

The Persistence of Transnational Idealism in Early Postwar Japan, 1945-1949

by Konrad M. Lawson

The nation-state is not dead, yet. I, for one, eagerly await its demise. The alternatives, however, and there are many, range from the infamous to the impractical and the ineffectual. Despite considerable academic interest in the study of theories of global governance, cosmopolitics, and so on, at the broader level of society throughout the world, I would argue that there is less sympathy and less organized support for movements promoting alternative political orders than at anytime in this century. International unity on the basis of class allegiance is in shambles with the end of the Cold War; the federalist ideal of the European Union is met with apathy all across the continent; the United Nations is attacked and all too often ignored. “Empire,” which is an alternative and often a predecessor to the nation-state has made something of a comeback in analyses of American power, but with very few exceptions the imperial status of the United States is either denied or derided. While our president speaks in terms of universal values and a crusader spirit, he famously ridiculed the idea that the United States should face a “global test” to justify military action: it is still national interest that counts, it is still the nation which rules.

It was not always thus, not even in this country. The role of the United States in formation of the United Nations, and its far more conservative predecessor, the League of Nations is well known. However, neither of these institutions posed any major challenge to the idea of national sovereignty, on the contrary, they were widely regarded as guaranteeing their protection. In the aftermath of World War II, however, even a victor

which had been relatively unscathed by the massive global conflict was willing to contemplate considerably more radical conceptions of a new political order. [SLIDE] In 1946, for example, a Gallup poll showed that a significant majority of Americans supported a form of world government to which all military power was surrendered. Almost half of this country's state legislatures passed resolutions supporting world government by 1950. What became known as the "Chicago Committee" at the University of Chicago met in the fall of 1945 in order to draft what became an elaborate world constitution while world federalist organizations proposing a somewhat more limited conception of world government that controlled all military but only some legal and economic functions were founded all over the world. While these movements were sometimes minimalist and sometimes maximalist in their ambitions for global unity, they were all forms of *transnational idealism* that proposed considerable limitations on national sovereignty, if not its total eradication.

Outside of the United States and Europe, perhaps the greatest early postwar enthusiasm for transnational idealism, and especially world federalism, is to be found in the ruins of a starving, defeated and militarily occupied Japan. How is that this completely mobilized and militaristic nation which collapsed in the wake of the world's first nuclear attack and a massive onslaught of Soviet troops in Manchuria could so quickly reverse itself and support, in the name of international peace and cooperation, radical conceptions of world government? Such reversals are, of course, common currency in history but we might want to follow Wolfgang Schivelbusch, who in his work *The Culture of Defeat* makes this [SLIDE] observation about the post-Civil War South,

France in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War and Germany in the aftermath of World War I:

It is a short step from understanding defeat as an act of purification, humility, and sacrifice—a crucifixion of sorts—to laying claim to spiritual and moral leadership in world affairs. [The three countries transformed] their philosophies of defeat into a moral bulwark for the protection of all humanity. To accept their own defeat as a verdict by the court of world history was one thing; to sit idly by while all humanity was threatened by future disaster was quite another. Who, they reasoned, was better equipped to act as moral standard-bearer against such evils than those who had only recently stared them in the face?¹

In all three cases that Schivelbusch examines, he found remarkable examples of a powerful and idealistic spirit, this despite the fact that these societies faced massive social shock, exhaustion, and paralyzing economic hardship. In Japan, it was much the same. Historian John Dower has described the early Japanese postwar condition of *kyodatsu*, a state of complete psychological shock and emotional exhaustion in the wake of defeat. And yet, in these early years from the conclusion of the war in August of 1945 until roughly the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, [SLIDE] several of Japan's most widely circulating magazines or popular journals known as *sôgô zasshi* published articles in support of various conceptions of global government, while almost half a dozen specialized journals were dedicated to movements supporting transnational idealism.

World federalism was the most important of these early postwar movements, and was often highly critical of what it saw to be the fatal flaws of its competitor: the United Nations. The “All Japan League for a World Federation” pronounced [SLIDE] its

¹ Wolfgang Schivelbusch *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery* (New York: Picador, 2001), 31.

support for the 1947 Montreux Declaration, a copy of which was included in the league's official journal. Strikingly, in this journal, *World Federation* we also find a regularly updated listing of prominent members of the league, which included some 80 sitting Diet members, and its list of directors included Matsuoka Komakichi (Chairman of the House of Representatives), Kuriyama Shigeru (Supreme Court Judge), four sitting or ex-cabinet ministers, fifteen Diet members, law professors from Tokyo University and Waseda University, and various other corporate leaders and journalists from the leading dailies. This weight helped give voice to the movement within the Diet itself. In 1947, still under American occupation, the Japanese Diet deliberated on a remarkable, "A Draft Resolution on the formation of a World Federation" and world federalism was brought up in over fifty separate Diet meetings in the first decade following Japan's defeat.

I would argue, however, that Japan's *culture of defeat*, which is certainly an important factor at work here, is not sufficient to explain the powerful momentum behind Japan's early postwar transnational idealism. The shock, the trauma of defeat and of the incalculable human suffering of war felt so acutely by its perpetrators even as their victims were often forgotten, these were certainly enough to generate a reaction, but there is an important additional component at work here which can help explain two unusual aspects of the movement, especially concerning support for the idea of a World Federation: 1) Japanese support for the world federalist movement flowered and largely withered away even before Japan's postwar grassroots peace movement and organized opposition to nuclear weapons began. Secondly, early postwar transnational idealism hardly involved any of Japan's famous left-leaning intellectuals or Communist leaders.

World federalism, in particular, was not a mass movement by any measure, indeed worldwide the total membership of world federalist organizations peaked at around 150,000 members on the eve of the Korean War, a negligible size when compared to more influential religious, political, and social organizations, even in the same period. While world federalism was the most politically powerful of early postwar transnational movements, it fell well short of the numbers found in later grassroots movements such as Garry Davis's "world citizen campaign" which even claimed the French writer Albert Camus as a member. The movement was for the most part conservative and unmistakably elitist.

The most important key to understanding Japanese transnational idealism in the early postwar period is to accept that Japan's defeat, and especially the horrific experience of nuclear devastation led to a transformation of existing ideas, and not their genesis. In the case of world federalism, the most important intellectual predecessor is the very political ideology so recently discredited by the war: Pan-Asianism.

Pan-Asianism is unfortunately a somewhat difficult cluster of ideas to unravel in a few words. It is both a descriptive and a normative term. On the one hand, pan-Asianist theories both inside and outside of Japan claim matter-of-factly that Asia, however defined, shares certain characteristics, whether racial, cultural, or more often than not, spiritual. Perhaps the most famous figure to make such claims, in English no less, is the artist Okakura Tenshin (Okakura Kakuzô). These ideas, however problematic, still carry significant weight throughout East Asia today. On the other hand, pan-Asianism in prewar and wartime Japan was a rallying cry, a bold call for regional unity and resistance against Western imperialism, and most often the domination of the white race. In much

of the historiography of the Pacific War and the Sino-Japanese War that raged long before it started, Japan's pan-Asianism has been largely dismissed as state propaganda, or the empty slogans of fascist organizations and nationalist thugs.

It is certainly not difficult to find evidence of this. Japan's wartime proclamation of an East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere was not followed by much prosperity, and even less "co-prosperity." As the Japanese military "liberated" oppressed colonies all over Southeast Asia, it held on tight to its own colonies in Taiwan and Korea, and continued to fight a brutal land war (or "incident" as it called the war) against the un-colonized China. Until March of 1945, it even allowed the hated French to continue administering their possessions in Indochina. The newly liberated populations could be forgiven for wondering exactly what was so liberating about their new status as their labor and loyalty were demanded by an empire at war. Okinawa had long since been formally annexed and forced to assimilate, while the native populations in Hokkaido and Sakhalin were either "civilized" or deprived of their means to a livelihood.

However, we can recognize the flagrant hypocrisies and tragic violence of Japanese imperialism without completely dismissing pan-Asianism as propaganda. Supporters of a political, military, or economic Asian federation of some kind come from all sides of the political spectrum, and some were deeply troubled by Japanese chauvinism and hypocritical policies. We find Marxist pan-Asianists such as Funayama Shin'ichi, Hirano Yoshitarô, and Ozaki Hotsumi, the latter famously arrested and executed as a Communist spy in the Richard Sorge incident. We find violent and nationalistic pan-Asianists like the socialist Kita Ikki and Ôkawa Shûmei, the latter famous for going mad at the Tokyo War Crimes trials. We find military figures like

Ishiwara Kanji who together with Miyazaki Masayoshi believed that Asian unity was a vital step in preparation for a final global war between strategic blocks. We find pan-Asianists like Nakayama Masaru who yearned for East Asia to return to an idealized and somehow more authentic Confucian past. We find the former Marxist Miki Kiyoshi who wanted an East Asian Community to form the basis of a new universal principle for a world order, in his words, a new cosmopolitanism which conceives the world as a true totality while preserving the originality of its parts. There are also more reluctant pan-Asianists like the legal scholar Rôyama Masamichi who comes first to a belief in the need for a regional economic and strategic federation before slowly adding the more decorative trappings of an Asian cultural and spiritual union.

The names I have listed span several decades of Japanese history, and they each play different roles in the narratives of Japan's modernization and its imperial expansion. What all of these theories have in common is the conviction that, even if the ethnic nation is still important, the nation-state has either failed or will soon complete its term of usefulness as a level of political organization. It must, they believed, surrender some, most, if not all of its functions to a higher level of regional community, justified both by Asia's shared characteristics and its immediate need to resist Western imperialism. Almost all of them retain a function for the ethnic nation within their new order, if not a strong emphasis on continued political independence, even as they strip it of military or economic autonomy. When war came, the nation mobilized itself at all levels of society and censorship crushed all remaining dissent, those intellectuals who decided to continue contributing their pens to public discourse increasingly molded and adapted their theories to face the geopolitical reality of the day. Many of these intellectuals were collaborators

of the most typical variety: believing with complete conviction that their only hope to influence the course of events was to work for and through the institutions of power. However, their differences dropped away as the war escalated, and in practice, pan-Asianism came to mean a unified economic bloc and more importantly an East Asian federation of states, ostensibly equal and nominally independent but guided by the benevolent light of Japan's imperial wisdom and developed by Japan's mighty industrial economy.

So what happened in the aftermath of war? What is the fate of pan-Asianism? On the surface, it largely disappears, as indeed, we might expect it to if the rhetoric of Asian unity was nothing more than empty wartime propaganda. The only major organization promoting pan-Asianism which survived the conclusion of the war was Ishiwara Kanji's East Asian League Association. Ishiwara was soon purged from public life by the US occupation authorities, however, and the organization was banned in 1946. None of these organizations would resurface until a far more marginalized radical right made a modest comeback in the 1950s. The idea of East Asian unity at the economic or political life would not find serious hearing in public discourse until the end of the Cold War.

The story could just as well end there, the various attempts to form a regional bloc, a transnational institution that took East Asia (Japan, Korea, Taiwan, China, and newly created nations of Manchuria and Mongolia) or a much broader Asia as its level of organization, had utterly failed. There are two important things to note, however: First: the more detailed and albeit failed efforts of Japanese intellectuals and policy makers to build an Asian economic and political bloc made popular for the first time, the idea of

federalism. Secondly: At least since the early 1920s, when I first found mention of it in the most popular journals of the day, East Asia or Asia as the unit of a new political order was frequently posited as only the first, regional stage in a teleological and historicist scheme ending in a global and totalizing unity. Much as Marxist historicism would have the ultimate Communist society preceded by bourgeois democratic and early socialist stages, so to most pan-Asianist theories saw the unity of the region as an important prelude to the final stage of a united world. However, also like Marxist historicism, the temptation to skip intermediate steps can be overwhelming.

In the aftermath of war, the ideas behind world federalism in particular were already well articulated and close at hand. What changed was the shift from the regional to the global. In the case of Japan, at least, the shock of defeat and the devastation of war led many leading politicians and intellectuals who had been active both in prewar and wartime Japan to seek to renegotiate the relationship between their once proud empire and a new postwar reality. For many, doubtless, this shift was seen as the only realistic option, since nationalism and any pretensions to empire would be frowned upon by both the US occupation regime and the world as a whole. This can help resolve the otherwise puzzling fact that many proud Japanese nationalists embraced world federalism.

More importantly, the continuities between wartime pan-Asianism and postwar world federalism finds a more direct connection through certain key pan-Asianist intellectuals. Many of the important wartime intellectuals are either dead or completely drop out of the public sphere. Ishiwara, as mentioned above was purged and later died in 1949. Ozaki Hotsumi, as mentioned was executed as a Communist spy in 1944. Miki

Kiyoshi was imprisoned at the end of the war for harboring a Marxist friend, and died tragically in prison only days before the US occupation forces ordered political prisoners released in 1945. Ôkawa, as mentioned, went temporarily insane, and for years dropped off the stage. However, of those prominent figures who remain, there are important hints of their sympathies in writings, even though I have not yet looked closely at their actual personal level of involvement in the world federalist movement. Funayama Shin'ichi and Rôyama Masamichi, listed briefly above, were two important intellectuals in Japan's wartime "Showa Research Association" that helped develop the wartime policy towards Asia. Funayama, a devout Hegelian philosopher and Marxist theorist who eventually turned to support Japan's empire, translated Kant's *On Eternal Peace* in 1947, a key work in the history of transnational idealism. In his preface to the work, Funayama expresses hope that Kant's conception of a new political order might be embraced by a postwar generation. Rôyama, who became a leading postwar figure in the conservative wing of the Socialist party, openly supported world federalism. Specifically, he argued that Japan was saturated by theories of class struggle and democracy, but warned that they could benefit from a far more thorough study of the idea of federalism: the key to future world peace. Hirano Yoshitarô, a China scholar and another Marxist turned Pan-Asianist supporter of Japan's wartime efforts, also supported world federalism, as did other intellectuals who supported Asian unity such as Tanikawa Tetsuzô and Shigemori Kôjiro. Japan's most famous Christian missionary and pacifist, the strongly anti-Communist Kagawa Toyohiko put his full support behind the movement and edited the journal *World State*. The US occupation authorities worked closely with Kagawa and

helped him conceal the fact that this “pacifist” traveled East Asia in wartime to support Japan’s pan-Asianist ideology.

In the end, though, the world federalist movement in Japan as elsewhere around the world, was powerless in the face of growing conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States. The final blow came with the outbreak of a massive civil war on the Korean peninsula, which radically polarized opinion in Japan. Even without the Cold War, however, I believe the movement was doomed to failure. It sought to eliminate war and promote global unity only through the creation of an overarching political institution. This was completely at odds with the more fundamental desire for social justice, basic economic well-being, and self-determination that drove almost every mass movement in decolonizing nations tragically into the camp of that other great transnational idealism of the twentieth century: Communism.