout Japan, sympathy for the Japanese in Germany was very limited. In Japan particular friendship and admiration for Germany was felt by men of science, especially medical science, and by the army. These men had received their training from German instructors, and the lifelong gratitude shown to his teacher is one of the noblest traits in the Japanese character. One German professor or military instructor attracted hundreds or even thousands of pupils, whereas the number of German sympathizers for Japan was limited to the former German residents in the country and those who, by their studies or for other reasons, had developed an interest in and knowledge of Japan.

German sympathies in the Far East went out to China rather than to Japan. China appealed to the German mind as the home of Confucianism. Lao-Tse was a philosopher whose writings and teachings appeared in numerous popular editions. The novels of Pearl Buck and other American authors added to this popularity. Chinese art was highly appreciated by a growing number of German collectors. There were those who regarded themselves as the real orthodox connoisseurs—the enthusiasts for early Chinese pottery such as Sung and Tang—or the Ming collectors and those who merely appreciated and understood the 18th-century porcelain. Some eclecticists even specialized in picture scrolls. In comparison with this vast number of admirers of Chinese art there were few enthusiasts for Japanese woodcuts and lacquer, whereas the market was inundated by the awful baubles produced by Japanese dealers for foreign consumption. The really refined and what one might call the reticent classical art of Japan had to be studied intensely and with devotion in the country itself.

In Germany, as in other countries, the Chinese enjoyed greater popularity than the Japanese. Their easy-going manner, their sense of humor, and their command of European languages secured for them a favored position as compared with the studied formality of the Japanese, whose exaggerated politeness, even though it may be only a cover for shyness and the lack of any gift for learning foreign tongues, borders on the arrogant. Even German residents in Japan who have been there many years failed to find their way to the heart of their Japanese hosts, although no more reliable and loyal friend exists than a Japanese once the outer crust of distrust and formality has been pierced and his confidence has been won. The Japanese is, indeed, the most complicated and difficult human being to handle.

Even the traditional German friendship for the Japanese Army had shifted to China. While the German military circles rendered lip-service to Japan, they were at heart more attracted to China, since Marshal Chiang Kai-shek had secured the services of a strong delegation of German officers for the training of Chinese divisions. Under the able leadership of General von Falkenhausen they rendered valuable service to the Chinese Government. These officers enjoyed a great measure of popularity, and became deeply imbued with that alluring atmosphere of China which sometimes gains the devotion of passionate acolytes with an astonishing swiftness. Examples of this type are to be found in Peking – such as, for example, the case of the German lawyer who, already in his fifties, came over to Peking on business which was to have kept him there for some weeks but who never returned home. He succumbed to the spell cast upon him by that beautiful and mysterious town, acquired a full command of the language, translated Chinese poems into German with a masterly touch, and led a happy life of seclusion near Peking.

Such complete absorption into Far Eastern life on the part of foreigners is never found in Japan. Such absorption as there is is confined to intermarriage. But although these marriages generally turn out harmoniously, their number is restricted by pressure brought to bear by both races.

The temperature of German friendship for Japan naturally rose when the centralized Third Reich aimed at establishing closer relations with the Far Eastern island kingdom. A wave of sympathy was set up and duly deepened by all the machinery of the party.

I personally favored the policy of friendship with Japan. I was too much of a Prussian myself not to feel sympathy for other nations who, like ourselves, “had hungered themselves to greatness.” Furthermore, I realized the necessity of applying some kind of brake to the Russian machine, after the relations between Germany and the Soviet Union became more strained. I had never believed in the possibility of a Russo-Japanese war on Japanese initiative. Moreover, I had always adhered to Joseph Chamberlain’s plan of an understanding between Britain, Germany, and Japan, a scheme which had been frustrated by that psychopathic leader of German foreign policy, Holstein. But I thought that this combination might occur again. The belief was to be strengthened by the conclusion of the Anglo-German naval agreement in 1935 which put an end to naval rivalry between the two countries. This proved to be an error of judgment on my part, but it was perhaps excusable.

Source: Herbert von Dirksen, *Moscow, Tokyo, London: Twenty Years of German Foreign Policy*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1952, pp. 139-142.

Recommended Citation: Herbert von Dirksen on Germany’s relations with Japan (Retrospective account, 1952), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/nazi-germany-1933-1945/ghdi:document-5182>> [May 12, 2024].