

## Japanese Buddhism in the Third Reich

*Brian Victoria*

While the Tripartite Pact between Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and the Empire of Japan is well known, the cultural ties that paralleled this military pact have been far less studied. In particular, the influence this pact had on the religious relationships between the participating countries is little known. Yet, the reality is that there was surprisingly strong Nazi interest in Japanese Buddhism. This article traces the roots of German interest in Japanese Buddhism, especially Zen, from pre-Nazi Germany through the Nazi's own fascination with what appeared to many of them to be a mirror of their own *völkisch* religiosity. Additionally, those German and Japanese figures promoting this relationship are introduced.

### Introduction

In the course of conducting research on the relationship of the Zen school (both Rinzai and Sōtō) to Japanese militarism, I came across an intriguing statement in the 1941 book *Bushidō no Shinzui* (*The Essence of Bushido*). In introducing D.T. Suzuki's article "Zen and Bushido", the book's editor, Handa Shin, wrote: "Dr. Suzuki's writings are said to have strongly influenced the military spirit of Nazi Germany." Unfortunately, Handa offered no proof of his assertion, and I remember thinking, could this possibly be true?

It was with this question in mind that, over the intervening years, I slowly began gathering materials that would, one way or the other, answer it. Although, as noted below, I came across tantalizing bits of information, it was not until I attended the first ever international workshop on Buddhism under the Nazis, held

at the University of Vienna in early May 2012, that I encountered the depth of engagement between Buddhism, Suzuki included, and National Socialism.

In particular, I gratefully acknowledge my indebtedness to the conference paper presented by Sarah Panzer of the University of Chicago. Her post-conference support, together with that of other German and Austrian colleagues, especially Prof. Karl Baier of the University of Vienna, have made this article possible. In the aggregate, this support led me to the realization that Suzuki's wartime writings in German translation, important as they are, were only the tip of the iceberg in a much deeper and broader relationship between Buddhism, especially Zen, and the Nazis.

What follows is only a brief introduction to this much broader relationship, albeit one that includes D.T. Suzuki's role. As the title suggests, the discussion is generally limited to the role played by Japanese Buddhism, especially Zen, with no reference to a second important dimension of the Nazi-Buddhist connection, Nazi interest in esoteric Tibetan Buddhism. That topic has already been at least partially explored by those better qualified than myself.<sup>1</sup>

For those readers who are incredulous that the compassionate faith of Gautama Buddha had anything to do with the Nazis, no less a figure than Adolf Hitler is quoted as having said: "Why didn't we have the religion of the Japanese, who regard sacrifice for the Fatherland as the highest good?"<sup>2</sup>

While it might be comforting to imagine that Hitler's lament applied only to the Shinto faith, this article will reveal that Nazi interest in Japanese Buddhism, particularly Zen, was also strong. Nazi (and Italian) interest in Japan, including its religious faiths, should not be all that surprising. After all, the Tripartite Pact of 1940, and before that the Anti-Comintern Pact of 1936, had locked the fate of these three nations together in what would become a fight to the death. Knowing your "friends", let alone your "enemies", was a natural result, even a military necessity, in the 20th century era of total war.

The Nazis, however, readily admitted that, like other Germans, they originally had but little knowledge of Japan. In a 1942 booklet, Prince Albrecht of Urach, a Nazi expert on the Far East, wrote:

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Alexander Berzin's introduction to this topic, "The Nazi Connection with Shambhala and Tibet," May 2003. Available on the Web at: [http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/advanced/kalachakra/shambhala/nazi\\_connection\\_shambhala\\_tibet.html#neea7f249202ac6437](http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/advanced/kalachakra/shambhala/nazi_connection_shambhala_tibet.html#neea7f249202ac6437) (accessed 28 June 2014).

<sup>2</sup>Speer, *Inside The Third Reich*, p. 96.

What did the rest of the world, or we in Germany, know only two generations ago about Japan? Let's be honest. Very little. One had heard of an island nation in the Far East with peculiar customs, of an island nation that produced fine silk and umbrellas from oiled paper, that honored a snow-capped mountain as if it were a god. They drank tea and had the curious custom of slitting their bellies open.... But one was not sure if the small and sturdy men of this peculiar people, some of whom came to Europe to learn eagerly, wore pigtailed and ate rotten eggs back home, or whether one was confusing them with the Chinese, since both peoples after all had slit eyes."<sup>3</sup>

This ignorance first began to change as a result of Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-5. For the first time in modern history, a non-Western nation had defeated a white imperial power. Western leaders took notice of the rapid growth of Japan's military might and sought to understand the reasons for Japan's success. They hoped to be able to inculcate in their own troops the same spirit of self-sacrifice that Japanese soldiers appeared to have in such abundance.

Though he was not yet a Western "leader", it is noteworthy that the young Adolf Hitler was also impressed by Japan's victory. Lieutenant-General Yamashita Tomoyuki (1885-1946), head of the Japanese military mission to the Axis, later reported that Hitler had assured him that he had been intensely interested in Japan since boyhood and had carefully studied Japan's war tactics during the Russo-Japanese War, a war begun with a surprise assault on the Russian fleet at Port Arthur.<sup>4</sup>

### Nitobe Inazō's Role

One of the first writers to explain the historical and spiritual background to Japan's military rise was Nitobe Inazō (1862-1933), author of *Bushido, The Soul of Japan*. Although the first edition of his book was published in English in 1900, i.e., prior to the Russo-Japanese War, he described a Japan that had already established itself as a growing military power thanks to its victory in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-5. At the time Japan's victory over another Asian nation was but little noticed in the West.

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<sup>3</sup>Albrecht Fürst von Urach, *Das Geheimnis japanischer Kraft (The Secret of Japan's Strength)*, Introduction, partial English translation available on the Web at: <http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/japan.htm> (accessed 27 July 2012).

<sup>4</sup>Quoted in Tolischus, *Tokyo Record*, p. 158.

However, after Japan's victory over Russia in 1905, Nitobe's work found a much wider readership in the West. U.S. President Teddy Roosevelt was so taken by the book that he distributed some sixty copies to family and friends.<sup>5</sup> This interest extended to Germany, where in 1905 a German translation, entitled: *Der Weg des Kriegers, Die Seele Japans: Eine Darstellung des japanischen Geistes*, first appeared.

As the title suggests, Nitobe attributed Japan's modern military success to its long martial history as incorporated in the *Bushidō* code. From the outset, Nitobe took pains to show that the *Bushidō* code, and hence the Japanese martial spirit, had long been closely connected with both Buddhism and Zen. In introducing the sources of *Bushidō*, Nitobe wrote:

I may begin with Buddhism. It furnished a sense of calm trust in Fate, a quiet submission to the inevitable, that stoic composure in sight of danger or calamity, that *disdain of life and friendliness with death*. A foremost teacher of swordsmanship, when he saw his pupil master the utmost of his art, told him, "*Beyond this my instruction must give way to Zen teaching.*"<sup>6</sup> (Italics mine)

Significantly, Nitobe also found Shinto to be another cause of Japan's martial success. He wrote:

The tenets of Shintoism cover the two predominating features of the emotional life of our race – Patriotism and Loyalty.... Shintoism never pretends to be a systematic philosophy or a rational theology. This religion – or, is it more correct to say, the race emotions which this religion expressed? – thoroughly imbued Bushido with loyalty to the sovereign and love of country.<sup>7</sup>

Taken together, Buddhism promoted both a disdain of life and friendliness with death while Shinto promoted patriotism and loyalty to the sovereign. What leader of any country, especially a country at war, wouldn't find in these elements an attractive package worthy of emulation? No wonder, then, that Hitler questioned why Germany didn't have the religion of the Japanese.

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<sup>5</sup>Dennett. *Roosevelt and the Russo-Japanese War*, p. 35.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 4.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

Perhaps because Nitobe makes it clear that he is a Christian Quaker, he does not attempt to present a sustained explanation of either Buddhism or Zen. Nevertheless, as we shall see shortly, his book made a lasting impression on at least some Nazi leaders. The Nazis inherited a deep fascination not only with the warrior code of *Bushidō* but with its samurai practitioners as well, not to mention both Buddhism and Shinto. The influence this would have on the subsequent creation in the 1930s of the most barbaric organization the world has ever known, the SS, is the most surprising, if not frightening, legacy of this period.

Nitobe was not the only Japanese promoting the unity of Zen Buddhism and *Bushidō* in the West at this time. In a 1906 English-language article in the *Journal of the Pali Text Society* entitled: “The Zen Sect of Buddhism”, D.T. Suzuki also promoted this unity while at the same time defending Japanese soldiers against the charge of having embraced fatalism in their willingness to die:

The *Lebensanschauung* of *Bushido* is no more nor less than that of Zen. The calmness and even joyfulness of heart at the moment of death which is conspicuously observable in the Japanese, the intrepidity which is generally shown by the Japanese soldiers in the face of an overwhelming enemy; and the fairness of play to an opponent so strongly taught by *Bushido*—all these come from a spirit of the Zen training, and not from any such blind, fatalistic conception as is sometimes thought to be a trait peculiar to Orientals.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike Nitobe, Suzuki had the advantage of writing his comments in the aftermath of Japan’s victory over Russia, a victory that had however cost the lives of more than 40,000 young Japanese men. Yet, according to Suzuki, these soldiers died with “calmness and even joyfulness of heart” derived from the spirit of Zen training.

During the war, in 1904, Suzuki had invoked Buddhism in his attempt to convince Japanese youth to die willingly for their country: “Let us then shuffle off this mortal coil whenever it becomes necessary, and not raise a grunting voice against the fates.... Resting in this conviction, Buddhists carry the banner of Dharma over the dead and dying until they gain final victory.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Suzuki, “The Zen Sect of Buddhism.” *Journal of the Pali Text Society* 5, 1906, p. 34.

<sup>9</sup>Suzuki, “A Buddhist View of War.” *Light of Dharma* 4, 1904, pp. 181–82.

## Ōhazama Shūei's Role

In 1925, the first serious anthology of Zen writings was published in Germany by Heidelberg University-related figures, Ōhazama Shūei (author) and philosopher August Faust (editor). The book was entitled: *Zen - der lebendige Buddhismus in Japan (Zen - The Living Buddhism of Japan)*. Eugen Herrigel served as the proofreader. As the following quote reveals, even at this early date the unity of Zen and the patriotic warrior had become an integral part of this work.

The most famous Japanese commander and loyal patriot Masashige Kusunoki (1290-1336) sacrificed himself and his family for the endangered empire. He was an excellent strategist who had long practiced Zen under the guidance of Zen Master Daitō, [who had been given the title of] “Teacher of the Nation”. *This hero became the model and ideal for all Japanese patriots who later fought and sacrificed themselves for their country.* His bronze equestrian statue stands in front of the Imperial Palace in the middle of Tokyo. (Italics mine)

Ōhazama's work only marked the beginning of Zen's impact on Germany.

## Eugen Herrigel's Role

In 1924, shortly after assuming teaching duties at the University of Heidelberg, Eugen Herrigel (1884-1955) accepted an offer to teach at Tohoku Imperial University in Sendai. While in Japan Herrigel explored various traditional Japanese disciplines, especially *kyūdō* (traditional Japanese archery). He returned to Germany in 1929 in order to take a position at Erlangen University, where he began to describe his impressions of Zen and its relationship to Japanese culture. He formally joined the Nazi Party in December 1937 and, thanks to having done so, became Rector of Erlangen in 1945.

Like D.T. Suzuki, Herrigel claimed that Zen was at the root of the Japanese martial ethos. He linked the warrior's ability to embrace death to the transcendence of the individual through the practice of Zen meditation (*zazen*). As the following quotation makes clear, for Herrigel the true effect of Zen's influence on Japanese culture was that it fostered an embrace of death among the entire Japanese people.

The unmatched hard training of body and mind that the samurai received over hundreds of years was joined to a Zen made all the more

durable by its introspective nature. This allowed the samurai to not only trust in life but in death as well. The samurai were thoroughly liberated from the fear of death and knew no fear of death.... Bushido has now become the way of the entire Japanese people, and it is self-evident that it is most clearly expressed in the Japanese military.<sup>10</sup>

Compare Herrigel with D.T. Suzuki, who wrote in his 1938 book *Zen and Its Influence on Japanese Culture*: “The spirit of the samurai deeply breathing Zen into itself propagated its philosophy *even among the masses*. The latter, even when they are not particularly trained in the way of the warrior, *have imbibed his spirit and are ready to sacrifice their lives for any cause they think worthy*. This has repeatedly been proved in the wars Japan has so far had to go through.”<sup>11</sup> (Italics mine)

The similarity in thinking between the two men is obvious, for Herrigel frequently referenced Suzuki as his authority on Zen. Herrigel wrote:

In his *Essays on Zen Buddhism*, D.T. Suzuki sought to demonstrate that Japanese culture and Zen are intimately related. He further claims that the Japanese arts, the mental attitude of the samurai, the moral, practical, and aesthetic aspects of the Japanese lifestyle, and even to a certain extent the intellectual life of the Japanese, cannot be understood without recourse to their basis in Zen.<sup>12</sup>

For Herrigel, Zen was the root of the “chivalric spirit” in the Japanese people as a whole, something that allowed them to sacrifice themselves “for the sake of the Fatherland” (*um des Vaterlandes willen*). Like Suzuki, Herrigel asserted that the Zen spirit had successfully permeated all aspects of Japanese culture. During the war years Herrigel became a popular guest speaker for meetings of the Deutsch-Japanische Gesellschaft (German-Japanese Association) throughout Germany, and, additionally, for the militarily far more important Deutsche Gesellschaft für Wehrpolitik und Wehrwissenschaften (German Association for Defense Policy and Military Sciences).

As Sarah Panzer notes, it was thanks to men like Herrigel, among many others, that following the rise to power of the Nazis in 1933, “Zen itself became politically

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<sup>10</sup>Quotation contained in a speech to the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Wehrpolitik und Wehrwissenschaften (German Association for Defense Policy and Military Sciences), 1944.

<sup>11</sup>Suzuki, *Zen and Its Influence on Japanese Culture*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>12</sup>“Die ritterliche Kunst des Bogenschießens” (“The Knightly Art of Archery”) in *Nippon-Zeitschrift für Japanologie* 2, no. 4 (October 1936), pp. 195-96.

mobilized, so to speak ‘weaponized,’ in Germany as a way of conceptualizing an idealized image of Japanese heroic masculinity that was meant to make Japanese culture more immediately recognizable and sympathetic to a German audience.”<sup>13</sup>

Yet in his 2009 book, *Shots in the Dark*, Yamada Shoji revealed that Herrigel never underwent formal Zen training during his five-year stay in Japan from 1924-29. Yamada further informs us that Awa Kenzō, Herrigel’s archery instructor, “never spent any time at a Zen temple or received proper instruction from a Zen master.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, readers who first became acquainted with Herrigel through his famous postwar classic, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, had no way of knowing either of his Nazi past let alone that Awa’s alleged Zen teaching of *Daishadōkyō* (“Great Doctrine of the Way of Shooting”) was simply Awa’s personal philosophy.

This did not prevent D.T Suzuki, however, from praising Herrigel in the preface to the 1953 English edition of *Zen in the Art of Archery*. Suzuki wrote:

In this wonderful little book, Mr. Herrigel, a German philosopher who came to Japan and took up the practice of archery toward an understanding of Zen, gives an illuminating account of his own experience. Through his expression, the Western reader will find a more familiar manner of dealing with what very often must seem to be a strange and somewhat unapproachable Eastern experience.<sup>15</sup>

If Zen is “strange and somewhat unapproachable”, it is no more so than the relationship of these two men to the Nazis. Further details on Suzuki’s own relationship to the Nazis will be presented below.

### Giuseppe Tucci’s Role

Giuseppe Tucci (1894-1984) was closely linked with the wartime fascism of his own country, Italy, an Axis member, thus playing a prominent role in the *Zeitgeist* of the 1930s. Tucci, a noted scholar of Tibetan Buddhism, also came under Suzuki’s influence, especially following the 1938 publication of *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence on Japanese Culture*. The following year Tucci published “Lo Zen e

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<sup>13</sup>Panzer, “Mobilizing Zen: Esoteric Theory and Martial Practice in National Socialist Germany,” in a paper presented at a workshop entitled: “Buddhismus im Nationalsozialismus” (Buddhism under National Socialism) held at the University of Vienna on 4-5 May 2012.

<sup>14</sup>Yamada, *Shots in the Dark*, p. 66.

<sup>15</sup>Quoted in Yamada, *Shots in the Dark*, p. 207.

il carattere del popolo giapponese” (“Zen and the Character of the Japanese people”) in which, like Suzuki, he claimed Zen had made the greatest single contribution to the formation of the Japanese character. Zen was particularly useful, he wrote, in freeing oneself from social constraints and allowing men to become “men among men, soldiers of an army that marches toward a fate that equalizes everyone.”

As E. Bruce Brooks of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst has noted, Tucci was also active in Japan during the war years:

In 1937, following the Marco Polo Bridge incident and the beginning of the Pacific War, Tucci was sent by the Italian Government to strengthen cultural ties between Japan and Italy. The Italian Cultural Institute was established in Tokyo, and Tucci traveled around the country giving lectures on Tibet and on racial purity. In books, and in the magazine *Yamato*, Tucci explained to his new public that he found in Zen a doctrine of freedom echoed in Bushido and in the practice of war. Success, Tucci held, calls for transcendence of the boundaries of the finite self: only here may one find liberation from the “tyranny of time”. Zen and war, then, are both ways to escape from “the cold rationality and impersonality of the modern age.”<sup>16</sup>

In the midst of his lectures, Tucci found time to write “Il Giappone moderno e la sua crisi spirituale,” (“Modern Japan and its Spiritual Crisis”), published in 1940. Tucci took this opportunity to tell his fellow Italians of his admiration for Zen monks as trainers of the *samurai*. He further praised them for the way in which they had successfully applied Zen immediacy and spontaneity to the battlefield. Tucci was a strong supporter of Mussolini and Italian fascism from as early as the 1920s and frequently wore a fascist uniform during the war years.

### Wilhelm Gundert’s Role

In addition to Herrigel, a second German scholar to make an explicit connection between Zen and masculine heroism was Wilhelm Gundert (1880–1971). He left for Japan in 1906 and remained there as a German language instructor into the 1930s, aside from a 2-year period when he returned to Germany to complete a doctorate in *Japanologie* (Japanese studies) in Hamburg.

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<sup>16</sup>E Bruce Brooks, “Giuseppe Tucci,” available on the Web at: <http://www.umass.edu/wsp/sinology/persons/tucci.html> (accessed August 8, 2012).

In 1927 Gundert became the German head of the Japanisch-Deutsche Kulturinstitut (Japan-German Cultural Institute) in Tokyo. He joined the Nazi Party in 1934 and succeeded his mentor as chair in *Japanologie* at Hamburg University in 1936. The following year he was nominated as dean of the philosophy department by the Berlin authorities. From 1941 until his dismissal in 1945 for his pro-Nazi views, Gundert served as Rector of the University of Hamburg.

In 1935 Gundert published *Japanische Religionsgeschichte (Japanese Religious History)*. Regarding Zen he wrote: “The profession of the warriors and knights (i.e., *samurai* or *bushi*) ... called upon Zen with its masculinity and discipline, its simple art of living and scorn of death, and its nobility and chivalry.”

In 1937 Gundert wrote of a shared chivalric past in *Die religiösen Kräfte Asiens (The Religious Strengths of Asia)*. After discussing the “heroic element in genuine Buddhism”, he continued:

Following closer contact with the Zen form of Buddhism, one cannot suppress the feeling that here, in a remarkable detour from Aryan India, is an expression of the most genuine Nordic spirit in the Far East. A form to which, despite the strange forms the outer covering has taken, we nevertheless readily feel internally related and close. The Japanese knight and warrior ideal of Bushido is born from the spirit of Zen. This spirit is yet alive today in the Japanese army and beyond, and thus you can still meet many Japanese officers who want to deepen [their understanding of] the writings of the ancient Zen masters or occasionally participate in meditation in a Zen monastery.<sup>17</sup>

It should be noted that, at least initially, Gundert’s positive evaluation of Japanese Buddhism was at odds with two trends regarding Buddhism in Germany (and in Europe generally). First, he challenged Buddhism’s popular reputation as not only a pessimistic faith but also one that promoted a fatalistic attitude toward life. Secondly, in European scholarly circles the Mahāyāna school, including Zen, found in East Asia was viewed as a corrupt and degenerate expression of the pure, original Theravāda school of Buddhism present in South and Southeast Asia.

In the Nazis Gundert found a ready audience for his positive evaluation of Japanese Buddhism, especially Zen, based on the masculine conception of honor and self-sacrificing heroism he promoted. Further, as will be described in detail

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<sup>17</sup>Gundert, “Nationale und übernationale Religion in Japan” in *Die religiösen Kräfte Asiens*, p. 16.

below, the SS welcomed Gundert's writings, for he located Zen within the nexus of socially circumscribed elite groups (i.e., the *samurai* and the modern Japanese officer corps). It was precisely such an elite group that the SS aspired to become. An elite group that would, once Germany had emerged victorious from the war, rule the greatly expanded Third Reich under Hitler's leadership.

Throughout the war Gundert continuously promoted the importance of Zen and *Bushidō*, notably including in his 1942 article in *Deutschlands Erneuerung*: "Quellen japanischer Kraft" (*Germany's Renewal: "Sources of Japanese Power"*). Like Herrigel, he became a popular lecturer through the Deutsch-Japanische Gesellschaft, giving lectures on the *Weltanschauung* (world-view) of the Japanese, of which Zen was presented as an important constituent part, in major German cities throughout 1942-43.

### Kitayama Junyū's Role

In the midst of the heightened interest in Germany concerning Japan's allegedly male-oriented heroic faith, it is not surprising that German-speaking, Japanese Buddhist priests had a role to play. The role played by Pure Land priest Kitayama Junyū (1902–1962) is particularly notable. One need only look at the title of one of his books, *Heroisches Ethos. Das Heldische in Japan* (*Heroic Ethos. The Heroic in Japan*) to recognize the contribution he made toward the transformation of Japanese religion into a martial faith.

As is typically the case in the modern Japanese priesthood, Kitayama was the son of a Pure Land priest who, following his undergraduate study of Buddhism in Japan, was sent to pursue his graduate studies in Germany by order of the Pure Land sect in 1924. This eventually led him to the University of Heidelberg, where he wrote his doctoral thesis on the metaphysics of Mahāyāna Buddhism under the famous philosopher Karl Jaspers in 1931.

Kitayama's commitment was not simply to the Mahāyāna school in general but to its Japanese manifestations in particular. Like so many of his fellow Buddhists in Japan, Kitayama claimed that Japanese Mahāyāna constituted "the final stage and fulfillment of Buddhist religiosity."<sup>18</sup>

Although Kitayama was active in both Japanese and religious studies, his influence was greatest in the field of intercultural exchange. In 1926 he accepted

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<sup>18</sup>Quoted in Kubota, "Strategies in Representing 'Japanese Religion' during the National Socialist Period: The Cases of Kitayama Junyū and Wilhelm Gundert," p. 623.

the role of deputy to the Japanese director of the Berlin Japan-Institut, which had been established to foster both cultural and academic mutual understanding and cooperation between Germany and Japan. Characterized as “a warm and upright friend of National Socialism” in an article by Kubota Hiroshi, Kitayama’s reward for his support of the Nazis was appointment as director of the Department of Japanese Studies at the German-speaking Karls-Universität in Prague in 1944.<sup>19</sup>

The year 1944 also marked the publication of Kitayama’s *Heroisches Ethos. Das Heldische in Japan*. In this book we encounter a major difficulty Kitayama faced in his efforts to promote Japanese Buddhism to his German readers. This difficulty stemmed from his affiliation with the Pure Land sect of Japanese Buddhism rather than Zen. Kitayama explained:

As a result of the fact that D.T. Suzuki published his works on Zen in English, followed by translations into other languages, the general impression in Europe is that the Zen sect is the only Buddhist school of thought to have played a role in Japanese intellectual history. This is because Suzuki devoted his works exclusively to the Zen sect of which he is a priest. Few significant works have been published about the other sects. Hence, no one in Europe has access to other or better materials on Japanese Buddhism than the writings of D. T. Suzuki.<sup>20</sup>

On the one hand, Kitayama’s remarks about D.T. Suzuki alert us to the importance of Suzuki’s role in Nazi Germany, a more detailed description of which follows below. As for Kitayama, he felt it was important to point out that the heroic nature of Japanese Buddhism was not just a product of Zen but sprang from the very nature of Japanese Buddhism. He wrote:

The heroic spirit of Japan comes from the union of individual Buddhism with state Buddhism. Japanese Buddhism seeks the ideal human existence not only in the past and future, but finds it in the present at the place where the eternal is united with the transitory.... For this reason, it was possible to combine Buddhism with the thinking of the Japanese government. Therefore, in Japan there were patriots in priestly robes, priests as great patriotic figures, and heroes as followers of Buddhism.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 618.

<sup>20</sup>Kitayama, *Heroisches Ethos. Das Heldische in Japan (Heroic Ethos. The Heroic in Japan)*, p 62.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., pp. 68-70.

Kitayama, like German enthusiasts for Japanese Buddhism, was faced with the further challenge of explaining the relationship of Buddhism to the indigenous Shintō faith. This was a far more important topic than might appear, since it mirrored a parallel struggle in Nazi ranks between an acceptance of Christianity despite its Jewish roots and an embrace of a putative pre-Christian “pure” Germanic (or Aryan) religious faith.

Nazi leaders held contrasting views concerning Christianity’s acceptability. On the one hand, there were figures like Heinrich Himmler and Adolf Hitler himself, powerful though relatively few in number, who rejected all forms of Jewish-tainted Christianity. In particular, Himmler saw it as his task to restore, or if necessary create, a truly pre-Christian Germanic or Aryan faith.

There were, however, far more Nazi leaders like Alfred Rosenberg, one of the principal ideologues of the Nazi party and editor of the chief Nazi paper *Völkischer Beobachter*. Rosenberg and his cohorts considered such German figures as Martin Luther and Meister Eckhart to have been major reformers of Christianity who created an authentically *Germanic* faith. Thus, despite its decadent roots in Judaism, the claim was made that Christianity in Germany had, as a result of a struggle lasting many centuries, taken on an authentic Germanic character.<sup>22</sup> This latter position was acceptable to the vast majority of Germans, both Catholic and Protestant, who continued to regard themselves as Christians.

Kitayama and many of his German colleagues argued that something similar had occurred in the case of Buddhism: despite the allegedly fatalistic and pessimistic nature of early Indian Buddhism, the subsequent Mahāyāna school had transformed Buddhism into an active faith engaged with the world. Building on this, Buddhism in Japan had been further transformed into a masculine, heroic faith that initially sustained the warrior class, thereby serving as the spiritual basis for Japan’s modern soldiers, who pledged loyalty unto death to the emperor and country.

Chapter Three of Kitayama’s book was entitled “The Japanese Sword as a Symbol of the Heroic Spirit.” In it Kitayama united Shintō mythology with Buddhism into an organic whole via the history and function of the samurai sword:

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<sup>22</sup>For further details of this little known but critical split in Nazi ‘religiosity,’ see Baier, “The Formation and Principles of Count Dürckheim’s Nazi Worldview and his interpretation of Japanese Spirit and Zen.” Available on the Web at: <http://japanfocus.org/-Karl-Baier/4041> (accessed 3 July 2014).

Early in Japan's mythological era the measure of a sword lay in its ethical and religious significance. One of the jewels that the Sun Goddess, ancestress of the Imperial Family, sent her grandson was a sword, symbol of his regency and granted for the purpose of defending justice.

For this reason, the sword later became recognized within Buddhism as "The Sword of Demon Conquest". Accordingly, the sword must not be used as a murder weapon, but only as a weapon to combat evil and injustice.<sup>23</sup>

Kitayama went on to identify the unity of Buddhism, particularly Zen, and the sword as a major characteristic of Japan's medieval feudal lords and *samurai*. Kitayama, like Suzuki, focused on the teachings the 17th century Zen master Takuan (1573 – 1645) gave to his *samurai* disciples. These teachings demonstrated, Kitayama claimed, that "through the art of swordsmanship, one can reach that state of consciousness known as enlightenment or release (*Erlösung*) in Buddhism."<sup>24</sup>

And finally, in what must have resonated deeply to Nazi ears, Kitayama ended this chapter as follows:

Swordsmanship training in preparation for death is the Alpha and Omega of the Japanese hero spirit.... One is no longer the bearer of life but of death, standing above life and everything that happens in life, able to freely, undeterred and courageously master whatever takes place. Therefore, the Japanese heroic spirit is decisive to finding the right place to die.<sup>25</sup>

One is left to wonder whether Kitayama himself was able "to courageously master whatever takes place", in that at the end of the war he was interned as a pro-German collaborator by the Soviet Union. Following his release, Kitayama became a teacher of Japanese and judo but would never see his homeland again, for the Czechoslovakian government refused to approve his repatriation to Japan. Kitayama was thus forced to stay in Prague until his death in 1962.

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<sup>23</sup>Kitayama, *Heroisches Ethos. Das Heldische in Japan (Heroic Ethos. The Heroic in Japan)*, p. 88.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 119.

## Walther Wüst, Heinrich Himmler and the SS

In 1937 Himmler directed a booklet be published to which he wrote the foreword: *Samurai. Ritter des Reiches in Ehre und Treue* (*Samurai, Knights of the Empire in Honor and Loyalty*). He had 52,000 copies of the booklet printed in order that one could be distributed to every member of the SS. "Using this short history of the *samurai*," Himmler wrote, "we wish to call to mind some long forgotten truths: The fact, that even in antiquity, *this Far-Eastern nation had the same honorary laws as our forefathers* . . . and moreover, recognizing that these are usually *elite minority groups that endow the worldly existence of a nation with eternal life*." (Italics mine)

Although the SS had originally been created as Hitler's personal bodyguard, under Himmler's direction it expanded dramatically and assumed a far more important role. From 1937 onwards it became the "elite minority group" Himmler described. The plan was for the SS to rule the German Reich in both war and in peace. The *samurai*, who constituted only 7-10

As mentioned above, Himmler sought to resurrect Germany's pre-Christian, pagan faith. The religious traditions of India attracted him, for, thanks to the alleged Aryan invasion of India in antiquity, the religions of India appeared to be extant expressions of authentic Aryan spirituality, especially because (it was claimed) the Aryan invaders had established a martial society based on a rigid social structure with strict caste distinctions.

Himmler was well aware that meditation was a key component of Indian religious practice, for he confided to his Finnish masseur, Felix Kersten: "I admire the wisdom of the founders of Indian religion, who required that their kings and dignitaries retreat every year to monasteries for meditation. We will later create similar institutions."<sup>26</sup>

For Himmler, the Vedas, Upanishads and Buddhist texts, especially the *Visuddhi-magga* (*The Path of Purification*) were all of interest, as were such figures as Buddha Śākyamuni and Krishna. In particular, Himmler valued Krishna's advice to warrior-prince Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*, that, nothing was more important than doing one's duty, no matter how disagreeable it might be.

In 1937 Himmler appointed Professor Walther Wüst, one of the leading Sanskrit scholars of his time, as director of the Ahnenerbe (Bureau for the Study of Ancestral Heritage), an official organization that had just been attached to the SS. Wüst became a colonel in the SS and, later, Rector of the Ludwig-Maximilian

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<sup>26</sup>Quoted in Palash Ghosh, "Heinrich Himmler: The Nazi Hindu." Available on the Web at: <http://www.ibtimes.com/heinrich-himmler-nazi-hindu-214444> (accessed 1 July 2014).

University in Munich in 1941. As such, he was one of the Third Reich's most influential scholars, operating on the assumption that the then secret Nazi religion being created (or 'revived') should be rooted in the Vedic and Buddhist writings of India. With Himmler's blessing, Wüst from June 1936 onwards repeatedly delivered a speech to SS-personnel asserting the existence of a direct line of racial ancestry from the old Aryans of India to present-day National Socialists. And the greatest Aryan of them all was, according to Wüst, Buddha Śākyamuni.

Wüst claimed that 2500 years after the Buddha's birth something wondrous had occurred in Austria. Namely, the 'Führer', then an unskilled worker living in Vienna, became acquainted with the hardship of the poor when walking through the pitiful flats of the workers. It was this experience in Vienna that had prevented Hitler from either getting lost in abstract theories or becoming subject to a shallow realism. Instead, Hitler acquired an inspired vision of reality similar to the one the Buddha once had. It was because the Buddha and Adolf Hitler belonged to the same hereditary community that they reacted in the same way to the problems of their time; it was their common Aryan identity that endowed them with the capacity to guide their people from subjugation to freedom.<sup>27</sup>

Wüst also had something to say about Japan, claiming:

From even a Japanese citizen with the most modern point of view shines forth the oldest *samurai*. If one wants to plant a new seed in his heart, one simply has to stir up the sediment that has settled in its depths over the course of centuries. The man who said this was a Japanese man soaked through with the unbelievable spirituality and power of tradition, a type of man that we luckily have in Germany, too, but we must attempt to develop far more vehemently, if we want to claim the certain victory of our weapons and to fulfill the deepest meaning of the Greater German Empire. May a merciful fate grant that this young but eternal German Man quietly, surely and constantly develop the character into which the Japanese are born.<sup>28</sup>

In Wüst's reference to a Japanese man "soaked through with the unbelievable spirituality and power of tradition," we clearly see a reference to Nitobe Inazō, for in *Bushido, The Soul of Japan*, Nitobe wrote in reference to Japan's victory in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-5:

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<sup>27</sup> For further details, see Junginger, "From Buddha to Adolf Hitler: Walther Wüst and the Aryan Tradition," *The Study of Religion under the Impact of Fascism*, p. 125.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Maltarich, *Samurai and Supermen*, p. 237.

What won the battles on the Yalu, in Corea (*sic*) and Manchuria, was the ghosts of our fathers, guiding our hands and beating in our hearts. They are not dead, those ghosts, the spirits of our warlike ancestors. To those who have eyes to see, they are clearly visible. *Scratch a Japanese of the most advanced ideas, and he will show a samurai.*<sup>29</sup> (Italics mine)

In light of Wüst's comments, it is not strange that Deputy Führer Rudolph Hess once claimed:

We, too, [like the Japanese] are battling to destroy individualism. We are struggling for a new Germany based on the new idea of totalitarianism. *In Japan this way of thinking comes naturally to the people!*<sup>30</sup> (Italics mine)

In reading these comments, one is almost moved to pity the poor Nazis who, unlike the Japanese, had to struggle to embrace the “new idea” of totalitarianism!

#### D. T. Suzuki's Role

For someone, especially a scholar, to claim that totalitarianism “comes naturally to the people” (the Japanese in this instance) would be to invite a well-founded rebuke from the scholarly community. Nevertheless, there was one scholar of religion who made the following claim about the Japanese character in an article written for Imperial Army officers in June 1941:

Although Zen originally came from India, in reality it was completed in China while its real efficacy was supplied to a great extent after coming to Japan. The reason for this is that there are things about the Japanese character that are amazingly consistent with Zen. I think the most visible of these is rushing forward to the heart of things without meandering about. *Once the goal has been determined, one goes directly forward to that goal without looking either to the right or to the left. One goes forward, forgetting where one is.* I think this is the most essential element of the Japanese character.<sup>31</sup> (Italics mine)

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<sup>29</sup>Nitobe, *Bushido, The Soul of Japan*, p. 64.

<sup>30</sup>Quoted in Tolischus, *Tokyo Record*, p. 159. Hess is quoted by the former Japanese ambassador to Berlin, Kurusu Saburō, who, Tolischus claims, knew Hess well.

<sup>31</sup>Suzuki. “Makujiki Kōzen,” *Kaikō-sha Kiji* (June, 1941), p. 17.

As readers will have guessed, the scholar who wrote these words was D.T. Suzuki. In the same article he added:

In one sense it can be said that “rush forward without hesitation” and “cease discriminating thought” are characteristics of the Japanese people. Their implication is that, disregarding birth and death, one should abandon life and rush ahead. It is here, I think, that Zen and the Japanese people’s, especially the warriors’, basic outlook are in agreement.<sup>32</sup>

While some readers may find it a stretch of imagination to link these words to totalitarianism, the noted scholar of totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt, wrote: “Under conditions of tyranny it is far easier to act than to think.”<sup>33</sup> Equally, while it may not have been Suzuki’s intent, in light of subsequent events his words cannot but remind us of those poorly armed Japanese troops rushing forward against Allied machine guns in suicidal and tactically futile “banzai charges” (to say nothing of *kamikaze* pilots).

Suzuki’s Zen writings first appeared in German in 1935 with an article “Japanese Culture and Zen” in a German art review, followed by an article in *Nippon-Zeitschrift für Japanologie* in April 1936. This was followed by the German edition of *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, i.e., *Die Einführung in den Zen-Buddhismus*, in 1939, and *Zen und die Kultur Japans* in 1941. This latter book was the German edition of Suzuki’s 1938 English language book *Zen and Its Influence on Japanese Culture* (shortened to *Zen and Japanese Culture* in post-war editions).

The clearest indication of Suzuki’s influence on the Nazis, apart from the influence he exerted on Herrigel, Tucci and other Nazis, was the reception accorded the 1941 publication of *Zen und die Kultur Japans*. On 11 January 1942 the official newspaper of the Nazi Party, the *Völkischer Beobachter*, carried an article featuring a full four pages of Suzuki’s book. Inasmuch as these same pages are readily available in English editions there is no need to include them here.<sup>34</sup>

Let it be sufficient to note that the words, “death”, “die”, “deadly” occur no less than fourteen times in these four pages. Typical of these death-related passages is the very first one: “The problem of death is a great problem with every one of us; it

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>33</sup>Hannah Arendt, available at: [http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/h/hannah\\_arendt\\_2.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/h/hannah_arendt_2.html) (accessed on July 27, 2012).

<sup>34</sup>See pp. 47-50 of the original 1938 edition of *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence on Japanese Culture* (later shortened to *Zen and Japanese Culture* in slightly revised postwar editions).

is, however, more pressing for the samurai, *for the soldier*, whose life is exclusively devoted to fighting, and fighting means death to either side of fighters.”<sup>35</sup> (Italics mine)

As Suzuki makes clear with his reference to “for the soldier,” he wanted his readers to understand that his words about Japan’s past applied equally to its present. And this was not the only time he did so; for example, only two pages earlier he had noted:

There is a document recently very much talked about *in connection with the military operations in China*. It is known as the *Hagakure*, which literally means “Hidden under the Leaves,” for it is one of the virtues of the samurai not to display himself, not to blow his horn, but to keep himself away from the public eye and be doing good for his fellow-beings.<sup>36</sup>

Inasmuch as Japanese troops had already committed the infamous “Rape of Nanking” in December 1937, a year before the publication of the original English edition of his book, one can only wonder how Suzuki could, *in connection with the military operations in China*, be touting the Japanese soldier as someone who went about “doing good for his fellow-beings”.

Suzuki returned to elaborate on the theme of the *Hagakure* in the four pages of the Nazi newspaper article. There he added:

We read the following in the *Hagakure*: “*Bushido* means the determined will to die. When you are at the parting of the ways, do not hesitate to choose the way of death. No special reason for this except that your mind is thus made up and ready to see to the business. Some may say that if you die without attaining the object, it is a useless death, dying like a dog. But when you are at the parting of the ways, you need not plan for attaining the object. We all prefer life to death and our planning and reasoning will be naturally for life. If then you miss the object and are alive, you are really a coward. This is an important consideration. In case you die without achieving the object, it may be a dog-death – the deed of madness, but there is no reflection here on your honour. In *Bushidō* honor comes first.

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 45.

Therefore, every morning and every evening, have the idea of death vividly impressed on your mind. When your determination to die at any moment is thoroughly established, you attain to perfect mastery of *Bushidō*, your life will be faultless, and your duties are fully discharged.”<sup>37</sup>

Inasmuch as the SS was modeled on the *samurai*, honor did indeed come first, equated, of course, with loyalty, the other key virtue of the *samurai* that Suzuki often promoted in his writings. As if this were not enough, Suzuki was introduced yet again in the same newspaper on January 15, 1942, only four days later. The article’s author, Ernst Meunieur, wrote:

The Japanese D. T. Suzuki recently wrote a book about the meaning of the Zen sect, published by Deutsche Verlagsanstalt in German. We published a section of his book describing the Japanese warrior’s preparedness for death in Vol. No. 11 of the *Völkischer Beobachter*.

Suzuki is a Zen priest and professor at a Buddhist university in Kyoto. If one attempts to characterize the Zen sect scientifically, which is difficult, one can conclude that in it Buddhism has been completely revamped to meet Japanese conditions. This is not a unique process but one that has also happened to Christianity in the past, for example with the birth of Puritanism and certain of its oriental forms.

The recent decade in particular has once again led the Zen sect to increased importance in Japan. The battle for Japan’s survival is taking place against the powerful backdrop of a history that has been able to survive for two and a half millenniums in a rare concord of race, religion and politics. It is quite understandable that in this difficult time for the existence of the Japanese people, they would retreat to the intellectual roots of their history and regard them as being quite valid for their present. The outstanding national virtues of the Japanese are anchored in the Zen sect, a fact that signifies a monumental endorsement of this practical life-art.

In words that seem to spring directly out of Suzuki’s pen, we learn in this article that Zen is “a practical life-art forming the very essence of the Japanese

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 49.

that also determines and directs, to a degree hardly conceivable by a European, Japan's public life."

The Nazis celebrated and promoted Suzuki's writings. At the very least his presentation of Zen served to reassure German readers that they were indeed fortunate to be allied with the Zen-inspired Japanese, who, like themselves, were expected to embrace death unconditionally in a fight to the finish.

In a booklet first printed in 1942, the Nazi expert on the Far East mentioned above, Prince Albrecht of Urach, sought to explicate the "secret" of the Japanese soldier's strength. First he wrote about Japanese religion in general:

The Japanese are fortunate in having never experienced serious conflict between national interests and personal religious beliefs.... Shinto is Japan's primeval faith, it corresponds to the Japanese character so completely that it is never discussed.<sup>38</sup>

As for Japanese Buddhism, Albrecht claimed:

Japanese Buddhism is much more positive and activist than Indian Buddhism.... There are countless very active sects of both Buddhism and Shinto that express their religious life not only in Japan itself, but go out into the areas dominated by Japan to give local people an idea of the power and strength of Japanese state religion.

Nevertheless, the Nazi Prince reserved his highest praise for Zen:

The active and yet stoic Buddhism of the Zen-sect perfected and refined the ethos of the Japanese warrior, and gave him the highly ascetical note that still today is the *essential feature* of Japanese soldiery. (Italics mine)

Compare this latter claim with Suzuki's own description in his 1941 book, *Zen und die Kultur Japans*:

Zen discipline is simple, direct, self-reliant, *self-denying*, and this *ascetic* tendency goes well with the fighting spirit. The fighter is to be always single-minded with just one object in view, which is to fight

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<sup>38</sup>Prince Albrecht of Urach, *Das Geheimnis japanischer Kraft* (The Secret of Japanese Power), partial English translation available on the Web at: <http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/japan.htm> (accessed 27 July 2012).

and not to look either backward or sidewise. To go straight forward in order to crush the enemy is all that is necessary for him.... *Good fighters are generally ascetics or stoics*, which means to have an *iron will*. When needed, *Zen supplies them with this*.<sup>39</sup> (Italics mine)

In light of Kitayama's earlier comments on the important role Suzuki played in the dissemination of Zen in Europe, I suspect I am not alone in recognizing Suzuki's influence on the Nazi Prince.

### Count Karlfried Dürckheim

No discussion of the wartime relationship between Japanese Buddhism, especially Zen, and the Nazis would be complete without introducing the seminal role played by Count Karlfried Dürckheim (1896-1988). However, as I have written a lengthy article about him elsewhere, here I will only trace the outline of Dürckheim's role. Interested readers are invited to read my more detailed description.<sup>40</sup>

Dürckheim, an academic working for Ambassador Joachim von Ribbentrop in London, received a research assignment from the German Ministry of Education in mid-1938 that included exploring the possible use of cultural activities in the promotion of Germany's political aims both within Japan and in those areas of Asia under Japanese influence.<sup>41</sup> Dürckheim described his arrival in Japan as follows:

I was sent there in 1938 with a particular mission that I had chosen: to study the spiritual background of Japanese education. As soon as I arrived at the embassy, an old man came to greet me. I did not know him. "Suzuki," he stated. He was the famous Suzuki who was here to meet a certain Mister Dürckheim arriving from Germany to undertake certain studies. Suzuki is one of the greatest contemporary Zen Masters. I questioned him immediately on the different stages of Zen. He named the first two, and I added the next three.

<sup>39</sup>Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence on Japanese Culture*, p. 35.

<sup>40</sup>See "A Zen Nazi in Wartime Japan: Count Dürckheim and his Sources—D.T. Suzuki, Yasutani Haku'un and Eugen Herrigel." Available on the Web at: <http://japanfocus.org/-Brian-Victoria/4063> (accessed 18 July 2014).

<sup>41</sup>Wehr, "The Life and Work of Karlfried Graf Dürckheim." Available on the Web as a pdf download at: <http://www.stillnessspeaks.com/assets/books/1/Karlfried%20Graf%20Durkheim%20Becoming%20Real.pdf> (accessed October 23, 2013).

Then he exclaimed: “Where did you learn this?” “In the teaching of Meister Eckhart!” “I must read him again...” (though he knew him well already).... It is under these circumstances that I discovered Zen. I would see Suzuki from time to time.<sup>42</sup>

Although the exact sequence of events leading up to their meeting is unknown, a few points can be surmised. First, while Dürckheim states he had been sent to Japan on an educational mission, specifically to study “the spiritual foundations of Japanese education,” it should be understood that within the context of Nazi ideology, education referred not only to formal academic, classroom learning but, more importantly, to any form of “spiritual training/discipline” that produced loyal citizens ready to sacrifice themselves for the fatherland. Given this, it is unsurprising that following Dürckheim’s return to Germany in 1939 the key article he wrote was entitled “The Secret of Japanese Power” (*Geheimnis der Japanischer Kraft*).

Dürckheim was clearly aware of and interested in Suzuki’s new book, for in records from his first visit to Japan Dürckheim occasionally mentions Zen, including D. T. Suzuki’s recently published book, *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence on Japanese Culture*. In this connection, Dürckheim comments: “Zen is above all a religion of will and willpower; it is profoundly averse to intellectual philosophy and discursive thought, relying, instead, on intuition as the direct and immediate path to truth.”<sup>43</sup>

Here we see an echo of Suzuki in his 1938 book. Suzuki wrote: “Good fighters are generally ascetics or stoics, which means to have an iron will. When needed Zen supplies them with this.”<sup>44</sup> Additionally: “From the philosophical point of view, Zen upholds intuition against intellection, for intuition is the more direct way of reaching the Truth.... Besides its direct method of reaching final faith, Zen is a religion of will-power, and will-power is what is urgently needed by the warriors, though it ought to be enlightened by intuition.”<sup>45</sup>

We know relatively little about the frequency of Suzuki’s meetings with Dürckheim during his first visit to Japan. However, Suzuki did include the following entries in a diary he kept in English: (January 16, 1939), “Special delivery

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<sup>42</sup> Goettmann, *The Path of Initiation: An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Karlfried Graf Dürckheim*, p. 29.

<sup>43</sup> Wehr, *Karlfried Graf Dürckheim. Ein Leben im Zeichen der Wandlung*, p. 96.

<sup>44</sup> See fn.39 above.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 34-37.

to Durkheim (*sic*), at German Embassy”;<sup>46</sup> (January 17, 1939), Telegram from Dürckheim”;<sup>47</sup> (January 18, 1939), “Went to Tokyo soon after breakfast. Called on Graf [Count] Dürckheim at German Embassy, met Ambassador [Eugen] Otto [Ott], and Dr. [space left blank] of German-Japanese Institute. Lunch with them at New Grand [Hotel].”<sup>48</sup> It is likely that this flurry of activity in early 1939 was connected to Dürckheim’s impending return to Germany. If so, Dürckheim’s luncheon invitation may well have been to thank Suzuki for the latter’s assistance during his stay.

### Dürckheim’s Second Visit to Japan

Dürckheim returned to Japan in January 1940 and remained there throughout the war. It was during this time that his most important work for the Nazis was undertaken. This time Dürckheim travelled to Japan by train through Russia, taking advantage of the new, and once unthinkable, non-aggression pact between Germany and the Soviet Union.

It was, however, this very treaty that had produced a crisis in Germany’s relationship with Japan. That is to say, the promising negotiations of 1938 between the two countries had led to nothing, mostly because of Japan’s hesitant attitude. As a result, Germany changed its plans and on August 23, 1939 Ribbentrop, now Nazi Foreign Minister, signed a “Treaty of Non-Aggression between Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics,” thereby allying Germany with Japan’s arch-enemy. This ruptured the Anti-Comintern pact, and the relationship between the two countries hit rock bottom.

By the spring of 1940, however, Germany had achieved an impressive list of military victories leading to the occupation of Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, and, most important, France. The defeat of England seemed to be only a matter of time. This led Japan to approach Germany with the goal of ensuring protection of its own sphere of influence in East Asia.

When it became clear that the defeat of England would take longer than expected, especially in the face of possible US intervention in Europe as well as East Asia, Germany once again became interested in a military alliance with Japan. This time renewed negotiations bore fruit in the form of the Tripartite Pact between Germany, Japan and Italy, signed on September 27, 1940.

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<sup>46</sup>Suzuki, “English Diaries,” No. 26, 2012, p. 3.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

Dürckheim continued to work for Ribbentrop during his second stay in Japan. This time his work included collecting information about Japanese opinion concerning Germany and its policies as well as organizing propaganda for the Nazis, especially at the academic level. About this, Dürckheim recalls:

Then the war started. The day after [Germany's invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939] Ribbentrop summoned me and said: "We need somebody to maintain contact with scientists in Japan." I answered: "Mr. Von Ribbentrop, I can't wait to return to Japan." "OK," he answered, "then come back tomorrow and tell me what you want to have [to carry out your task]." The next day I said to him: "I want eighty libraries consisting of one hundred volumes each." "What do you mean?" "Eighty libraries with one hundred volumes in each is a library for every teacher at German schools [in Japan]." He said "OK, approved. I think this is reasonable."<sup>49</sup>

In addition, Dürckheim sought to place pro-Nazi articles in important Japanese journals while supplying the German Foreign Office's propaganda magazine, *Berlin-Rom-Tokyo*, with articles about Japan. He also claims to have played a role in the preparation of the Tripartite Pact signed on September 27, 1940.<sup>50</sup> Despite his lack of official status in Germany's Foreign Ministry, Dürckheim was clearly an important, even key, figure in promoting the wartime relationship between the two countries.

### The View of Dürckheim within Japan

As for Dürckheim's activities in Japan, we have one observer who knew them well. He was a German academic by the name of Dr. Dietrich Seckel. Seckel taught in Japan from 1937 to 1947 and later at Heidelberg University from 1965 to 1976. He described Dürckheim's wartime activities in Japan as follows:

Dürckheim also went to Zen temple[s], where he meditated. However, his study and practice of Zen Buddhism have been extremely exaggerated. In particular, I felt this way because, at the same time, he was propagating Nazism. There was something incongruous about

<sup>49</sup>Dürckheim *Der Weg ist das Ziel*, p. 40.

<sup>50</sup>See Dürckheim: *Der Weg ist das Ziel*. Gespräch mit Karl Schnelting in der Reihe "Zeugen des Jahrhunderts," pp. 41-42.

this. I recall seeing him at a reception at the German Embassy. At that time he was poking his finger into the breast of one of the most famous Japanese professors of economics, who was wearing a brown silk kimono. While explaining the ideology of the German Reich to him, Dürckheim kept pushing the poor professor back until the latter reached the wall and could go no further. I could not help but feel pity for this professor who was the object of Dürckheim's indoctrination.

Dürckheim thought of himself as a friend and supporter of German teachers [in Japan]. He provided us with everything he could think of. He lectured everywhere ceaselessly, his lectures first being translated into Japanese and then, later on, distributed to all German residents in the original German. His speeches arrived in the mail on an almost daily basis. It was extremely unpleasant. He was what might be called an excellent propagandist who, possessed of a high intellectual level, traveled throughout Japan teaching Nazism and the ideology of the Third Reich."<sup>51</sup>

Neither Dürckheim's intelligence nor his dedication to propagating Nazi ideology can be in doubt. In fact, he was so dedicated to his work that he was awarded the War Merit Cross, Second Class on Hitler's birthday, April 20, 1944. Dürckheim shared this honor with such prominent Nazis as Adolf Eichmann and Dr. Josef Mengele. Yet, what of his interest in Zen? "... his study and practice of Zen Buddhism have been extremely exaggerated," Seckel informs us.

Does this mean, then, that Dürckheim never practiced with a recognized Zen master in Japan? No, for the record is clear that Dürckheim did indeed train, albeit for only a few days, with Yasutani Haku'un, then a Sōtō Zen priest, who in the postwar era became a well-known Zen master in the West, particularly the U.S. We know about Dürckheim's training with Yasutani thanks to Hashimoto Fumio, a former high school teacher of German, who served as Dürckheim's interpreter and translator at the German embassy in Tokyo.

Hashimoto described his relationship to Dürckheim as follows:

When Dürckheim first arrived in Japan, he was surrounded by Shintoists, Buddhist scholars, military men and right-wing thinkers, each of whom sought to impress him with their importance. The

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<sup>51</sup>Arai, "Shūsenzen tainichi doitsujin no taiken," p. 112.

Count found it difficult to determine which of them was the real thing, and I stepped in to serve as his advisor. In addition, a great number of written materials were sent to him, and my job was to review them to determine their suitability....

In the end, what most interested the Count was traditional Japanese archery and Zen. He set up an archery range in his garden and zealously practiced every day. In addition, he went to Shinkōji temple on the outskirts of Ogawa township in Saitama Prefecture, where he stayed to practice Zen for a number of days. His instructor in *zazen* was the temple abbot, Master Yasutani [Haku'un]. I accompanied the Count and gladly practiced with him.<sup>52</sup>

Hashimoto relates that it was he who first took an interest in Yasutani because of the latter's strong emphasis on both the practice of *zazen* and the realization of enlightenment. This emphasis on practice was a revelation for him, for until then his only knowledge of Buddhism had come from scholars who "had never properly done *zazen* or realized enlightenment."<sup>53</sup>

In particular, Hashimoto was impressed by Yasutani's 1943 book on Zen Master Dōgen, and a modern-day compilation of Dōgen's teachings for the laity known as the *Shūshōgi*. Hashimoto claimed that Yasutani's book revealed "the greatness of this master [i.e., Yasutani] and the profundity of Buddhism."<sup>54</sup> So impressed was Hashimoto that he not only provided Dürckheim with a detailed description of the book's contents but went on to translate the entire book into German for him.

Yasutani's book, coupled with Hashimoto's recommendation, was the catalyst for Dürckheim's training at Shinkōji, albeit for only "a number of days". Dürckheim could not help being aware of Yasutani's extremely right-wing, if not fanatical, political views, which are clearly expressed in his book. For example, Yasutani described the purpose of his book as follows:

Asia is one. Annihilating the treachery of the United States and Britain and establishing the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere is the only way to save the one billion people of Asia so that they can, with peace of mind, proceed on their respective paths. Furthermore,

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<sup>52</sup>Quoted in Victoria, *Zen War Stories*, pp. 88-89.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 89.

it is only natural that this will contribute to the construction of a new world order, exorcising evil spirits from the world and leading to the realization of eternal peace and happiness for all humanity. I believe this is truly the critically important mission to be accomplished by our great Japanese Empire.

In order to fulfill this mission it is absolutely necessary to have a powerful military force as well as plentiful material resources. Furthermore, it is necessary to employ the power of culture, for it is most especially the power of spiritual culture that determines the final outcome. In fact, it must be said that in accomplishing this very important national mission the most important and fundamental factor is the power of spiritual culture....

It is impossible to discuss Japanese culture while ignoring Buddhism. Those who would exclude Buddhism while seeking to exalt the Spirit of Japan are recklessly ignoring the history of our imperial land and engaging in a mistaken movement that distorts the reality of our nation. In so doing, it must be said, such persons hinder the proper development of our nation's destiny. For this reason we must promulgate and exalt the true Buddha Dharma, making certain that the people's thought is resolute and immovable. Beyond this, we must train and send forth a great number of capable men who will be able to develop and exalt the culture of our imperial land, thereby reverently assisting in the holy enterprise of bringing the eight corners of the world under one roof.<sup>55</sup>

The words "it is most especially the power of spiritual culture that determines the final outcome" must have been particularly attractive to Dürckheim inasmuch as they paralleled his Nazi creed. However, without knowledge of modern Japanese Buddhist history, it is unlikely that he would have understood the reference to "those who would exclude Buddhism while seeking to exalt the Spirit of Japan..."

Yasutani's reference is to Shinto and Neo-Confucian-inspired criticism, dating back to the late Edo period (1600-1867), that condemned Buddhism as a foreign, degenerate religion defiling a divine Japan properly headed by a "living (Shinto) god" (*arahito-gami*). The reference, of course, is to the emperor. As late as the 1930s Shinto and Neo-Confucian advocates maintained that Buddhism, an out-

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<sup>55</sup>Quoted in Victoria, *Zen War Stories*, pp. 69-70.

dated foreign import, had nothing to offer modern Japanese society, a position Yasutani vehemently rejected.

Note, too, that the basis of the martial spirit of the Japanese people was described as the “Spirit of Japan” (*Yamato-damashii*). Yasutani clearly concurred with this belief, though he asserted that it was Japanese Buddhism that made the cultivation of this ultranationalist and xenophobic spirit possible. Yasutani even turned Zen Master Dōgen, the 13th century founder of the Sōtō Zen sect in Japan, into the model of an Imperial subject:

The Spirit of Japan is, of course, unique to our country. It does not exist in either China or India. Neither is it to be found in Italy or Germany, let alone in the U.S., England and other countries.... We all deeply believe, without the slightest doubt, that this spirit will be increasingly cultivated, trained, and enlarged until its brilliance fills the entire world. The most remarkable feature of the Spirit of Japan is the power derived from the great unity [of our people]....

In the event that one wishes to exalt the Spirit of Japan, it is imperative to utilize Japanese Buddhism. The reason for this is that as far as a nutrient for cultivation of the Spirit of Japan is concerned, I believe there is absolutely nothing superior to Japanese Buddhism.... That is to say, all the particulars [of the Spirit of Japan] are taught by Japanese Buddhism, including the great way of ‘no-self’ (*muga*) that consists of the fundamental duty of ‘extinguishing the self in order to serve the public [good]’ (*messhi hōkō*); the determination to transcend life and death in order to reverently sacrifice oneself for one’s sovereign; the belief in unlimited life as represented in the oath to die seven times over to repay [the debt of gratitude owed] one’s country; reverently assisting in the holy enterprise of bringing the eight corners of the world under one roof; and the valiant and devoted power required for the construction of the Pure Land on this earth.

Within Japanese Buddhism it is the Buddha Dharma of Zen Master Dōgen, having been directly inherited from Shākyamuni, that has emphasized the cultivation of the people’s spirit, for its central focus is on religious practice, especially the great duty of reverence for the emperor.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 70.

Yasutani excludes even wartime allies, Germany and Italy, from sharing in the uniquely Japanese “Spirit of Japan”. The reader might suspect that Dürckheim would have been somewhat alienated by Yasutani’s words; but in fact the Nazis readily recognized that every *Volk* (people/nation) had their own unique spirit and culture. Thus it was self-evident that the equally unique “German Spirit” (*Deutscher Geist*) propagated by the Nazis would have excluded the Spirit of Japan.

Nevertheless, there was nothing to prevent the unique spirits of the three peoples from working closely together against common enemies, while simultaneously learning and sharing with one another. Not least of their common enemies were the Jews, for Yasutani was also an anti-Semite:

We must be aware of the existence of the demonic teachings of the Jews, who assert things like [the existence of] equality in the phenomenal world, thereby disturbing public order in our nation’s society and destroying [governmental] control. Not only this, these demonic conspirators hold the deep-rooted delusion and blind belief that, as far as the essential nature of human beings is concerned, there is, by nature, differentiation between superior and inferior. They are caught up in the delusion that they alone have been chosen by God and are [therefore] an exceptionally superior people. The result of all this is a treacherous design to usurp [control of] and dominate the entire world, thus provoking the great upheavals of today. It must be said that this is an extreme example of the evil resulting from superstitious belief and deep-rooted delusion.<sup>57</sup>

Since anti-Semitism was not typical of wartime Zen masters, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that for Dürckheim among the most attractive features of Yasutani’s teaching were both his embrace of a militarism based on “no-self” and his virulent antipathy to Jews.

At the war’s end Dürckheim was imprisoned in Tokyo’s Sugamo prison by the Allies for some eighteen months as a suspected Class A war criminal. However, he was eventually released and repatriated to West Germany in 1947, where he enjoyed a long successful postwar career as a psychotherapist, hiding his Nazi past. He did, however, continue to promote his understanding of Zen, claiming to have had an enlightenment experience, i.e., *satori*, while in Japan.

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 73.

## Conclusion

What all the Buddhist-related figures, both Japanese and German, introduced in this article ultimately have in common with each other and the Nazis is their willingness to *instrumentalize*, i.e., to *weaponize*, Buddhism, most especially Japanese Buddhism and Zen, in the service of the state at war, in the service of *both their personal and collective self-interest*, and, ultimately, *in the service of death*.

This is encapsulated in the following wartime statement attributed to Hitler by Lieutenant-General Yamashita Tomoyuki. “Hitler emphasized,” said Yamashita, “that in the coming age, the interests of Japan and Germany would be identical, because the two have *a common spiritual foundation*. And he hinted that he would leave instructions to the German people to bind themselves eternally to the Japanese spirit.”<sup>58</sup> (Italics mine)

Sadly, the historical reality is that something similar can be said about religious leaders from other faiths in Germany and elsewhere. To give but one example in a German context: in December 1942, the Roman Catholic Church’s Office of Military Affairs wrote the following at the height of Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union:

God gave the German people a noble mission in this war—reordering Europe. This reconstruction should be done in the name of Christ. Bolshevism means a Europe without God, and without and against Christ. The front of young nations led by Germany wants a Europe with God, with Christ.... So we celebrate the birth of Christ very purposely. Christianity is after all not just a workshop for the highest spiritual culture but also a construction site for national greatness and power.<sup>59</sup>

The question is, has the effort to ‘weaponize’ Buddhism (and other religions), to suit the aims of state and religious leaders, come to an end? Or, on the contrary, are we already in the midst of the next round of bloodletting based on the realization that, as stated by the Japanese Imperial Army, “Faith is power”?<sup>60</sup>

An Associated Press article during the Iraq War described the role of military chaplains as follows:

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Tolischus, Tokyo Record, p. 158.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Missalla, Für Gott, Führer und Vaterland (For God, Führer and Fatherland), p. 151.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Victoria, Zen at War, 2nd ed., p. 111. The phrase “Faith is Power” (J. Shin wa chikara nari) was the title of a section in the Field Service Combatant’s Code (Senjinkun), promulgated by Tōjō Hideki on 8 January 1941.

As American troops cope with life—and death—on a faraway battlefield, military chaplains cope with them, offering prayers, comfort and spiritual advice to keep the American military machine running.... Chaplains help grease the wheels of any soldier's troubled conscience by arguing that killing combatants is justified. Capt. Warren Haggray, a 48-year-old Baptist Army chaplain said: "I teach them from the scripture, and in the scripture I can see many times where men were told...to go out and defeat the enemy. This is real stuff. You're out there and you gotta eliminate that guy, because if you don't, he's gonna eliminate you." "I agree," said Lt. Cmdr. Paul Shaughnessy, a Navy chaplain and Roman Catholic priest from Worcester, Massachusetts."<sup>61</sup> (Italics mine)

As for the putative unity of Zen and *both* a metaphorical *and physical* sword prof-fered by Suzuki and so many other wartime Japanese Zen leaders, the following quotation reveals that this understanding has already crossed the wide Pacific and is alive and well *in the U.S. military*. At the dedication in October 2007 of the "Vast Refuge Dharma Hall Chapel" at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, CO., Wiley Burch, a Buddhist priest affiliated with the Hollow Bones Order of the Rin-zai Zen sect, said:

I understood there was a possibility of a place for Buddhism in the military. I understand the culture very well, and I understand the diversity of it. From that place, rather than being hard and coming in against, I came in willing to accept all. That's a Buddhist teaching, not to set yourself up against things so much as to just be, we say, like clouds and like water, just flow.... Without compassion, war is nothing but criminal activity. It is necessary sometimes to take life, but we never take it for granted.<sup>62</sup>

Germany's God-given mission to reorder Europe; Japanese Buddhism, especially Zen's, promotion of *selflessly* dying for a divine emperor; U.S. Christianity's greas-

<sup>61</sup> Associated Press article of 29 August 2004.

<sup>62</sup> Quoted on the 'Buddhist Military Sangha' website available at: <http://buddhistmilitary-sangha.blogspot.jp>, posted on Thursday, 1 November 2007 (accessed on 11 December 2013). Note that many other allegedly Buddhist justifications for killing in wartime can be found on this website. Ironically, many of these justifications are similar to if not identical with those given by Japanese Zen and other Buddhist leaders in wartime Japan.

ing the wheels of a soldier's troubled conscience; the necessity sometimes to take life, etc. are all truly "real stuff". They are, in fact, the stuff of *death*.

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