JUST HOW IT WAS THAT NISHIDA KITARŌ and others in the so-called Kyoto school first came to be branded “nationalists,” and why that label should have persisted into the present in certain academic circles, is not clear. A careful study of Nishida’s activities and philosophical writings presents a picture that is far from anything we normally associate with the word nationalism.¹ What emerges is rather a thinker who resisted fanatic nationalism and struggled against the attempts of the pre-1945 military government to impose its program of “thought control” on Japan’s intellectual community.² Nishida’s systematic philosophy was far too universal in scope to submit to the petty racial egoism, cultural chauvinism, and pseudo-religious belief in the superiority of the Japanese people that was the hallmark of the nationalism—or rather ultranationalism—prevalent at the time. At the height of the Pacific War, Nishida incurred the open censure of ruling right-wing factions for his “Westernized” conviction that individual freedom and creativity must not be sacrificed to national interests. He died on 7 June 1945, just months before Japan’s final defeat, after which the mood among the intelligentsia shifted to a more progressive stance. A few years later the new leftist intellectuals, taking aim at everything that seemed politically reactionary, began to criticize Nishida for having acknowledged the historical significance and the


² Nishida’s interest in the political situation of his time is indicated by the number of letters on this subject. Of the 2,717 letters included in the Collected Works, about 350 (13%) contain references to the current politics; of the 1,845 letters written between 1935 and the time of his death in 1945, 320 (17%) contain such references. Letters are referred to here by number and by volume and page number in the Collected Works.
role of the imperial family, conveniently overlooking his broader perspective. In their eyes, the emperor system had been the willing vehicle for colonial expansion and military aggressions, and the idea of supporting the imperial household was enough to bring the thought of Nishida and others in the Kyoto school under suspicion of fascist ideology. To understand these charges and to assess their validity, it is not enough to patch together quotations here and there from Nishida’s philosophical writings, diaries, and copious correspondence. We need first to have a look at the general political, historical, and intellectual scene in pre-1945 Japan.

NISHIDA’S BASIC POLITICAL STANCE

In an important sense, the basic ingredients of Nishida’s political stance were already present from his youth. Born in 1870, he grew up breathing the liberal democratic air of the early Meiji period. But like many of his boyhood friends, he came to feel that something had been lost in the rapid turn away from traditional Japanese customs. He joined with Yamamoto Ryōkichi, Fujioka Sakutarō, Suzuki Daisetsu, and Matsumoto Bunzaburō to form a literary circle known as the “Gasonkai.” On 11 February 1889, the day the Meiji Constitution was promulgated, they posed in front of a camera with a banner that read “We Stand Free at the Top of Heaven,” a sign of their defiant hope for a new nation emancipated from the unfair trade treaties that Japan had been subjected to (and which were in fact rescinded four years later).

From early on, too, Nishida took a position against the government bureaucrats who were carry-overs from the old feudal system and formed an oligarchy or hanbatsu (藩閥) system. It was not so much that he opposed the system as that his own loyalties lay rather with the former Kaga fiefdom, whose rulers he saw as representing the kind of open-minded liberalism that Japan needed. As an act of resistance against the government’s attempt in 1886 to centralize education, Nishida and Yamamoto dropped out of school, a decision that was not without consequences for their futures. Behind this resistance lay a firm belief in the legitimacy of the constitutional state and in the efficacy of parliamentary government, political parties, and honesty in civil service. Throughout his life he was to maintain an active interest in developments on the political scene.

3 Translated literally, Gasonkai 我尊会 means “Respect-the-Individual Society.” In writing for this group, Nishida assumed the pen name Pegasus 有翼. By the time the Gasonkai was formed, Suzuki had already dropped out of school because of financial problems at home. The boyhood friendship among Nishida, Yamamoto, and Suzuki was to last throughout their lives.
Against a backdrop painted in such bold strokes, Nishida’s reverence for the emperor and his attachment to the emperor system can only seem inconsistent, but his understanding of the historical landscape was far more nuanced. In 1898 D. T. Suzuki expressed opposition to the movement to sacramentalize the imperial family as a distortion of an important symbol. Again in 1961, as an old man, he spoke of how his generation had been “kindly disposed” to the emperor but of how the military had abused that affection for their own purposes. The same could surely be said of Nishida. Although he never seems seriously to have questioned the validity of the Meiji constitutional monarchy, neither did he at any time slip into blind worship of the emperor. His grandson and biographer, Ueda Hisashi, recalls Nishida’s opposition to the indoctrination of the youth in State Shinto:

Grandfather used to tell us that the emperor was an ordinary human being whom we should feel sorry for because he had been deprived of his freedom. This confused us, since what we were being taught in junior high school was strongly colored by the official military ideology. When we went to Kyoto, grandfather would take us out for walks, but we could not understand why he would not pause when we passed a shrine but would walk by without making the customary bow. Even though we had been instructed at school to make obeisance to the shrines, he told us that the “sacred object” of the shrine was only a stone or piece of paper.

Nishida approved of a cultural role for the imperial family, but he considered the Japanese polity (国体 kokutai) to have its roots elsewhere: in the nobility of human reality as such. A letter to Yamamoto dated 26 December 1918 contains the earliest record we have of his views in this regard:

I would like to see the imperial family play the role of a patron of culture. “Revere the Emperor” may have been a viable slogan at the time of the Restoration, but the imperial family today is no longer a symbol of opposition to the Shogunate. It is something for all of Japan.

Nowadays one hears a lot of clamor about the national polity, but no one bothers to recognize that the Japanese kokutai is grounded in humanity. They are content with their dogma of the unbroken line [of imperial succession]. For me, this “unbroken line” is rather a symbol of great mercy, altruism, and partnership.

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4 Suzuki Daisetsu, 私の履歴書 [My curriculum vitae], SDZ 30:591.
6 No. 239, NKZ 18:206–7, emphasis added. A year earlier, in 1917, Nishida wrote an article “On Things Japanese” expressing dissatisfaction with the trend of exclusivist Japanism.
In short, Suzuki and Nishida’s generation felt free to accept on their own terms the ideology of the emperor system that the 1890 Imperial Rescript on Education was trying to implant. For them the emperor was a regent who ruled subject to the constitutional structures of a modern nation. The doctrine of imperial divinity that would appear in later years was altogether foreign. It is hardly surprising that right-wing elements in the military would use the emperor to develop and spread its ideology of aggressive nationalism. Around 1935 the idea of the emperor as a living deity or kami became official doctrine. No less than the late Emperor Shōwa himself is said to have remarked of this:

It was Honjō or Usami who called me kami. I told them that my body is made the same as any other human being, that I did not qualify as a kami, and that to use that name for me was nothing but trouble.7

When tempers among young military officers boiled over into an attempted coup on 26 February 1936, Nishida was incensed. He at once saw through the hypocrisy of the military factions who, hiding behind the slogan “Absolute Reverence for the Emperor,” murdered government leaders and ministers trusted by the emperor without the least compunction:

This is an atrocity neither God nor the people can forgive. It reminds one of the French Revolution…. What they are doing is destroying our country…. It is time for the Japanese people to stand up. The future of the country looks grim if we do not take firm action at once.8

The coup was suppressed quickly by government forces and its leaders executed at the express wish of the emperor.

Nishida was always concerned about the well-being of the imperial family. He felt it his duty to accede to the request for a New Year’s lecture to Emperor Hirohito in 1941. He chose as his subject “The Philosophy of History,”9 apparently the first time that one of these lectures had dealt with philosophy. Nishida knew only too well that this was to be his first and last opportunity to speak his mind on the current world situation directly to the emperor. In hindsight he felt that his lecture might have been too abstruse.10 In it he argued that the philosophy of history presents a notion of the world fundamentally different from that of the natural sciences. What distinguishes

8 Letter to Hori Koretaka, Nos. 1005 (27 February 1936) and 1009, NKZ 18:561, 563.
10 Letter to Tomonaga Sanjūrō 朝永三十郎, No. 1534 (25 January 1941), NKZ 19:146.
the historical world from the biological is that the former depends on the human spirit shaping the course of events.

Conflict, Nishida goes on to say, arises out of the interaction of divergent ethnic groups, but so does the resolution of conflict. In that sense, war is by implication inevitable but not an end in itself. The vision he proposes is of a pluralistic community of nations within which each nation is able to maintain its own identity, the leadership falling to those countries with the most highly developed global orientation to history.

In this context, the ideal country is one where individual rights are not violated and where each individual contributes creatively to the life of the whole. Here Nishida adds a note of protest against current military policies: “Any totalitarian system that negates outright the role of the individual is an anachronism.” He concludes his lecture by expressing his faith in the continually regenerative vitality of history, whose central symbol in Japan is the imperial family, and his hope that a new era was dawning with a new and more active international role for Japan to play.

NISHIDA AND THE FIRST WAVES OF TOTALITARIANISM

Nishida was especially critical of the direction taken by the Ministry of Education, whose decisions directly affected the lives of students and professors alike. In this regard he was openly skeptical of the educational-reform package of 1918 whose aim was to strengthen Japanese national power in the years following World War I. In the years to come his skepticism would only have cause to deepen. Toward the end of the 1910s and in the early 1920s, liberal thinkers found a common platform in what has since come to be known as “Taishō Democracy.” To counter the influence of these ideas, reactionary forces began to organize themselves inside the academic community and out. The power struggle between the two factions had already consoli-

11 Emperor Shōwa was known for his work in marine biology.
12 The former director of the Center for Statistics of the Ministry of Education, Hayashi Chikio 林知己夫, analyzes statistical data to argue that some change is visible among contemporary Japanese. In the past people classified themselves either as nationalist or internationalist, but recent data indicates a tendency toward a stance of “asserting Japanese self-identity in international society” (Asahi News, 13 January 1994). Japanese consciousness appears to be headed in the direction Nishida favored.
13 See his letter to Yamamoto No. 239 (26 December 1918), NKZ 18:206–7.
14 For further details on this, see Yamada Munematsu, 昭和の精神史 [An intellectual history of the Shōwa period] (Kyoto: Jinbun Shoin, 1970). Yamada points out that there were two opposing intellectual camps at the University of Tokyo during the Taishō period: a liberal one headed by Yoshino Sakuzō 吉野作造 and Minobe Tatsukichi 美濃部達吉, and an ultranationalistic one headed by Uesugi Shinkichi 上杉慎吉.
dated as early as in 1920. In 1925 the government launched an all-out policy of thought control with the introduction of the Peace Preservation Law, whose initial overt aim was to suppress communist movements. In April 1929 a nationwide offensive against the Communist Party was inaugurated with the arrest of 339 of its members. By the following year the number had risen to 1,500. In September of 1929 the Ministry of Education initiated its own nationwide program of thought control, and in the process began to revoke the civil rights of dissidents. The invasion of Manchuria by the occupying Japanese forces in September 1931 set the country off on a “Fifteen-Year War” that meant an escalation of aggressive military campaigns abroad and an instilling of ultranationalistic sentiments at home.

In 1926 Nishida felt that his philosophical vision was finally coming together. He retired from his teaching position at the University of Kyoto in 1928 under the mandatory retirement rule with the intention of spending his days in the leisure of philosophical contemplation. His plan was short-lived. Within four years he felt himself called to take up the challenge of educating the younger generation. The immediate occasion was the government’s establishment of a Center for National Spiritual Culture on 23 August 1932. The Center was divided into three sections to deal respectively with research, with the “reeducation” of students who had fallen prey to Marxist or socialist ideas, and with the ongoing training of teachers in methods for ideological resistance. Nishida was quick to respond to this latest and crudest turn to the right of the Ministry of Education:

What the Ministry of Education is passing off in the name of “spiritual culture” is not right. From now, so long as my strength does not fail me, I intend to write as much as I can. I want to gather bright young students around me and engage them in debate and discussion, to train them how to think. In this way I will be satisfied that I have done my part if I can accomplish something on the intellectual and academic level.16

The year 1932 was filled with ominous events. The “May 15th Incident” claimed the life of Prime Minister Inukai. On 29 June the Department of Police set up a formal system of thought police known as the Superior Special Police Force. With branches across the country, the thought police succeeded in creating a cloud of suspicion around the freedom of expression. Meantime, government bureaucrats, spurred on by the ultranationalists,


16 No. 758 (8 November 1932), NKZ 18:465. The term I have rendered here as spiritual culture is 精神文化.
began to monitor the circulation of ideas more closely and to meddle aggressively in the traditional freedoms of academia. The Takikawa Incident of 1933 at the University of Kyoto, and the Minobe Incident of 1935 belong to this turn of events.

Regarding the former, Nishida responded only halfheartedly, apparently feeling that “the university should not be closed for the sake of one Takikawa.” Iwanami Shigeo, the founder and president of the Iwanami Bookstore, was upset by the reactions of Japan’s leading intellectuals, including Nishida. In retrospect, Iwanami’s instincts were right. If the intellectuals and the academic community had concentrated their efforts and taken a stance against the government, subsequent academic disasters may well have been averted. But the dike was cracked and the trickle of ultranationalist and right-wing accusations soon broadened into a steady stream that carried away more and more of the academic community with it.

The Minobe Incident, in which a certain right-wing group attacked a liberal reading of the Meiji Constitution, dealt a decisive blow to academic freedom. The fanaticism behind the ousting of Minobe Tatsukichi was aggravated by the opportunistic maneuvering of the Seiyū Party, a majority opposition party, to overthrow the cabinet of the ruling government. At the instigation of Suzuki Kisaburō, president of the Seiyū Party, the Diet passed a resolution demanding that the government “clarify the national polity.” This turned out to be the beginning of the end of party politics in pre-1945 Japan. On this occasion Nishida was less guarded in his criticism. He was

The Takikawa Incident is also known as the Kyoto University Incident (京大事件). Takikawa Yukitoki 高川幸次 (1891–1962), professor of law at the University of Kyoto, maintained that society has a duty to seek out the causes of a crime before taking retaliation against the criminal, and that it is unfair to punish only the wife in cases of adultery. Minoda Muneki 宫田文郎 of the Genri Nipponsha attacked this theory as “red.” The Minister of Education, Hatoyama Ichirō 帽山周一郎, took up this issue, and on 10 May demanded of President Konishi of the University of Kyoto that Takikawa either resign or take a leave of absence. On May 26, at a faculty meeting of the Department of Law, it was unanimously decided that the entire law faculty would resign en masse if the Ministry of Education did not rescind its demand.


Minobe Tatsukichi (1873–1948), professor of constitutional law at the University of Tokyo, had already as early as 1912 proposed a theory of the emperor as “an organ of the state” (天皇機関説), which meant that the emperor’s legal powers were defined by the constitution. See Tsunoda Ryūsaku et al., eds., Sources of Japanese Tradition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 746–7, and 宮沢俊義 Miyazawa Toshiyoshi, 天皇機関説事件 [The “imperial organ theory” incident] (Tokyo: Yūhikaku, 1970), 2 vols.

Minobe’s interpretation of the Meiji Constitution was generally accepted among leading scholars, judges, and close assistants to the emperor. Apparently, Emperor Shōwa himself was for the “imperial organ theory,” and regretted what happened to Minobe.
visibly angered at the badly-timed tactics of the Seiyū Party, which had only its
own interests at heart and was endangering the principles of the parliamen-
tary system itself by inviting further military interference. The Minobe Inci-
dent seems to have led Nishida to rethink the role of law and the meaning of
the state, resulting in his 1941 essay on “The Problem of the Raison d’état.”

Nishida against the Japanists

In March 1937, riding comfortably in the wake of the Minobe Incident and
the parliamentary resolution to “clarify the national polity,” the Ministry of
Education published a tract called Fundamentals of the National Polity
(国体の本義), which became the textbook of the kokutai-cult20 and ultrana-
tionalism. With it the government sought to maximize “ideological uniform-
ity” among the people of Japan.21

Nishida was well aware of what was happening and did not hesitate to
apply the label “fascist” to these events. A letter to Hidaka Daishirō, dated 13
October 1935, advises the younger generation to stay their resistance and
bide their time:

As you know, we’ve fallen into a period of fascism. If one thinks deeply
and selflessly about the future of our country, one will not lash out
against the present situation but will bear with it, making efforts where
one may to return it gradually to its normal state.22

A series of clashes between the government and the academic world—of
which the Takikawa Incident and the Minobe Incident were only the best
known—prompted the Ministry of Education in late 1935 to establish a
Committee for the Renewal of Education and Scholarship. The purpose of
the committee was to implement the “clarification of the national polity” in
education by reexamining Japan’s “indigestion from Western culture,”
actively promoting the distinctively Japanese learning, and returning to the
spirit of the Imperial Rescript on Education.23 Simply put, the committee’s
task was to turn back the clock on current education and antique the whole

20 William Woodard, The Allied Occupation of Japan 1945–1952 and Japanese Religions,
(Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972), proposes this term “for Japan’s emperor-state-centered cult of ultra-
nationalism and militarism” (11).

21 Tsunoda, Sources of Japanese Tradition, 785. This short work sold more than 2 million
copies. It was “designed to set the ideological course for the Japanese people. Study groups were
formed to discuss its content, school teachers were given special commentaries, and a determined
effort was made to reach ideological uniformity by guarding against deviation.”


23 石川謙 Ishikawa Ken et al., eds., 教學革新評議會總會議事錄 [Minutes of the Secretariat for
the Renewal of Education and Scholarship], in 近代日本教育制度史料 [Sources for recent educa-
with a thick varnish of nationalist spirit. Nishida was asked to serve on the committee, an appointment that he found loathsome in the extreme. He knew that the conclusions were foregone, and that his own views, critical of the Ministry of Education as they were, would not be welcome. The thought of being associated with the likes of Kihira Tadayoshi, an influential member of the Center for National Spiritual Culture, and other advocates of an exclusive Japanism was further cause for concern. (Actually, Kihira had been a former editor of Nishida and was instrumental in bringing out A Study of the Good in 1911, but the two gradually drifted apart as Nishida strengthened his liberal convictions and Kihira turned more and more ultranationalistic.)

In a letter dated 9 February 1938 to Yamamoto, Nishida complained of school superintendents from the Ministry of Education “going around Japan attacking him”:

The word seems to have got around that when some officials from the Academic Department visited me last year, I severely criticized the policy of the Center for National Spiritual Culture and its attitude. It appears that quite a few of them have turned hostile towards me.

Though somewhat encouraged by the fact that the Committee for the Renewal of Education and Scholarship included two former colleagues, Watsuji Tetsurô and Tanabe Hajime, he doubted the usefulness of his own presence, as he wrote to Watsuji:

The presence of you and Tanabe-kun at the meetings will be a reinforcement, but how can we make our views heard in such company? It is clear from the outset that our efforts will be in vain—especially mine. I am getting old and I think the best contribution I can make to the country is to complete my work and not waste even a moment.

Nishida did, however, attend the first meeting, which was convened on 5 December 1935. That was quite enough to convince him to skip the rest. In January of the following year he wrote to Yamamoto that he had found the committee a “truly biased group” and that he worried for the future of Japan with such a group of people at the helm. Kihira seems to have recommended

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24 Kihira Tadayoshi 証平正美 (1874–1949) was known for his interpretation of Hegel. He adhered to nationalism, and with the advent of totalitarianism began to advocate Japanism. The existence of some 1,200 letters addressed to him by the leading intellectuals of his time has just been made known (朝日新聞 [Asahi News], 20 October 1993). The letters themselves will not be made public for some time, since, in the judgment of Kihira’s grandson, they may compromise certain persons still living.


27 No. 978 (1 December 1935), NKZ 18:551.
dropping Darwin’s theory of evolution from the classroom, which Nishida found a bad joke. But rather than retire from the committee in silence, he decided to prepare a written opinion for the January 15th meeting. It was read at the meeting by Konishi Shigenao, former President of the University of Kyoto, despite the efforts of the chairman, Matsuda Genji, Minister of Education, to suppress it. The communique is a good summary of Nishida’s basic position on education and research vis-à-vis the aims of the committee. I cite it in full:

In order to “unify the world of thought of the present and the Japan of the future by means of the Japanese spirit,” we need to conduct scholarly research into the history of Japan and things Japanese and to clarify their essence objectively. If the humanities are to be applied, they need first to be approached from the ground up, to be studied carefully and well understood. A spirit that rests only on the past and lacks a future is no longer living. Clear and superior ideas do not survive in isolation from other ideas, but by nature serve to unify them. This is the only way to unify Japanese thinking, the only way for Japan to become one of the centers of world culture. The fact is, however, that when it comes to basic research, Japanese scholarship is still in its infancy. Even in the area of physics, where we are most advanced, we have yet to produce a Dirac or a Heisenberg. In the humanities things are still worse.

Without laying a solid foundation for scholarship in Japan, we have no more hope of diverting the radical infiltration of foreign ideas than the Yellow River has of becoming clear blue. To be sure, this is no easy matter, but no one with great expectations for Japan can afford to ignore it. To succeed, we need not only to give first-rate scholars the freedom to engage in basic research in their various disciplines, but also actively to train such scholars. Concretely, I think these questions deserve the attention of a special committee, but in the meantime offer two suggestions of my own: that we increase the number of full scholarships for students who have proved their academic excellence, and that we establish positions for professors who can engage full-time in research.

As soon as Nishida’s communique had been read to the committee, Tanabe and Watsuji spoke up in support. As Nishida expected would happen, their voices were a cry in the wilderness.

28 For an account and minutes of the proceedings, see Ishikawa, “Minutes,” 363.
29 The term used here, 精神科学, appears to be a Japanese translation of the German term Geisteswissenschaften.
Things were not yet as bad as they would get, however. Nishida seems to have felt free to express his defiance at a public meeting held on 9 October 1937 in Hibiya Park, Tokyo, to mark a conference on philosophy sponsored by the Society for the Promotion of Science. Nishida felt that the event was a sham. As soon as he had completed his talk on “Scholarly Method” he walked off the stage. In his talk, he pleaded for academic freedom in the face of the rising tide of ultranationalism and fanatic Japanism. Nishida argued that Japan’s task was “to create a new world culture, strengthened by an Eastern heritage that has nurtured us for millennia.” This can only happen if the “Japanese spirit” becomes “scholarly and rational through and through.” He criticized as superficial the distinctions the Japanists made between the morality of the East and the natural sciences of the West. Genuine intellectual growth into a world culture that will serve humanity at large does not think in such clichés but seeks to understand ideas from all quarters. Throughout his remarks, criticisms of current government policy are clear.

Simply put, what Nishida sought was a marriage of Western learning and Japanese scholarly discipline, not an irrational divorce of the two. Such a cross-cultural marriage, a living union of partnership and love, would enable Japanese academics to discover a deeper standpoint from which to carry out their work.

Nishida against Totalitarianism

The forces of irrationality came to dominate the political scene with almost sinister dispatch. As the social milieu grew more and more tense, concerned intellectuals responded by enlivening the debate on humanism. In an interview with Miki Kiyoshi in September 1936, Nishida observed:

The reason we talk about humanism so much today is that we are driven to it. The humanism of the Renaissance signaled a return to the human away from the religious control and authority of the middle ages. This laid the foundations for later culture. This movement has come to a dead end today, as we see in the counterdemand for greater control of society. In both fascism and Marxism, the question of control is central. And as the control gains strength, social freedom recedes further and further from the grasp of the individual. Faced with this turn of events, the question of humanism arises once again.32

31 NKZ 12.385–94. The intent of his talk, which was later printed by the Ministry of Education, is clearer when read as a criticism of the Fundamentals of the National Polity.

32 “The Contemporary Significance of Humanism—An Interview with Dr. Nishida Kitarô,” NKZ, 17.492–504. The quotation can be found on pages 492–3.
Nishida rejected totalitarian attempts to suppress individual freedom, and in their place proposed what he called a “new humanism.” Near the end of the Pacific War, Nishida felt that his views had been vindicated by the course of history.\textsuperscript{33} He wrote to D. T. Suzuki on 11 May 1945:

Many people today are saying that power-worshipping totalitarianism is the direction to go, but I find such an idea thoroughly old-fashioned and outdated. The direction we need to take is one that reverses the move towards totalitarianism, namely a new globalism. Whether we admit it or not, the world is already going that way.\textsuperscript{34}

Nishida and his circle never once let go of the conviction that totalitarianism was a dishonor to the country that embraced it.

\textit{Nishida’s Support of Liberal Groups}

Nishida kept up a constant and active support for the group of progressive-minded young graduates of Gakushū-in who had come to study at the University of Kyoto. Among them were Harada Kumao, Kido Kōichi, and Konoe Fumimaro, commonly known as the “court group” since they were aristocracy and worked closely with the emperor and played a prominent role in Japanese politics. Konoe, who was appointed prime minister in June 1937, regarded Nishida as one of his mentors. Saionji Kimmochi, the last of the elder statesmen, treated Konoe, Kido, and Harada as his “three treasures,” and counted on Konoe as the only hope to bridle the military and avert war. As it turned out, it was during Konoe’s administration that the military campaign began, with the invasion of China in August of 1937. Konoe never forgave himself for having condoned the invasion, but the fatal step had been made and there was no turning back.

Nishida tried for a time to convince Konoe to take measures to counter the narrow, dogmatic government policies of recent years. He wrote to the prime minister on this point in September 1937, and later met with him privately, only to discover that Konoe lacked the courage to make the decisions that needed to be made. When Kido took over as Minister of Education in October, Nishida immediately went to see him. Kido left the impression that his hands were tied in the present situation, that the current of events had grown too strong to swim against. Nevertheless, Nishida accepted Kido’s offer to serve as a counselor to the Ministry in order to “do something for the young people” whom “present policies of the Ministry of Education put at a disadvantage.”\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{33} See his letter of 1 May 1945 to Tomonaga Sanjūrō.

\textsuperscript{34} No. 2195, NKZ 19:426–7.

\textsuperscript{35} Letter to Watsuji, No. 1302 (19 November 1937), NKZ 19:54–5.

118
Nishida took it upon himself to be the gadfly in the Ministry of Education for the following eight months. To give one example, on the question of ethnicity and nationalism he wrote in a letter to Kido:

The idea that “each country of the world needs to awaken to its ethnic and nationalistic identity” seems at first blush to deny the “world” and to encourage each ethnic group to close in on itself. But in historical actuality, it means that each country has no choice but to stand on its own two feet as one part of the wider world. The term world was once no more than an abstract idea, but now it has become real. That the Japanese nationalists of today have not understood this I find an abomination.36

Gotō Ryūnosuke, a former high-school classmate of Konoe’s, was convinced that Konoe would one day become prime minister. Seeing the need, “as a friend of Konoe, to study the political situation at home and abroad,” he set up an office in 1933, which later developed into the Shōwa Study Group. The group attracted liberal thinkers from various walks of life, all of them eager to cooperate in the stance against the fascist military powers-that-be. Like Nishida, Gotō opposed the policies of the Ministry of Education. He felt the need to train a younger generation that could think on its own, make its own decisions, and steer Japan prudently into the coming age of global interaction. To this end he set up a private school in September 1938, the Shōwa Juku, and invited Nishida to be on the board of advisers. Nishida gave nominal consent and spoke to the students on at least one occasion.

Around this time, Miki Kiyoshi, a progressive “leftist” thinker who had studied philosophy under Nishida Kitarō, Hatano Seiichi, and Tanabe Hajime, joined the Shōwa Study Group and soon became one of its most zealous members. Although the group had many devoted and active members, it disbanded in November of 1940 when Gotō was asked to take a central role in the newly organized Taisei Yokusan-kai, a national non-governmental organization. The following year the Shōwa Juku was also dissolved, when Ozaki Hotsumi, one of the active directors, was arrested on charges of espionage.

NISHIDA AND THE SWELLING TIDE OF NATIONALISM

One of the most pernicious shelters for ultranationalist thinkers was formed in 1925 under the name Genri Nipponsha, the Japan Principle Society. Its founding purpose was to “denounce democracy and Marxism,

both of which go against the spirit of the Japanese national polity.” ³³ Apart from Nishida, those who were singled out for attack by this group included Ichiki Kitokurô, Minobe Tatsukichi, Miyazawa Toshiyoshi, Sasaki Sôichi, Kawakami Eijirô, Yanaihara Tadao, Nanbara Shigeru, Iwanami Shigeo, Tsuda Sôkichi, Amano Teiyô, Abe Yoshishige, Hisamatsu Shin’ichi, Miki Kiyoshi, Tanabe Hajime, Kôyama Iwao, Kôsaka Masaaki, and Watsuji Tetsurô. These figures were regarded as liberal, pro-democracy, and pro-individualism, and thus “dangerous,” in the eyes of the ultranationalists.

One of the leading figures in the Japan Principle Society, Minoda Muneki, first reacted against the popularity of Nishida’s philosophy in 1927.³⁸ Within a decade his criticisms had turned into an all-out attack against a “dangerous” thinker who posed a “threat to the ultranationalists’ agenda.” By then ultranationalists in general had begun to interfere openly with free speech. Under their influence the Ministry of Education denounced liberal democracy thought as a form of “individualism” that put egoism ahead of national pride. Such amateurish, deliberate distortions became commonplace.

In a lecture delivered in 1938 Nishida drew laughter with the remark that things had gotten so far out of hand that “it has even become a crime nowadays to use the word world.”³⁹ He felt it important to avoid precipitous confrontation if there was to be any hope for the restoration of sanity and rationality. Accordingly, he advised young scholars like Kôsaka Masaaki to take care not to become a target of the ultranationalists.⁴⁰ For his own part, he found the attacks of Minoda irritating and ignorant. He wrote to a former student, Mutai Risaku, that he would do his best “not to become a target of those mad dogs.”⁴¹

But the nightmare continued to become reality. In February 1940 the Minoda camp turned its sights on Tsuda Sôkichi, a scholar of ancient Japanese history, and succeeded in bringing him and his publisher, Iwanami Shigeo, to trial. Nishida’s own Problem of Japanese Culture was published the

³⁸ 西田博士の認識論を謬ず [Critique of Dr. Nishida’s epistemology], The Japan Principle, 7–14. Minoda accused Nishida’s thought of being “static,” of “not having gone beyond the realm of idealistic metaphysics,” and of “lacking the power to guide the new era.” He found it “sad that such a philosophical system should be considered representative of modern Japanese philosophy,” and attributed Nishida’s popularity to ideas he shared with “that despicable Marxist ideology.”
³⁹ NKZ 14:396.
⁴¹ No. 1243 (4 July 1938), NKZ 19:30. See also his letter to Takizawa Katsumi 高沢克己, No. 1248 (11 July 1938), NKZ 19:33.
following month by Iwanami Bookstore, but its attenuated language saved it from a similar fate. In it he tried to argue for a non-Eurocentric perspective from which to view contemporary world culture and to consider the role that Japan has to play. Given the power of the ultranationalists to mobilize the thought police, Nishida had to be more careful than usual and complained of the harassment of the ultranationalists. Later he would compare the mood of the times to the burning of books during the Qin period in China.

Nishida on War

On a humanistic level, Nishida of course deplored the suffering and devastation that always accompany armed warfare. But intellectually he recognized the role that conflict has had to play in the unfolding of history:

> The more the world becomes unified as a total environment, the more “horizontal” relationships give way to “vertical” ones. The struggle between one subjectivity and another cannot be avoided. History is the story of racial struggles.

Nishida did not question the legitimacy of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, the first war to mobilize the Japanese people as a nation. But it was this war that brought him face to face with the absurdity of armed conflict, for it cost him the lives of a dear friend and of his own younger brother. Nishida’s way of dealing with the shock was to take up his pen and compose moving tributes to the two loved ones. These pieces, published in local newspapers, tried to justify the deaths by appealing to the governmental propaganda that “if the power of our country is extended to East Asia as a result of this war, and if the bodies of the fallen become the foundation of a new empire,” then somehow they have not died in vain. But his heart was far from the official explanation. He was devastated and fell into a deep depression from which he did not emerge until a year later.

On 2 January 1905, when the news of the fall of Port Arthur reached Japan, Nishida wrote in his diary that he, too, “could not help feeling the euphoria.” But he was deep into Zen practice at the time and the clarity of

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42 The work sold 40,000 copies right after its publication, attesting to the popular demand for Nishida’s work. It is contained in volume 12 of Nishida’s *Collected Works*.
44 NKZ 12:375.
45 NKZ 13:170.
46 See his letter to Yamamoto of 8 March 1905, No. 47, NKZ 18:66.
47 NKZ 17:129.
insight this brought him seems to have kept him from sharing in the victory celebrations. His diary reads:

This afternoon I sat in meditation. At noon there was a rally in the park to celebrate the fall of Port Arthur. I could hear people shouting “Banzai!” They are going to have a lantern procession this evening to celebrate the occasion. How fickle the heart to give itself to such foolish festivities! People don’t think about the many lives that were sacrificed and about the fact that the war has still a long way to go before it ends.48

His mixed emotions reached beyond the popular reaction to the political arena as well. As a Japanese, Nishida was pleased with the final victory, but he was also noticeably irritated by the settlement Japan’s statesmen had secured. At the same time, his diaries speak of the need for a “self-reform” that goes beyond the political arena:

The most courageous act is to conquer oneself. There is no greater enterprise than self-reform and self-improvement. It surpasses the control of Manchuria. The Way and scholarship—these are my enterprise.49

The next armed conflict to engage the entire nation of Japan was the Pacific War of 1941–1945. Nishida had already been concerned about the escalation of the war in China when Navy Captain Takagi Sōkichi, who was in charge of a “think tank” made up of able-minded persons, approached him for a philosophical perspective that he might use to give direction to the Navy. For some time already the Army and Navy had been at loggerheads for control of Japanese military policy. Nishida complied, hoping that in some way his ideas might help influence the course of events. The association between the Kyoto school and the Navy may be said to have begun with a meeting that Harada Kumao arranged on 18 February 1939. Nishida spoke about the Japanese spirit, the pressures being brought to bear on state universities, and political negotiations with China.50 Takagi called on Nishida at his home in Kamakura in September 1939, and it was probably on this occasion that he asked Nishida’s collaboration. Nishida recommended Kōyama Iwao, a former student teaching at the University of Kyoto, as someone who could take part in the efforts of the Navy.51 This is how the Kyoto school members came to collaborate with the Navy’s think tank.

48 NKZ 17:130.
49 NKZ 17:134.
Nishida saw Takagi only twice in 1943. In 1944, when the Ministry of Education’s “Thought Inquisition” (思想審議会) had begun to scrutinize Nishida’s writings as “unpatriotic,” Takagi was able to intervene on his behalf. The final report of the committee found Nishida and his fellow Kyoto philosophers innocent of the charges.52

Despite the efforts made by the more level-headed among the nation’s statesmen and intellectuals, and despite the emperor’s own resistance to go to war, movements within the military to launch war against the United States had gained too much momentum to stop. As mentioned, Nishida was critical of the Japanese military campaign in China. He was also worried about his son Sotohiko, who was in Tsitsihar (Qiqihaer) at the time. But in any case, Nishida was opposed to the Pacific War and predicted that Japan would eventually be defeated. It was an open secret among top statesmen, Navy officers, and a handful of intellectuals, that Japan lacked sufficient oil reserves to carry on a campaign against the United States for any longer than six months, a year at best. On 18 October Tōjō Hideki was appointed prime minister and within two months Japan had declared war against the United States. This gave the warmongers the chance they had been waiting for to test their strength. Nishida learned of the declaration of war in the Kyoto Prefecture Hospital, where he had been admitted shortly before for treatment of acute rheumatism.

Nishida on the New World Order

In March of 1943, Nishida was visited by Yatsugi Kazuo, a member of the Center for National Strategy. This meeting led to his meeting with military officials. There are conflicting reports as to why Nishida agreed to do so. Furuta Hikaru, who has tried to sort out the facts, concludes that Yatsugi was told by Kanai Shōji of rumors that Nishida was under the secret surveillance of the military police and might be arrested. Kanai’s aim, as an admirer of Nishida, was to prevent this from happening. He thus arranged for Yatsugi to visit Nishida under the pretext of asking him to write his views regarding the Japanese situation in East Asia, and possibly to draft a blueprint of the proclamation of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere that the Tōjō government might use for a Greater East Asia Meeting scheduled to be held in November of that year.53


53 古田 光 Furuta Hikaru, 「世界新秩序の原理」事件考 [Thoughts on the “Principles for a new world order” incident], supplements to NKZ 14 and 19.
Although Nishida’s first reaction at the visit was one of anger, after he had time to think the matter over he acceded to the request, perhaps reckoning that it would not be an altogether bad thing if some of his ideas could seep into the military. At the meeting, which was held on 19 May, Nishida criticized the position of the government for exploiting the countries of southern and eastern Asia. Yatsugi told Nishida of the rumor that the secret police might try to arrest him. Those present promised not to let such a thing happen. Yatsugi recalls: “I was relieved. It seemed the professor was also relieved. But he only nodded slightly with no word of thanks, without even so much as a ‘I wish you well.’ I was impressed.”

In the following week, Nishida was asked to write up the gist of his comments that evening. Troublesome as it was, he complied with a paper entitled “Principles for a New World Order,” which was submitted on 28 May. It turned out to be too difficult for the military officials to understand, and was returned with a request that it be rewritten. This only infuriated Nishida all the more. Tanabe Juri, a sociologist specializing in French thought who had served as the go-between for these negotiations, undertook the rewriting himself. He finished the work in a few days—“simplifying” the original, as he said, “so that it would make sense to the military officials.” The edited version was then passed on to Yatsugi, who had it mimeographed and copies passed on to the prime minister, ministers and vice-ministers of the Army and Navy, the minister of foreign affairs, and to a few others.

It is hardly surprising that the edited text lacked the subtlety of the original. A few days later, Tanabe brought twenty copies of the mimeographed pamphlet to Nishida, who sent copies to Hori and Watsuji for comment. He did not seem to object strongly to the editorial work. His concern was rather, as he wrote to Hori, that its basic ideas might influence a speech that Tōjō was preparing on the topic: “I am not very certain as to how much impact all of this will have on the speech scheduled for tomorrow,… but I tried to bring out the dimension of universality present in the Japanese spirit.” As it turned out, Nishida was “disappointed” to read Tōjō’s speech in the newspaper and see that virtually nothing of his vision had found its way into it.

56 No. 1780 (14 June 1943), NKZ 19:243.
57 The remark appears in a letter to Watsuji of 23 June, No. 1784, NKZ 19:245. Nishida reworked his talk on his own and the final version is contained in NKZ 12:426–34. For the background of this piece, see my “Fashion and Aletheia: Philosophical Integrity and Wartime Thought Control,” 比較思想研究 16 (1989): 281–94.
The last essay Nishida wrote on current affairs was published in 1944 under the title “The State and National Polity.” He had not intended to publish it, but since its existence was already known to those in the government, he thought it better to express himself openly than to provoke further suspicion.58

**Nishida on Japan’s Spiritual Reawakening**

Nishida sensed the end of the war was near as the year 1945 rolled around. He wrote to D. T. Suzuki that he took heart in the example of the Israelites who survived the Babylon captivity by strengthening their spirituality. Convinced that “a people who identifies its pride with arms is destroyed by arms,”59 he believed that the Japanese people would be able to lift themselves up out of defeat only if they could continue to believe in themselves. A letter to Hisamatsu Shin’ichi dated 12 April 1945 reiterates the point:

> The war situation is getting worse at such a quick tempo. This is the autumn of Japan, which may lose its very existence as a country…. We have to make a renewed effort in the intellectual arena by putting the notion of national polity on a more spiritually elevated plane, instead of identifying national confidence with military might alone and identifying the national polity with the military…. Even if the worst happens, if the people have a deep faith in the lofty spiritual national polity, we will certainly rise again and there will come a time when we can make great progress.60

Less than a month later, on 7 June, Nishida died of nephritis. He did not live to see the end of the war.

**EVALUATION**

As we remarked earlier, Nishida’s 1917 essay “On Things Japanese” argued for the universal dimension of Japanese culture—that the Japanese tradition can be understood and appreciated by those of other traditions, and vice-versa. The position seems to have strengthened as time went on. Sometime around 1937 Nishida began to respond concretely to the social, political, and historical issues of the day, turning a philosophical eye to such specific questions as the imperial family, national polity, and the state. In this connection

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58 See, for instance, No. 2057 to 沢瀬久敬 Omodaka Hisayuki (5 December 1944), and No. 2058 to 木村索衛 Kimura Motomori (6 December 1944), NKZ 19:356–7.

59 No. 2194 (11 May 1945) NKZ 19:426.

60 No. 2181, NKZ 19:417–8.
he tried to redefine expressions created by the ultranationalists or used as slogans by the militarists: “the Japanese spirit, “the participation of all,” “the essence of national polity,” “all the world under one roof,” “the way of the emperor,” and “holy war.”

One has to wonder why Nishida would venture out into such an open minefield, and this in turn raises the possibility that his thought was in fact inherently nationalistic. On the basis of the argument laid out in the foregoing pages and the background material amassed in its preparation, I can only conclude that Nishida’s aim was to present an alternative to the nationalism of his day. As a philosopher he sought to give different, more reflective meaning to words and ideas that had been expropriated by the right. Let it suffice to single out a few representative passages from his writings where it should be clear that Nishida was trying, in his own way, to relieve the tensions that ultranationalistic elements had built up in the Japanese people and to promote clear thinking about the future of the country. I organize my remarks around some of the key words indicated above.

“All the world under one roof”

We may begin with the slogan, *hakkō ichiu* (or *hakkō iu*), “all the world under one roof.” The term had become so much a catchphrase of the nationalists that the mere fact of using it at all seems to place Nishida in their camp. What Nishida is about, however, is closer to what Ueda Shizuteru has called the “semantic struggle” of pitting his philosophical vision against the irrational forces of ultranationalism. In *The Problem of Japanese Culture*, for instance, he argued that as an island country Japan had developed in relative isolation from the rest of the world for thousands of years. It had become a world unto itself. But that world has ceased to exist. Japan is no longer a string of secluded islands lying in the eastern seas. It is “in” a larger world and must open up itself to that world. It cannot afford to become a subjectivistic power unto itself. “To make Japan ‘subjective’ is in effect to turn the ‘Way of the emperor’ into a form of hegemony and imperialism.”

Nishida recognized that there was no single power that ruled Japan from one epoch to the next. The controls shifted hands with the passage of time, even though the imperial family was always present in the background as a kind of axis around which history unfolded itself. Throughout most of Japan’s history, its emperors did not come to the political fore, but their pres-

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61 NKZ 12:341. Nishida used the word 主体的 *subjective* in a negative sense here.

62 Examples of “the subjective” in Japanese history, according to Nishida, include the Soga clan, the Fujiwara Family, the Taira Family, the Minamoto Family, the Hōjō Family, the Ashikaga Family, and the Tokugawa Family (NKZ 12:335–6.).
ence was always felt. Nishida finds this visible kind of ongoing presence amidst the changes of history significant and reckons it a kind of “principle of the self-formation of the contradictory self-identical world itself.” What Japan has to bring to the international community is a heritage of continuity symbolized in the way of the emperor, which is “the true meaning of the phrase, hakkô ichiu.”

Nishida was, of course, well aware of the current connotations of the phrase hakkô ichiu. He knew that it had been taken over as a slogan to rally support for a grand union of the countries of eastern Asia. He tried to rehabilitate the term by making it serve a broader philosophical and political perspective. Lest his intentions be mistaken, he seasoned his comments with direct and harsh criticisms of current military policies. The military, for its part, was in no position to reject Nishida’s appropriation of their vocabulary, since they themselves had insisted all along that their true aim was “the liberation of Asian countries from European and American colonialists,” and their “motivation was not one of imperialism.” At the same time, in his accusations of “hegemony” and “expansionism,” “ethnocentric egoism,” and “imperialism” Nishida made no attempt to disguise his ire at the activities of the militarists.

In an addendum to his article, originally entitled “The State and the National Polity,” Nishida used the phrase hakkô ichiu in speaking of the historical foundation of Japan as a country through reference to episodes from the Kojiki and Nihongi. In his view, this radical historicity of Japan is a defining characteristic of its national character or kokutai:

It is only in virtue of the fact that the Japanese national polity, as the creative modality of the formation of the historical world, contains a principle of the formation of the world that a principle of the formation of an East Asian world can emerge from it. This is how we need to think about hakkô ichiu.

In “Principles for a New World Order,” Nishida locates the true significance of hakkô ichiu in the global interaction of ethnic-nations, each seeking to secure its own independence in order to contribute to the formation of world history. “This is what Japan’s ideal of hakkô ichiu must be,” he concludes. In short, the ideal of “bringing everything under one roof” is not a nationalist slogan for Nishida, but the expression of a principle aimed at realizing a global unity

63 In this sense, Nishida describes the imperial family as a “being of non-being” (無の有), NKZ 12:336), as an “absolute present” (340), and as “the alpha and omega” (409).

64 NKZ 12:341.


66 NKZ 12:419.
of independent countries. And this principle is already present in the unfolding of Japanese history.\textsuperscript{67}

\textit{East Asian Union}

Nishida treated the related slogans of “creating a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” and “Japan as the leader of East Asia” in similar fashion. In \textit{The Problem of Japanese Culture} he argued that there are things in the culture of Japan that can be “exported” to the West with pride. To illustrate his point, he quotes Bruno Taut’s praise of the simple beauty of the buildings of the Ise Shrine. He takes the occasion to reiterate his view that the age of isolationism is over for Japan, that it has now become a world power in the Rankean sense of the term. Thus the most pressing issue for Japan is how to maintain its traditional past and at the same time open itself to the rest of the world:

Japanese culture exhibits its flexibility in the manner of [Dōgen’s] “dropping off of body-mind, body-mind dropped off.” This means that Japan is not one subjectivity standing over against others, but rather that it embraces other subjectivities \textit{as a world}. It means building a single world at one with concrete reality in a contradictory self-identical way. This is where I see the mission of Japan in building up East Asia. If it is merely one subjectivity pitted against others, seeking either to negate the others or to assimilate them, it is nothing more than imperialism. That is not what the Japanese spirit is about.\textsuperscript{68}

It is not clear from the above just how Japan is to embrace other subjectivities constructively. Nishida is more forthright about Japan’s role of leadership in his “Principles for a New World Order.” Noting the oppression that Asian countries have suffered under the siege of Western colonial powers, he argues that the time has come for each country to be awakened to its own mission in the world, and that to this end a regional unity of the countries of eastern Asia will enable them to assert their independence and fulfill that historical role in the new emerging order of things. This is how he understood the “principle of the constitution of an East Asia co-prosperity sphere.” It means Asian countries combining strengths to uphold ideals different from those of European and American countries, and thus to become actors rather than mere victims in the making of world history:

For a regional world to take shape, it is necessary for one country to assume a central position and shoulder the responsibility. In East Asia,

\textsuperscript{67} NKZ 12:428.

\textsuperscript{68} NKZ 12:430.
Japan is the only country for this. In the same way that the victory of Greeks against the Persians determined the course of the culture of Europe all the way up to the present, the outcome of the Greater East Asia War taking place today will in retrospect be seen to have given a certain direction to world history.69

What does Nishida mean by singling out Japan as the only country able to bear the burden of central leadership among the countries of eastern Asia? Given his tough criticisms of the activities of Japan’s military as exploitation and imperialism, as well as his wish that Japan not become a “power in control” of Asia, it is hard to interpret his words as meaning that he supported a cultural dominance backed up by military might. It is more logical to read these lines as a call for Japan to return to the humaneness and morality of its original national spirit, to lay down its arms and only then to presume to guide its Asian neighbors into a new era. One may dismiss the idea as romantic. One may even argue that in some sense Nishida is paying lip service to the ideals of ultranationalism by giving Japan a privileged position in the scheme of things. Or yet again, one may read it as a plea for the restoration of humanity to politics and the restoration of a Japanese spirit that had gone astray.

As with not a little of Nishida’s writing, the variety of interpretations is due not only to the ambivalence of the text but to the presuppositions that the reader brings to it. From our present position, we may wish for Nishida to have been clearer. At the time, he seems to have been testing the limits of free expression with that very same ambiguity.

Kokutai 国体

Nishida’s most problematic remarks on kokutai or national polity70 are to be found in his essay on “The State and National Polity.” Here, too, he seems to be arguing on two levels, the general and particular. Speaking first in general terms, Nishida reasons that “the national polity is the personality of state,” which means that every state has its national polity. For Nishida, the state emerges from ethnic groups that have evolved beyond the level of a biological race to the self-awareness of unity as a world. In other words, ethnic groups have to transcend their ethnic identity in order to become a state. The state, meantime, becomes a moral and rational entity to the extent that it mirrors the world within itself. At the same time, when the state is based on an

69 NKZ 12:429.

70 Woodard, The Allied Occupation of Japan, 11, notes that this word can be translated “national entity,” “national structure,” “fundamental character of the nation,” or more commonly “national polity.”
exclusive ethnocentrism, it becomes imperialistic and expansionist, and ceases to be a state in the true sense of the word. In this sense, “nationalism” for Nishida means a racial egoism that does not belong to the state.\(^7\)

If national polity is to provide a model for moral action, it must do so in the light of “absolute reality.” The best means to do so, Nishida argued, is to keep in touch with the country’s historical unfolding. “It is at this radically historic dimension of our existence that we encounter the divine, and it is there that we ground our attempts to be rational.”\(^7\)

Turning to the particular level, Nishida goes so far as to conclude that “in the highest sense of the term, no other country has what we call kokutai.” Later he adds:

The Japanese kokutai captures the essence of the idea of kokutai as that which makes up the historical world; what the Japanese people think of when they hear the word has no counterpart in any foreign language.\(^7\)

This is a strong claim, certainly much stronger than Nishida tried to substantiate by sustained historical or philosophical argument. To read it in the weak sense that only in Japan does one find a “Japanese” kokutai is conciliatory but hardly fair to the context. We have no choice but to read his words as a statement of his personal conviction that the historical bonds between the national polity and the imperial family as found in Japan is somehow normative for the notion of “national polity” itself. Since this brings us as close as we come in Nishida to a nationalistic ideology, it bears pausing for a moment to consider his intentions.

In contrast to the popular views being advocated by the ultranationalists that the essence of the Japanese kokutai is its “family-like” feature, Nishida emphasizes the historical founding of Japan by imperial decree. The shift of emphasis away from current social structures to past fact opens the way to a truly religious dimension. His aim is not to sacralize present strategies but to desacralize them by locating the sacred in a larger landscape. This larger landscape is what he understands by kokutai.\(^7\) However Nishida might have developed this initial intuition in its general and particular aspects, it is clear that he consistently opposed the identification of kokutai with military strength and insisted that the true roots of national polity lie deep in our common humanity.

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\(^7\) NKZ 12:403–4.
\(^7\) NKZ 12:408.
\(^7\) NKZ 12:410, 415.
\(^7\) NKZ 12:417–9.
To the end Nishida left no doubt of his dissent against Japan’s expansionist policies in Asia. His vision of Japan as part of the world community was one with his love for his country, and it was out of this vision and this love that he called for a reawakening of conscience, rationality, and above all spiritual depth. His concern for the future of Japan was not a matter of abstract philosophical categories but of living realities of very concrete consequence. When he locked horns with nationalistic ideologues, he did so in the language of the day. Rather than invent a new vocabulary that would rise above the fray, he took up the jargon and slogans of the day and sought to redeem them from their petty provincialism by opening them up to a more universal perspective. Whether and to what extent he succeeded may not be as important for us today as the fact that he tried to sound a note of conscience and rationality amidst the tumultuous fanaticism all around him. In such circumstances, any attempt to address the immediate political issues of Japan philosophically was bound to invite misunderstanding, particularly for later generations left with only written texts to go by. Had he never left the realms of pure philosophy, our task as interpreters might have been easier. Easier, but somehow less than real.