

The Zen of Hitler Jugend

Brian Victoria

Introduction



Signing of Tripartite Pact

The Tripartite Pact linking Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and Imperial Japan was signed in Berlin on September 27, 1940. Less than two months after the pact was signed, a six-member delegation of *Hitler Jugend* (Hitler Youth) arrived in Japan. This was actually the second *Hitler Jugend* delegation to visit Japan, a much larger delegation having first visited in the fall of 1938. In honor of the first delegation's visit, a song was composed entitled *Banzai Hitorā Jūgento* (Long Live Hitler Youth!). A recording of this song together with photographs highlighting the activities of both the first and second delegations in Japan is embedded below.

The video can be downloaded [here](#).



Eihiji temple complex

Zen Master Dōgen

Members of the second delegation traveled to Daihonzan Eihei-ji for an overnight stay on November 19, 1940. Eihei-ji, located in the mountains of Fukui Prefecture, was established by Zen Master Dōgen, the founder of the Sōtō sect, in 1244 and is now one of the two head monasteries of the Sōtō sect, Japan's largest Zen sect. The accompanying photograph shows the *Hitler Jugend* seated in the front row surrounded by Eihei-ji's senior monastic officials, including the head of the monastery seated in the center. It was taken shortly before the delegation departed the monastery on the morning of November 20, 1940.



Hitler Jugend visiting Daihonzan Eihei-ji

The August 1942 issue of the Eihei-ji periodical *Sansho* included an article describing the instructions Hitler had personally given the delegation prior to departure:

When you are in Japan, there is no need for you to be concerned about Japanese culture. There is no need for you to research Japanese politics. There is no need to investigate Japan's economy. The only thing you need do is thoroughly experience the great spirit of the Japanese people that has arisen in their national polity.¹

To understand why Hitler so strongly

emphasized the need for German youth to understand "the great spirit of the Japanese people," we should recall that as early as his 1925 work *Mein Kampf*, Hitler wrote: "All force which does not spring from a firm spiritual foundation will be hesitating and uncertain."² Hesitating and uncertain force was the last thing Hitler needed in his future soldiers.

As far as Eihei-ji's leaders were concerned, there was no better place to learn the great spirit of the Japanese people than their monastery. In the same August 1942 article, Eihei-ji's head monk trainer, Zen Master Ashiwa Untei, described Eihei-ji's importance and its relationship to the young Nazis' visit:

Someone has said that Asia as a whole can be described as a training center for the human spirit. Europe, on the other hand, can be described as a learning center for the cultivation of knowledge. A characteristic of Asian spiritual culture is the training of the human spirit through the practice of *zazen* [seated meditation] and sitting quietly. It is for this reason that the latent energy of spiritual power grew out of Asia acting as a training center for disciplining the human spirit. . . .

The foundation of a nation's destiny, like the development of a person, depends on the power of the human spirit. The training of the human spirit, the importance of vigorous spiritual power is something the citizens of Japan are now selflessly demonstrating to the world. In the late autumn of the year before last, *Hitler Jugend* visited Eihei-ji and stayed overnight. They were profoundly impressed by the existence of the training center for the human spirit they encountered here in the deep mountains.³

An even earlier article in the December 1940 issue of *Sansho* gave a detailed description of the delegation's visit. Appropriately, the article was entitled *Hittorā Jūgento (Hitler Jugend)*. Inasmuch as it reveals important features of

the values and religious outlook of both Nazi youth and Japan's wartime Zen leaders, a complete translation follows. Note, however, that the following article presents a necessarily shallow understanding of the spiritual orientation of Nazi youth on the Japanese side inasmuch as it was gained from only one relatively short encounter, not to mention the need for interpretation.

This article also leads one to ask how members of the *Hitler Jugend* delegation viewed their visit to Eiheiji? What did members write or say about their visit upon return to Germany? Inasmuch as this question is beyond the author's competence, knowledgeable readers are sincerely invited to present this side of the story.

Hittorā Jūgento

(Blue Eyes Spend One Night as Zen Guests)

by Fueoka Togetsu

Bearing the brilliant future of our youthful ally Germany, a six-member delegation of *Hitler Jugend*, arrived at our monastery on the 19th of last month [November 1940]. Headed by [Heinrich] Jürgens, the delegation was part of a Japanese-German youth exchange program. Following their arrival in Japan, the delegation first met with people from every field in the Imperial capital [Tokyo]. Having completed this mission, they next headed southwest from Tokyo to the Hokuriku rail line, getting off the train at Kanazawa station on November 19th. Their goal was the Zen training center of Eiheiji where they spent a quiet night, the only temple at which the delegation stayed overnight during their visit to Japan. It is for this reason that the night they spent at our monastery meant so much to them.

On the day of their arrival, this writer had the good fortune to accompany the delegation on the last segment of their train ride to Eiheiji

station. Young and old stood along the tracks to welcome the delegation, enthusiastically waving German flags to welcome the visitors from afar. In response, the members of the delegation stuck their long bodies out of the train windows, rapidly raising their right arms in a return salute.

The delegation arrived at Eiheiji station at 4:20 pm. Among others, pupils from the Shihidani Elementary School were waiting on the station platform to greet the delegation, waving German flags embossed with swastikas on a red background. In response, the six-member delegation lined up in a row perfectly abreast of one another and raised their right arms in a return salute. The precision of the members' movements made a deep impression on everyone present.

Marching with large Japanese and German flags intertwined, the delegation then made its way from Eiheiji's main entrance gate to the entrance of the guest quarters. At that point newspaper reporters and cameramen besieged them. Thereafter the delegation walked down a long hallway at the foot of Eiheiji's towering monastic complex until they arrived at the reception area. Here they met, for the first time, Zen Masters Katō and Takada, the monastery's head administrative officer and his assistant, together with other senior monastic officials.

The six members of the delegation were:

Heinrich Jürgens, delegation head, 37 years old

Wilhelm Daniel, delegation member, 27 years old

Heinz Rothermund, 21 years old

Daoruku Teiru (phonetic spelling), 21 years old

Rudolf Minsch, 19 years old

Heinz Schumi, 17 years old

In addition, the delegation was accompanied by Miyamoto Kinshichi, an official of the Social Education Bureau of the Ministry of Education; Hiraiwa Tatsuo from Mitsubishi Trading Co., the delegation's interpreter; and a number of representatives from the Fukui Prefectural government, including Mr. Ueda, head of the Prefectural Social Education Section.

While Eiheiji has welcomed a few foreigners in the past for an overnight stay, this is the first time our monastery formally welcomed blue-eyes [Westerners] on a mission like theirs. Thus, the monastery made careful preparations for their visit. First, all of the senior monastic officials came to the reception area at 6 pm to greet the guests of honor who had come from faraway. This was followed by a welcome banquet in order to become better acquainted with our guests.

After the monastic officials arrived at their assigned places in the banquet room, the visiting delegation bowed to them and then sat down as a group. The youngest member of the delegation, a handsome lad by the name of Schumi, made himself look attractive by wearing a formal kimono purchased in Tokyo complete with family crest and *obi* (narrow sash) tied in a simple knot. It was somewhat surprising to find nearly all members of the delegation sitting on bended knees for an extended period.

When everyone had been seated, Zen Master Katō, head administrative officer, welcomed the delegation on Eiheiji's behalf with Mr. Hiraiwa acting as interpreter. Delegation head Jürgens then expressed the delegation's gratitude for the invitation, noting that up until then they had only been able to read about Zen in books. Now, however, they had a wonderful opportunity to directly experience the spirit of Zen by staying overnight at this training center.



Example of a temple vegetarian meal

All of the food on the banquet tray was, of course, vegetarian. Delegation members were quite skilled in their use of chopsticks, making short work of dish after dish. It appeared they were truly enjoying all of the food. We recently had a delegation of more than ten Chinese monks stay overnight with us and had a similar banquet for them. However, in this writer's opinion the way these blue eyes ate Japanese food was far more skillful than the Chinese monks.

By chance the conversation turned to food. Delegation head Jürgens stuck his chopsticks into a dish full of radishes and explained that at the time of the [First] World War the people of Germany had nothing to eat but radishes. Thus, he confessed that anytime he eats radishes he recalls that war. His words provided us with a glimpse of just what one would expect of a delegation head.

Jürgens went on to say that there were many vegetarians in Germany though not for religious reasons. While the vegetarianism of the Führer Adolf Hitler was well known, Jürgens explained that he personally leaned in that direction inasmuch as he normally ate only fruit for breakfast. Hearing this, Zen Master Katō asked, "Does that mean that Führer Hitler is a Zen priest?" With that, everyone burst out laughing.

The conversation continued for a while after the banquet finished. Jürgens spoke about the religious orientation of the *Hitler Jugend*. What he said can be summarized as follows:

The people of present-day Germany are no longer satisfied with the religion they have had up to now. However, a new religion that can fully satisfy the German people has yet to be born. Therefore, until a new national religion appears, they have, albeit reluctantly, to depend on the religion they've had up to now. The *Hitler Jugend* take the same position.

It doesn't make any difference what religion the members of the *Hitler Jugend* believe in. However, only belief in Judaism is strictly forbidden. For example, even though some members are Protestants and others are Roman Catholic, there is absolutely no conflict between them. Nevertheless, among today's members there are an extremely large number who have freed themselves from their former religion. This is because, as I have said, the religion we have had up to now doesn't meet our present needs.

However, even though members have left their former religions doesn't mean they have become atheists or turned their backs on God. In fact, they continue to have a very strong religious spirit, identifying themselves as "people who believe in God." They dislike describing themselves any further than this. At present we are all eagerly awaiting the emergence of a mighty religion with great religious leaders.

When this writer heard these words from delegation head Jürgens, he could not help thinking that Jürgens was also speaking about the outcome for the Buddhist world, not just the religious world in Germany. This was truly a case of thinking that Jürgens had put his finger on a sore spot.

The scene underneath the banquet room's gorgeously painted ceiling and brilliantly

illuminated electric lights was something that hadn't been seen since the founding of the monastery. On the one side were the monastery's senior officials with their shaved heads and wearing Buddhist robes. Sitting opposite them was Jürgens and his delegation of blue eyes with their red armbands.

Following the banquet the delegation took a short rest in their quarters. Thereafter they reassembled to hear a lecture given by assistant administrative head Takada, assisted by Hiraiwa as his interpreter. The lecture began with a basic introduction to Buddhism and then went on to include both Zen and Japanese culture, ending with a detailed explanation of the teaching of Zen Master Dōgen. The delegation profited from this immensely.





Monks meditating in zazen

Morning service at Eiheiiji

The next morning the delegation got up early at 3:30 a.m., first going to the Monks Hall (Sōdō) to observe the practice of *zazen* (meditation) before going to the Founders Hall to see the offering of tea [before the image of Zen Master Dōgen] and a *sutra* recitation service. Thereafter they went to the Dharma Hall where they took part in a solemn morning service. In this way they were able to experience the life of a training center.

The delegation's breakfast was exactly the same as the monks, consisting of pure rice gruel. It was surprising to see how the members eagerly consumed the gruel and repeatedly ask for more. Just what might be expected from the youth of Nazi Germany who have exerted themselves to the utmost for many years.



Eiheiiji, Imperial Messenger Gate

At 9:30 am the delegation gathered at the foot of the stairs leading to the Imperial Messenger Gate (*Chokushi-mon*) to take a commemorative photograph together with Eiheiiji's monastic officials. After that the delegation headed for the monastery entrance gate where they expressed their gratitude to the assembled monks who were gathered there to give them a warm send-off. On their way to the entrance gate the rays of the late autumn sun shone down on them through the ancient Japanese cedar trees lining the pathway. On leaving the monastery, they headed for Eiheiiji train station.

Conclusion

Readers familiar with the earlier series of three articles concerning D.T. Suzuki's relationship to the Nazi movement both in Japan and Germany will recognize similar themes in all of the articles. Readers unfamiliar with these articles will find them here.

- 1) [D.T. Suzuki, Zen and the Nazis](#)
- 2) <http://japanfocus.org/-Karl-Baier/4041>;
- 3) [A Zen Nazi in Wartime Japan: Count Dürckheim and his Sources-D.T. Suzuki, Yasutani Haku'un and Eugen Herrigel](#)

One of the articles' striking features is the degree to which the German side admits to an

ongoing struggle to create a new and authentically Germanic faith, i.e., a faith, in the first instance, cleansed of its Judaic roots.

There were, nevertheless, differences of opinion among Nazi ranks concerning the new religion being created. Many Nazi party leaders, both military and civilian, sought to create a dramatically altered Christianity that emphasized, almost to the point of exclusivity, its Germanic origins in the form of German Christian leaders like 13th century Meister Eckhart on the Roman Catholic side, or Martin Luther on the Protestant side. Atheism was unacceptable since that would signify a Nazi embrace of the same stance as the hated and despised Bolsheviks.

On the other hand, at least some Nazi leaders wanted to break completely free from Christianity. In particular, SS leader Heinrich Himmler sought to recreate a faith rooted in Germany's pre-Christian, Aryan past. However, he was unsuccessful in searching for a coherent, indigenous pre-Christian faith within Germany itself. This led him and other SS leaders to look further afield to the Aryan religions of India, both Buddhism and Hinduism. In particular, the historical founder of Buddhism, Shakyamuni Buddha, was considered a worthy role model for SS members in that not only was he a great Aryan religious leader but also a member of the warrior caste (Skt. *kshatriya*). This in turn facilitated Hitler's transformation into a worthy descendant of the historical Buddha.⁴

By comparison, the Japanese side cleared believed they already possessed an unshakable and powerful spiritual foundation, one eminently suited to mobilizing the Japanese people in the war effort. Although not directly discussed in this article, this widespread belief in the strength of its spiritual foundation, including a divine emperor rooted in Shinto, allowed Japan to entertain the idea the country could prevail over the West, despite the

recognized material superiority of the latter. As Zen Master Ashiwa asserted, unlike Japan, European culture was built solely on "the cultivation of knowledge."

The belief in Japan's spiritual strength was given further expression in a second related article in the December 1940 issue of *Sansho*. In an article entitled, "The Power to Lead the Nation's Citizens," a senior Eihei-ji official, Sekiryū Buntō, once again discussed the admission by the head of the *Hitler Jugend* delegation that "Christianity had already lost its power to guide their spirit," etc. Sekiryū continued:

We were truly surprised when we heard these things said directly to us. That said, we were overjoyed by the fact that, to the contrary, we ourselves have experienced the true path shown to us by Zen Master Dōgen. This makes it possible for us to guide the nation's citizens, thoroughly constructing the spiritual foundation of today's citizens of Japan . . .⁵

As demonstrated above, wartime Zen leaders like Ashiwa and Sekiryū envisioned themselves playing a leading role in enhancing the people's commitment to the war effort, effectively acting as the 'spiritual custodians' and 'trainers' of what was then popularly known as "the spirit of Japan" (*Yamato-damashii*). This was not, it must be emphasized, a new role for Zen masters inasmuch as their predecessors in Japan's medieval period had provided the "mindless" and "selfless" metaphysical foundation for the absolute and unquestioning loyalty required of a *samurai* warrior combined with fearlessness in the face of death. Now, however, the same selfless loyalty was redirected toward the Imperial state and its divine emperor.

The connection between the role of Zen in Japan's medieval era and during the Asia-Pacific War (1937-45) was well understood by scholar-priests like Nakane Kandō, wartime president of Sōtō Zen-affiliated Komazawa University. In March 1940 Nakane wrote:

The spirit of the soldier is that of *Bushidō*. . . . Thus, if we were to sum up Zen in a word, it would be that it is training for death. When you become one with death and are selfless, you are in the realm of enlightenment. If you are enlightened then it makes no difference whether you are in a hot hell or a cold hell, you can, with the greatest sincerity, fearlessly repay the debt of gratitude you owe your country by serving it with the utmost loyalty, for the sake of justice, for the sake of the monarchy.⁶

Sentiments like these were repeated over and over again by wartime Zen masters. Thus, they, like their medieval predecessors, bear significant responsibility for the ensuing carnage, first within the country during the medieval era, and then abroad in the modern era. Should there be any remaining doubt about the goals of Japan's wartime Zen masters, we need look no further than the words of Sōtō Zen Master Sawaki Kōdō. In his book *Kannon-kyo Teisho* (Lectures on the *Kannon Sutra*), published in November 1944, Sawaki stated:

This is truly a war to spread the Imperial Way throughout the world. The Imperial Way is the Buddha Way and must be spread. In accordance with the Imperial Way, we must destroy democracy, liberalism, and [Sun Yat-sen's] Three Principles of the People. This is what it means to be citizens of Japan.⁷

Although he died in 1965, Sawaki remains revered to this day as one of Japan's greatest Zen masters of the twentieth century, not only

in Japan but also in the West thanks to his disciples and their hagiographical writings. As documented in *Zen at War*, Sawaki's wartime words are typical of those of his contemporaries in both the Sōtō and Rinzai Zen sects. Thus, like the German Christian sycophants of the Nazis, of whom there were many, the Zen school in Japan has an undeniable 'heritage' of war complicity that, despite a few attempts to address it in the postwar period, has yet to be seriously reflected on. In asserting this, however, it is equally true that Zen is far from the only religious tradition, Buddhist or otherwise, to suffer from the same malady.

Recommended citation: *Brian Victoria*, "The Zen of Hitler Jugend", *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 14, Issue 2, No. 2, January 18, 2016.

Brian Daizen Victoria holds an M.A. in Buddhist Studies from Sōtō Zen sect-affiliated Komazawa University in Tokyo, and a Ph.D. from the Department of Religious Studies at Temple University. In addition to a 2nd, enlarged edition of *Zen At War* (Rowman & Littlefield), major writings include *Zen War Stories* (RoutledgeCurzon); an autobiographical work in Japanese entitled *Gaijin de ari, Zen bozu de ari* (As a Foreigner, As a Zen Priest); *Zen Master Dōgen*, coauthored with Prof. Yokoi Yūhō of Aichi-gakuin University (Weatherhill); and a translation of *The Zen Life* by Sato Koji (Weatherhill). He is currently a Visiting Research Fellow at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies (Nichibunken) in Kyoto.

Brian Victoria is a native of Omaha, Nebraska and graduate of Nebraska Wesleyan University. He holds a M.A. in Buddhist Studies from Sōtō Zen sect-affiliated Komazawa University in Tokyo, and a Ph.D. from the Department of Religious Studies at Temple University. Major writings include *Zen Terror in Prewar Japan: Portrait of an Assassin* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), *Zen At War* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); and *Zen War Stories* (RoutledgeCurzon, 2003). Brian is currently a non-resident Senior Research

Fellow at the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies.

Notes

¹ Quoted in Daihonzan Eiheiji: Sansho, August 5, 1941, p. 279.

² Adolf Hitler, Chapter Five, Mein Kampf. [English translation](#) (accessed 28 November 2015).

³ Ibid.

⁴ For further information on the alleged relationship between Hitler and the historical Buddha, see Victoria, "Japanese Buddhism in the Third Reich," Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies, Vol. 7. [Available on the Web](#) (by subscription only).

⁵ Sekiryū Buntō. 国民指導力 (The Power to Lead the Nation's Citizens). Daihonzan Eiheiji: Sansho, December 9, 1940, p. 862.

⁶ Quoted in Niino Kazunobu, Kodo Bukkyo to Tairiku Fukyo. Tokyo: Shakai Hyoron-sha, 2014, pp. 110-111.

⁷ The Three Principles of the People consist of: 1) nationalism, 2) democracy, and 3) socialism. Sawaki's words are contained in: Sawaki Kodo. Kannon-kyo Teisho (Lectures on the Kannon Sutra). Tokyo, Toko-sha, November 1944, pp. 153-54. Original Japanese text reads: 誠にこの度の戦争は皇道を世界中に拡げる事である。皇道すなわち仏道を、弘めねばならない。皇道によって、三民主義・民主主義・自由主義を破らねばならぬ。これが我々日本国民なのである。