Japan was forced to open her doors to the West in 1853 after more than 200 years of relative isolation. After the restoration in name if not in fact of imperial rule shortly thereafter in 1868, the founding fathers of modern Japan, all influential former samurai, were convinced of the necessity of creating a militarily strong, united nation. This meant that in the long run she had to overcome the Western Powers with their lead in technology. The goal was to achieve recognition as an equal and finally to defeat the encroaching Europeans and Americans with their own weapons. The modernization of the new Meiji state therefore had a defensive thrust from the beginning. Modernizing activities were concentrated in the areas of defense and heavy industry and also in education.

The two most influential nations in Asia at that time — Great Britain and the United States — appeared to be natural models for the future development of Japan. English speaking clerks (gaihō) consequently wielded uncommon authority in the 1870’s. Only after the Satsuma Rebellion in 1877, when the inadequate training of the army became evident and when the debate over a constitution raged, did the new Prussian-oriented German State begin to interest the Japanese. Around 1880 Japan gradually turned toward Germany and away from Great Britain, the US and France in its search for appropriate western prototypes to emulate. The conclusive decision came on 12 October 1881 with the promise of a constitution: The constitution, to be promulgated in 1889, was to be modeled on the German-Prussian constitution.

The foundation in Tōkyō of a Japanese "Society for the Propagation of German Science“ (Gesellschaft für Verbreitung deutscher Wissenschaft) in January 1882 came, apparently by chance, at the beginning of the "German-phase“ in Japan’s modernization. This phase culminated in the area of government with the promulgation of the Meiji Constitution on 11 February 1889 and in ideology and education with the announcement of the Imperial Edict on Education on 30 October 1890. The era of reforms, experimenting with western models, came to an end with a clear preference for Prussian solutions to existing problems — the restoration of the emperor and support for the traditions which this institution represented.

German experts were inclined for the most part to state constitutionalism. As academic socialists ("Kathedersozialisten") who advocated a socially oriented, enlightened monarchy they helped to secure the rule of a small elite group, former samurai from Satsuma and Chōshū. This coterie was interested not only in the modernization of Japan, but also in maintaining their privileged status. The measures they enacted reveal their lack of concern for the large majority of people living on farms in the provinces for whom the harsh system of taxation caused considerable suffering. Reform consistently meant for the oligarchy and their supporters — large land owners and big business (zaibatsu) — imperial restoration and the exclusion of the people from the political policy making process. The "German measles", as the deposed paragons of modernity, the English, were fond of cynically calling Japanese blind adoption of everything German, was indeed a highly contagious and finally near fatal disease. Germans transmitted to the Japanese an authoritarian system of government and helped to create an ideological superstructure for it. In 1895 however, Berlin undid much she had accomplished in Japan: the "Triple intervention" of Russia, France and Germany opposing Japanese claims on the Liaotung Peninsula had lasting negative effects on Germany's lofty status there. The contracts of most of the German guest experts were allowed to run out in the late Meiji Period, and they abandoned the country leaving behind an alien political and intellectual legacy.

The Society for the Propagation of German Science was a gathering of the small band of former students who in the early Meiji Period had studied in Berlin. Some of these men — General Katsura Taro (1848-1913) later three times Prime Minister, Sato Susumi (n.d.) first Surgeon General of the Imperial Army, and Hirata Tōsuke (1849-1925) politician and bureaucrat later Minister of Agriculture and Commerce and Home Ministerial — already held leading positions in the government. Imperial Prince Kitashirakawa (1847-1895), who posed a threat to the ruling oligarchy as a potential alternative to the reigning emperor, also had been obliged to spend seven years in exile in Berlin. There he had studied military science, and now he appeared to be a prime candidate for the presidency. According to the rules of this Society, only Japanese with a good knowledge of German could become full members. The main purpose of this group was to organize educational establishments in Japan modeled on those in Germany, and to translate and disseminate German scientific works. It was already policy to have the entire government become in effect honorary members of the Society. Japan's collective bow toward Germany could hardly have been more appropriately expressed. The number of Japanese studying German culture, science and politics rose, and two years later the Society founded a school in Tōkyō. However, more time was necessary to spread German language and thought. The national awakening accompanying the Meiji Restoration brought about a more ready acceptance of the drama about freedom "William Tell" and the poem about deception and trickery "Reinecke the Fox", the first German works translated into Japanese. Japan's leaders, influenced by English and French culture, were not well enough informed to appreciate and accept highly intellectual literature or treatises heavily laden with theory. The immediate effects of the founding of the group were therefore not so much in the area of culture.
The association of all Japanese experts on Germany in a particular society was primarily of political importance. The united effort of this small group of specialists was urgently needed to guide previously announced, and projected future reforms. The government was well aware of the consequences of adopting the Prussian constitution as a model for their own. The entire administration, especially the Ministries of Justice and Education, was to be newly organized as stipulated in the new constitution and this was to be accomplished simultaneously with the drafting of that document. Shortly after the founding of the Society the head of the "German Party", Itô Hirobumi (1841–1909), inquired through the diplomatic delegation in Berlin into the possibility of his leading a special mission to study the German parliamentary and school systems. Itô supported his request with the explanation that the Japanese were impressed by the purposeful nature of these German institutions and their suitability for Japan. The Japanese Foreign Minister also spoke publicly about the deeper political meaning of this reorientation favouring Germany: He and the majority of his colleagues regarded German culture and education along with her institutions as the most appropriate, "for the propagation in Japan of feelings of loyalty and patriotism and to resist already strong ultraliberal tendencies."

Earlier the Japanese had looked to the United States, but very little of use had come from that country. They only expected undesirable influences from contemporary France. Likewise, restoration leaders were not favourably impressed by the situation in England and Ireland.

The choice was clear: The Japanese regarded the young, aspiring Imperial German Reich as the model of an orderly nationstate with a patriotic folk loyal to its monarch. Itô traveled to continental Europe with a nine member delegation in 1882. During his three months’ stay in Berlin he attended lectures given by the political scientist Rudolf von Gneist (1816–1895), and conferred with Prussian politicians. The German academic expressed doubts in numerous consultations about the feasibility of adopting the German constitution, given the completely different customs and practices in Japan. A constitution was not just a set of rules. It was the living soul of a state, von Gneist maintained remaining entirely true to the German idealist tradition. On the other hand, von Gneist advised his attentive guest not to give parliament control over the budget, especially military expenditures. Emperor Wilhelm also pointed out to the Japanese statesman this weakness in the Prussian-German constitution. He advised strongly that constitutional conflicts like the one he had experienced at the beginning of his rule should be avoided by including appropriate clauses in the Japanese statutes. In fact, Article 67 of the latter constitution significantly limited the budgetary powers of the parliament, and in Article 71 the so-called Bismarck continuance theory, whereby the preceding year’s budget continued into the following year when a new one was not enacted, was included in the Japanese document. Lorenz von Stein (1815–1890), Professor of Constitutional Law in Kiel, after 1855 in Vienna, introduced Itô to the idea of a social monarchy in Vienna. Back in Berlin Albert Mosse (1846–1925), a Prussian judge and advisor to the Japanese Cabinet from 1886 to 1890 explained to him the Prussian system of local self-government. On his way back to Tôkyô Itô met with the future Minister of Education Mori Arinori (1847–1889) in Paris to discuss the reform of the Japanese school system along Prussian lines. Upon
arrival in Japan he assumed the post of Imperial Household Minister. With this appointment, Itō occupied the most important political post at court complimenting his strong position within the Chōshū dominated government. Seeing himself as "the Japanese Hardenberg" (Karl August Fürst von Hardenberg (1750–1822), the statesman responsible for the reforms undertaken in Prussia, 1806–1815), Itō intended to implement his "revolutionary" program against the opposition of the conservative traditionalists at court and the liberal politicians.

In 1884 Hermann Roesler (1834–1894), a German expert on constitutional law already in Japan, had his contract extended. He became, in effect, Itō's private secretary for constitutional affairs. Roesler served in this capacity for sixteen years, drafting 160 juridical position papers and was the only foreigner who was called upon personally to advise the government on constitutional matters. Contrary to Itō, the German legal expert did not want to include the myth about the divine origins of the Japanese emperor in the constitution. Roesler also was in favour of limiting the emperor's prerogatives as supreme commander of the military, and he wanted to anchor powers of taxation and the enactment of laws in the parliament. Had he prevailed, the Japanese constitution would have been more democratic and modern than the German one, and the "Tennōcult" which strongly coloured Japanese ultranationalism in the 1930's and 40's would have been denied any legal foundation. Itō, however, wanted to retain the archaic imperial mythology as a sort of religious substitute — a state ideology as he himself called it — filling a role similar to that of Christianity in western states. The contradiction in the Meiji Constitution between western legal provisions and traditional Japanese content was invested in it from the very beginning.

The German advisor nevertheless had a decisive influence on the formulation of the law concerning the parliament and the creation of a secret state advisory council (Privy Council). This council stood above the parliament and functioned as a sort of control organ for the state. Upon Roesler's recommendation the leading expert in Germany on local selfgovernment legislation, the aforementioned Albert Mosse, was invited to Japan. Mosse was instrumental in devising the laws supplementing the constitution.

True to the assumptions of the Prussian reformer Karl Freiherr vom und zum Stein (1757–1831), whose biography the leaders of the government had translated into Japanese, Yamagata Aritomo (1838–1922) saw these local measures as a prerequisite to implementing his ideas about universal military conscription. The villages — the traditionbound, folkish centers of power — were to be mobilized against the quickly expanding cities. The latter were perceived as the source of all that was evil about modernism. As a result self-government in the cities was severely limited and the village was elevated in status as the true nucleus of the Japanese folk. The beginnings of an antimodern agrarianism was consciously propagated at this time by the military in order to block further development of liberalist tendencies, even before the constitution was promulgated.

Yamagata in the meantime assumed the post of Interior Minister. In order to secure control of the state's instruments of power he had the police reorganized to conform with the Prussian system. The German police officer Captain Wilhelm
Hoehn (d. 1893), in Japan from 1885 to 1891, trained an elite core for the fledgling Japanese police force in Tókyó. They immediately served to guarantee law and order in the new capital. Together with another official from the Prussian Ministry of Justice Captain Hoehn also reorganized the entire Japanese prison system. Endeavoring to revise the unequal consular treaties forced upon Japan, which provided for a separate judicial system for foreigners, the prisons were to be brought up to western standards. In light of the extremely low crime rate, the prisons were also made ready to accept political criminals. With the engagement of an additional Prussian court chamberlain to institute German etiquette at the imperial court, all necessary preparations for the coming imperial proclamation seemed to be in order.

In 1889 the emperor, henceforth officially a god, promulgated the constitution according to Prussian court ceremony on the mythical founding day of the imperial dynasty (11 February). The western facade was now in place. However, despite numerous security measures serious disorders arose with the opening of the parliament in Tókyó. At this time the German Minister to Tókyó reported on various negative experiences with the constitution and, hopefully according to him, its impending abrogation. The young German emperor (William II) then commented reflecting similar frustrations of his own, "the donkeys in Japan, [its abrogation] would be by far the most sensible course and will hopefully soon come to pass". With respect to their reservations about the parliament and granting more rights to the people, government leaders in Germany and Japan, inclined to militarism, were of one mind.

Several weeks after the inauguration of the lower house the parliament building, which had been designed by a Berlin architect in Wilhelmine style, burned down. Due to the infirm (swampy) terrain and short construction time it was built of wood. The investigation into the origin of the fire was inconclusive. The burning of the Japanese parliament building in 1891, similar to the Reichstag blaze in Berlin later, was a "straw fire" symbolic of the parabolic enthusiasm for parliamentary government in both nations.

The new constitution guaranteed further unrestrained expansion and inner improvement of the armed services. Stubborn resistance by French military advisors stationed in Japan since the close of the Tokugawa Shogunate prevented, however, quick implementation of Prussian military standards. French was normally the only foreign language which higher military officers understood; French was the language of the drill fields; officer training was conducted at a school modeled on the French academy at St. Cyr. A radical change would have disconcerted the troops who, due to a lack of qualified officers, were undisciplined. This in turn would have weakened their none too effective fighting ability. Chōshū military leaders therefore opted for a compromise: The French should remain as instructors for the troops, which was agreeable to them because of the Japanese passive acceptance of their guidance. Orders were to be given in accord with Prussian field-service regulations. In this way the mass of recruits and noncommissioned officers were molded into unquestioning, obedient soldiers. Officers on the other hand, were to be educated in the Prussian style of troop command with its tradition of individual responsibility.
The ideological indoctrination of the military services with traditional values a mixture of Chinese Confucian norms and Japanese bushidō was an important base for spreading these doctrines throughout society. The army became the "primary school" of the nation, and was elevated to the position of guarantor of state authority, centered in the emperor. The Imperial Rescript for Soldiers and Sailors drafted by Yamagata and promulgated by the Emperor on January 2, 1882 brought together for the first time the basic elements of the future "Tennō-ideology". The spiritual foundation for the planned political superstructure was now in place. At this time Army Minister Oyama Iwao (1842–1916) and his fifteen man high-ranking military delegation were sent to Europe. It had been decided in the highest echelons of the government that they were to engage an outstanding Prussian general staff officer for training Japan's highest military officers in leading large military operations. The Japanese army, indoctrinated and disciplined, was to be prepared for a great war. Due to permanent tension over control of the Ryukyu Islands and Korea, this war undoubtedly would be with China.

Berlin responded to Japanese wishes through Helmuth Graf von Moltke (1800–1891), Chief of the Prussian (German) General Staff from 1855 to 1888, who ordered one of Germany's most talented staff officers, Major Jacob Meckel (1842–1906), to the war academy in Tōkyō. Meckel arrived in Japan early in 1885 and remained only three years. His individual influence was nonetheless the largest of any of the foreign experts. Installed in his new office by the Emperor personally, Meckel trained about 60 of Japan's senior officers in tactics, strategy, general staff duties, the historical dimensions of military science and Prussian military history. He was able to bring to bear during these training sessions his personal experience in the campaigns against Austria in 1866 and France in 1870. In contrast with the French instructors Meckel did not limit himself to theory. He required his students to translate theory into practice in manoeuvres staged under his direction. The Japanese army's coming victories in Korea and Manchuria were programmed in advance by the Prussian precision imparted through Meckel's schooling.

In 1886 when Katsura became Vice-Minister of War, Meckel was given the additional task of reforming the military along Prussian lines. From the very beginning these reforms were also made evident to ordinary soldiers. Uniforms, which until that time had been tailored like those of the French, were changed to nearly exact copies of Prussian army garb. Meckel, fulfilling his new assignment, drafted numerous memoranda designed to implement the strict, centralized command of a highly mobile army. Responding to his suggestions communications, supply and medical service units were reorganized. The system of conscription, which up to that time had been managed very arbitrarily, was newly systematized. Moreover, he composed reports on the basic concepts of national defense. These included improvement of coast defense fortifications, and the German firm Krupp with their sophisticated artillery products received a large number of orders. Meckel had an additional German officer instated at the war academy, and arranged for this officer to succeed him when he decided against extending his contract a second time. The officer remained in Japan until 1890, insuring that the training program continued to conform to Meckel's directives.

The division of responsibilities at the army's highest level of command — War
Minister, Chief of Staff, and Inspector General — is the Meckel measure which subsequently had the most serious consequences. This division of duties into three areas of competence — administration, troop command, and training — could only be correctly implemented when placed under the direction of a centralized system of leadership, e.g. the German emperor as supreme commander supported by a military cabinet. Since the role of the emperor in Japan was conceived differently, this Prussian system could not function well. Cooperation between the army and navy were difficult to begin with due to each being controlled by former samurai from different pre-Restoration provinces (han), and the army itself was split by constant factional rivalry. Meckel and Katsura did not take into account the basic features of the Japanese social order and its new factitious constitutional structure when they blindly adopted the Prussian military system. The personal rivalries engendered by it were intensified in Japan due to a lack of control from above.

The modern Japanese army was predominantly a product of Major Jacob Meckel’s personal work. When he departed the German Legation reported to Berlin that Meckel was by far the most successful German advisor who had come to Japan. Reports on manoeuvres conducted in later years confirmed this evaluation. The great imperial manoeuvres conducted by Japanese forces could just as well have been those of German troops in Germany. The real victor in the war with the Chinese in 1894/5 and the Russians in 1904/5 was, according to the Japanese officers trained by him, sensei Meckel.

The civilian schools of the nation lagged significantly behind those of the military, and in the 1890’s the army still had to give recruits a basic education before they could be trained to use modern weapons. Like the military, the school system had been modeled on the French one with the enactment of some basic laws in 1872. Eight educational districts were schematically laid out, each with a pyramid-like structure leading from elementary school to a university. Due to excessive emphasis on western teaching materials and inflexible centralized control this experiment failed after eight years of difficulty. The apprehensive educators then went to the other extreme: with the Education Ordinance of 1879 they introduced into Japan the American system. Unaccustomed to their new freedoms, both teachers and students found this system even less understandable than the content of the French educational materials. With the decision favouring a Prussian style constitution, this second experiment in education was terminated. The general disillusionment in Japan at that time with Americans apparently grew out of this failure in educational reform. Thereafter Prussia was the only model accepted and followed consistently by the Japanese.

During their meeting in Paris in March 1882 Itô, the father of the Japanese constitution, and Mori, the politician responsible for educational issues, agreed to introduce into Japan the dual Prussian system. Japanese bureaucrats in the Ministry of Education began to occupy themselves with a flood of German pedagogical writings supported by numerous German experts. The central importance of community (Gemeinschaft) and family life in the acquired instructional materials quickly drew their attention. Likewise the schooling techniques of Pestalozzi (Johann Heinrich, 1746–1826) and of Froebel (Friedrich, 1782–1852) corresponded well with Japanese inclinations. Japanese interest focused finally on the German
philosopher and pedagogue Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776–1841). His postulate that youth should be educated in the moral virtues through instruction, discipline, and direction (rigid structures) completely agreed with the predilections of the conservative reformers. In particular Herbart's five ethical ideals corresponded extremely well with the five norms of Confucian education (filial piety, love, harmony, modesty, benevolence). The German educator Emil Hausknecht (1853–1927), an expert on primary education, was appointed Professor at Tōkyō Imperial University for the purpose of transmitting this knowledge. There he trained Japan's future educators so thoroughly in Herbart's doctrines that they quickly came to be followed mechanically by rote. With the idea of promoting regulated school discipline Education Minister Mori also had the gymnastics of the "father of German gymnastics" Friedrich Ludwig Jahn (1778–1852) — sport as patriotism and military physical fitness training — introduced into the Japanese primary school curriculum.

The theoretical base of the Prussian education system was reviewed and found to be well suited to practical application in Japan. Minister Mori, who had been ordered back from his diplomatic post in Paris to assume direction of the Ministry of Education, promulgated a list of school ordinances in 1886. In agreement with the pedagogical maxim that primary education first and foremost should serve to disseminate a healthy patriotism among the masses, a policy vehemently advocated by Bismarck, ideological indoctrination was to be carried out from now on in the Japanese primary schools. Higher education contrasted sharply with that in the elementary grades. The dual system of Prussian schooling was faithfully copied, and the universities which were principally for the training of future state officials were granted, as in Prussia, the greatest possible freedom. Critical scientific study was encouraged. However, the social selection mechanism in both countries insured that children from the lower classes were with very few exceptions excluded from the halls of higher learning.

Promulgation of an imperial code of education binding on the entire nation was a natural consequence of the reform in content and structure of the entire area of education along conservative lines. The impulse to improve the moral education of the populace and to impart to all the feeling of belonging to a united country, came from Japanese education experts trained in Germany. The official commentary on the Imperial Rescript of Education for school children was composed by the philosopher Inoue Tetsujirō (1856–1944) who had just returned from six years of study in Berlin. Four million copies were published. The edict itself combined Confucian family ideals with the ultra-nationalistic virtues promoted in State-Shintō producing a code of behaviour with the emperor at its center. The Rescript was read daily until mid August, 1945, in every Japanese school before instruction began. The young subjects of His Majesty were required to stand and listen with heads bowed in the direction of the imperial palace. In this way it soon became an obligatory national confession of faith.

Laying the ideological and institutional foundations of an authoritarian state and social system in imperial Japan would have been impossible without German help and without the German faction in the government taking consequent recourse to German models. The Japanese oligarchy came to emulate Prussian
Germany of their own accord. German influence, solidly anchored in the constitution, the military and the education system could not be easily repudiated, because the leading elite and soon the Japanese people as well identified with it. In 1889 Meiji Japan stood definitively on German bedrock. A report from Theodor von Holleben, German Minister to Japan 1886–1889, summarizing the growth of German political influence through the work of a relatively small number of visiting experts, expressed the situation aptly: "No other nation has achieved anything like it. One can say Japan is by far more germanized internally than the other powers or the Japanese themselves realize."

The consequences of the "German endowment"—the few remaining German experts left Japan with the beginning of World War I—could not be foreseen by its Japanese custodians, nor did this bequest necessarily eventuate the juncture of the two nations' international political concerns in the late 1930's. Japan's participation in World War I on the side of the Allied Powers appeared to clearly contradict assumptions about a Japanese-German community of interests. Still, in 1917 the historian Ludwig Rieß (1861–1928), the founder of modern historical science in Japan who returned to Germany in 1902, presented a sound evaluation of the two countries strong similarities with regard to the military: "In light of their respect for duty, which is an integral aspect [of militarism], the Germans and Japanese can always find a common ground of agreement." (See also Rieß' memoirs, Allerlei aus Japan, 2 Vols. 1904 & 1908.)

Nevertheless, it was a long and difficult path, that cannot be described in detail here, which led eventually to the alliance of World War II, the Tripartite Pact of September 27, 1940. International power considerations, power politics between competing nations, undoubtedly accelerated the coupling process. Despite their many differences, Japan and Germany found themselves joined together on a collision course with the rest of the world.

The Japanese-German confrontation with the Allied Powers resulted in no small part from the internal affinity of these two "late developing nations." Both social systems were placed in quarantine by a leadership oriented toward preserving traditional rank and status privileges. Due to the neglect of internal reforms, because they endangered the old order, political achievements could only be realized in foreign affairs. Internal repression and, above all in Japan, economic hardship brought about a need for distractions abroad—a policy of aggression and plunder at the cost of neighbour nations. The ruling elite could most easily legitimize themselves through military triumphs. The Japanese victories over China (1895) and Russia (1905) strengthened the position of the Meiji rulers more than all their previous reform measures put together. By contrast, in World War I the German military machine clattered to a halt and was overturned. Yet, Japan's China policy paralleled in some ways original German war aims and pacification concepts in Europe. Japan attempted in the aftermath of the European war to acquire China as a protectorate. Therefore she found herself in the camp of Germany's adversaries, but only for temporary opportunistic reasons. Both entertained a long-range interest in large-scale territorial expansion and establishing political spheres of influence which ran directly counter to Allied policy. Beginning in 1917 secret Japanese-German negotiations were conducted to explore the possibility of a separate peace.
directed against the dominance of the Western Powers. The idea of an extended Eurasian land mass from a German Middle Europe to a Japanese East Asia, in which the ruins of the Russian state were forcibly integrated in one form or another, first surfaced during these talks. Originally these thoughts on geopolitical theory came from the German founder of this discipline, Karl Haushofer (1869–1946), who developed them only after a long period of detached duty with the Japanese army.

The political system of the victor nations in World War I, the two Anglo-American powers, was unacceptable to the Japanese. Internally Japanese leaders had no intention of extending more rights to the people, and externally they were not inclined to accept the new international order. That which "Versailles" meant to the Germans the Japanese associated with "Washington": the supremacy of western power politics and the predominance of Anglo-American commercial policies. At the Washington Conference (1922) Japan was forced under the combined pressure of the victor nations to relinquish her claims in China and abandon Tsingtao which she had taken from the Germans. Instead the Imperial Government was obliged to endorse the "Open Door Policy" in China, which singularly favoured the strongest economic powers — the United States and Great Britain.

Internally the Japanese were not enthusiastic about the parliamentary governments of the Allied countries. Since Meiji times this system had been continually discredited within Japan, and German conceptions of orderliness had been superimposed upon it. Despite the granting of universal manhood suffrage the political parties in Japan were even less able to influence policy making decisively than in the Weimar Republic. The masses, caught up in Tennô-ideology, lacked the fundamental political skills necessary for a party government to function correctly. Elected representatives were looked upon by the public as anti-social parasites. The Taishô Era (1912–1926), held in regard by many as a parliamentary interlude, remained a fiction for the most part, much as legislative government was accepted at best as a necessary evil in Weimar. In both countries the political parties basically caused their own downfall. They did not have a proper base, and their arguments against the existing social order were not convincing. In Germany this foreign intruder was eliminated in 1933, and in Japan much the same occurred under state direction in 1940. In both countries the "national community" (Volksgemeinschaft) rid itself of the "alien" hypocrisy of party politics.

Japan and Germany reacted to the world political and economic crisis in the late 1920's and early 30's in a remarkably similar manner: The nationalists in both countries, embodied by the armed forces, saw in the weakening of the Western Powers the possibility of freeing themselves from arms limitations and independently acquiring an expanded self-sufficient empire. In Japan acute distress among the farmers nurtured political radicalization which was articulated as a "Lebensraum" ideology. This was put into action in 1931 when the army overran Manchuria. Implied in the demand for a "Shôwa Restoration" was the complete overthrow of the existing social order and the establishment of a "people's monarchy". The leading elite, whose social and economic status was threatened, drastically reduced their support for the political parties and adopted some of the themes of this agrarian, anti-industrial Japanese-style facism. Kokutai, a nationalistic doctrine about the
essence of being Japanese centered on the emperor, was first given legal sanction in the Peace Preservation Law of 1925. Thereafter the promotion of socialist or even liberal theories was punishable by law. In the course of the trend toward political radicalization during the economic crisis of the late 1920's and early 1930's kokutai was made a state doctrine by the military which had come to dominate politics. It also became a palliative against all foreign, i.e. subversive, elements.

Economically the state intervened on a massive scale in Japan before Hitler and the German Minister of Commerce (1934–38) and President of the German Reichsbank (1933–39) Hjalmar Schacht (1877–1970) attempted comparable measures in Germany. With the help of new types of credit the economy was revived in accord with the wishes of the military — through armament programs. State control of economic life, constantly urged by national-socialist economic theorists in Japan and Germany, favoured one-sidedly military interests. The ideal of a social monarchy, once proposed by Lorenz von Stein and Rudolf von Gneist, was perverted by the pervasive power of a militaristic state.

National socialist ideology in Germany — the chosen race called to conquer the world — and the officially declared "Fundamentals of Our National Polity" (Kokutai no Hongi) in Japan were the outcome of historical developments in each nation. They were the culmination of an all encompassing ideology which led to self-destruction through war, and was carried on to the point of absurdity. Militaristic Japan and national socialist Germany wandered ever further from the international community of nations due to their radical national-totalitarian doctrines. Their isolation in world politics, resulting from related political structures and fascist ideologies, led them to converge militarily. The Anticomintern Pact (November 25, 1936) was regarded by military leaders in both countries as signaling opposition not only to the spread of communism but also to the worldwide English monopoly of political power. Slightly less than four years later it was expanded into a military alliance against the Anglo-Saxon nations.

The opposing fronts were already clear in 1940. The authoritarian camp and the western democracies had lined up opposite one another. Two incongruous ideological systems, in which values concerning individualism and economic activity were totally different, advanced into combat. At stake was the dominance of the world. In the Second World War the Japanese and Germans were defeated, and as a result of the Soviet victory over Germany in Eastern Europe communism emerged as a new world power. The special mission in world politics upon which Prussia first embarked, followed by Japan from the middle of the Meiji Era, was forcibly ended forever in 1945.

Japan, which social scientists and the Japanese themselves like to commend to late developing nations as their only viable model for modernization, stood in ruins at the end of World War II. The new political start and economic growth in Japan and West Germany after 1945 took place under completely different conditions subordinate, moreover, to the guidance of the American victors. A prerequisite for the postwar developments in both countries was their total defeat. The adoption of an alien culture, forced upon the Japanese since the opening of their country by Commodore Perry and his "black ships" in 1853, ended in 1945.
with unconditional surrender. Basically Japan capitulated to her own inability to adopt and integrate western ideas. Social similarities with Prussian Germany appeared to offer her a way to escape Anglo-Saxon domination and still emerge as a modernized nation. This acknowledgment though, was never reciprocated by German leaders who, from Bismarck to Hitler, never responded to the overtures of their Far Eastern counterparts. Japanese reliance on German models resulted nonetheless in catastrophe, as under Hitler the prototypical model transformed itself into an atypical monster staggering toward destruction and defeat. Japan as a guide to modernization has in the eyes of this historian reverse significance: she is a warning, a miscarriage resulting from onesided, blind acculturation.

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