

# Hitler Youth 1940 Visit to Japan: A Comment on Brian Victoria’s “The Zen of Hitler Jugend”

Hans-Joachim Bieber



Title of Jürgens' report on the visit to Japan in the Hitler Youth periodical *Junge Welt*, February to April 1941

In his article, “The Zen of Hitler Jugend” ([Asia Pacific Journal: Japan Focus, Volume 14, Issue 2, Number 2; January 18, 2016](#)), Brian Victoria presents two Japanese reports and some photos that deal with a visit by a delegation of the Hitler Youth to Eiheiji in November 1940. One of the most important Japanese monasteries, Eiheiji was established in 1244 by Zen Master Dōgen, who was the founder of the Sōtō sect. These newly discovered reports, which were originally published in the Eiheiji periodical *Sansho* in December 1940 and August 1942, undoubtedly provide interesting source material and are thus worthy of being republished. However, I would like to add some further information about the delegation's visit to Japan and compare the Japanese reports found by Victoria with a report published by the head of the delegation upon his return to Germany. In doing so, I hope to shed light on some striking differences between the perception of the visit to Eiheiji by the monks of the monastery on the

one hand and the German delegation on the other.



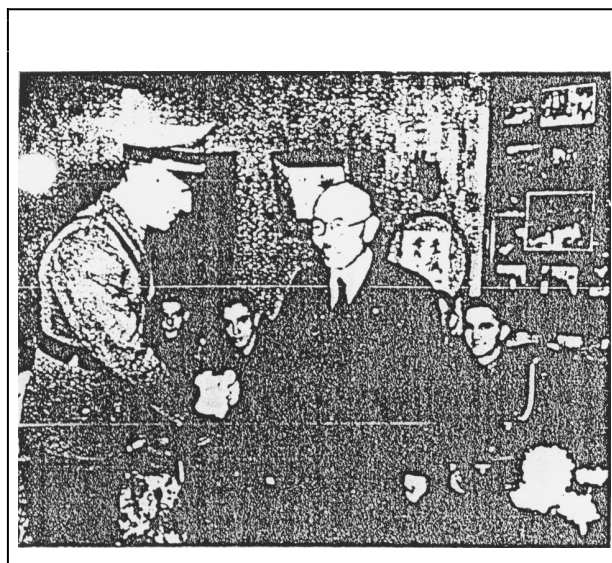
Celebration of 2600th jubilee of imperial dynasty, 11 November 1940

To begin, the occasion for sending a delegation of the Hitler Youth to Japan in 1940 was not the signing of the Tripartite Treaty in September of that year, as Victoria suggests, but rather the 2600th jubilee of Japan’s imperial dynasty two months later (November 1940). The original plan called for sending hundreds of German workers to Japan on ships operated by *Kraft durch Freude* (“Strength through joy”), the national socialist organization for recreation and leisure. With the outbreak of the war in Europe in September 1939, however, ocean travel from Germany to Japan became impossible; furthermore, many young Germans were then conscripted immediately into military service. Thus, only a small delegation of the *Hitler Jugend* (Hitler Youth) and an even smaller one, consisting of members of the

*Deutsche Arbeitsfront* (German Workers' Front), were sent to Japan in late 1940. They traveled by means of the Trans-Siberian Railway, the only remaining connection between Germany and Japan. The six members of the *Hitler Jugend* delegation, led by Heinrich Jürgens, head of the Far East Department of the *Reichsjugendführung* (Head office of the national youth organization), began their tour by visiting the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo and Korea, which had been a Japanese colony since 1910. They were impressed by "the idealism, sense of national identity, commitment, strong will, and courage" ["*dem Idealismus, dem Nationalbewußtsein, der Einsatzfreudigkeit, dem starken Willen und Mut*"] of the young Japanese who were trained in Harbin to become farmers and settlers in Manchukuo and they were equally impressed by the achievements of the Japanese in Korea.<sup>1</sup> The members of the delegation apparently had no misgivings regarding the legitimacy of Japan's policy of expansion and settlement in East Asia, an attitude which might be explained by the fact that, on the occasion of their departure for Japan, the periodical of the Hitler Youth published an illustrated report in which Japan's alleged lack of "living space" (*Lebensraum*) was used to justify its expansion in East Asia without reservation.<sup>2</sup>

Upon arriving in Japan, the delegation of the Hitler Youth was greeted with music and flags displaying both the swastika and the rising sun. The *Völkischer Beobachter* reported how "in a real triumphal procession [the delegation] marched through the rows of the public", which greeted them enthusiastically.<sup>3</sup> During their six-week tour of the country, the delegation's members traveled from Beppu to Hokkaido, visiting schools, barracks, and the mythological birthplace of the family of the tenno. In Tokyo, they met the respective ministers of war, foreign affairs, and culture and education. There were meetings as well with industrial leaders, heads of youth organizations, and the deputy chief of the admiralty. They visited

universities, the Meiji and Yasukuni shrine, and attended receptions hosted by the German embassy and the Japanese German Cultural Institute. The head of the delegation was received by Prime Minister Konoe. According to an article in the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the delegates thus attained an understanding of how the education of Japan's youth was geared towards establishing a "mentality of defense". The article continued with a description of the positive impression created among the delegates by the "warm acceptance" given them throughout Japan as representatives of the German people.<sup>4</sup> The delegation was presented on Japanese radio several times and, as the first delegation of the Hitler Youth had done during its visit to Japan in 1938, performed songs of the Hitler Youth.<sup>5</sup> Its members also recorded the German version of a Japanese song written on the occasion of the signing of the Tripartite Pact by Yamada Kosaku, one of the best-known Japanese composers of the time. The recording was released as a gramophone record. The highlight of the delegation's visit was its participation in the official observance of the jubilee of the Japanese dynasty. The corresponding festivity, to which 50,000 guests had been invited, was held in front of the imperial palace in Tokyo in mid-November of 1940.



## Reception by major of Beppu

The reason for the delegation's visit to Eiheiji is not documented in German sources; yet, since late 1937, Reinhold Schulze, an official of the *Reichsjugendführung*, had been in Tokyo to establish closer ties between the Hitler Youth and Japanese youth organizations. It is conceivable that the itinerary for the delegation had been arranged by him and his Japanese counterparts, from whom the idea of showing the delegates one of Japan's most prominent Buddhist monasteries may have originated. In any case, the Japanese reports found by Victoria reveal three striking features: the description of Eiheiji as a cultural center of international relevance, the importance attributed to the visit of the Hitler Youth delegation, and the hosts' perception of what the delegates had said.

The first report quoted by Victoria was published in August 1942. It contains a description by Eiheiji's head monk trainer, Zen Master Ashiwa Untei, who speaks of Asia as a whole and Eiheiji in particular as a center where the human spirit is trained through the practice of *zazen* and quiet sitting. Ashiwa goes on by saying that the "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". He thus presents Eiheiji as a place where, like other visitors, the visiting members of the Hitler Youth could learn to discipline their spirit and to cultivate "the latent energy of their spiritual power". At least Ashiwa was certain that the young Germans were "profoundly impressed by the existence of the training center for the human spirit they encountered here in the deep mountains".

An article appearing even earlier, in the December 1940 issue of *Sansho*, and translated in its entirety by Victoria emphasizes the political significance of the visit by the

delegation of the Hitler Youth to Eiheiji. It introduces the delegates as representatives of "the brilliant future" of Japan's most important "youthful ally" and highlights how the delegation was escorted by Japanese officials and welcomed at Kanazawa railway station near Eiheiji by pupils waving German flags. It accentuates as well the uniqueness of the visit by stating that for the first time "blue-eyes [Westerners]" were "formally welcomed [...] on a mission like theirs", and by describing, as "something that hadn't been seen since the founding of the monastery", the scene "beneath the banquet room's gorgeously painted ceiling and brilliantly illuminated electric lights", where "the monastery's senior officials with their shaved heads and [...] Buddhist robes" were sitting on one side and "the delegation of young Germans of blue eyes with red armbands" on the other.

According to the same report, the officials at Eiheiji were primarily interested in religious issues, and they seemed pleased by what they heard from the delegates. In his response to the welcoming speech by Eiheiji's chief administrative officer, Jürgens expressed the delegation's gratitude for the invitation, "noting that up until [the visit] 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." Later, Jürgens spoke about the religious orientation of the *Hitler Jugend* and informed the monks that "the people of Germany [were] no longer satisfied with the religion they've had up to now", but then added that "a new religion that could fully satisfy the German people had yet to be born". Germans who decided to abandon their former religion, however, didn't have to become atheists "or turn their backs on God"; instead, they continued "to have a very strong religious spirit, identifying themselves as 'people who believe in God'" while "eagerly awaiting the emergence of a mighty religion with great religious leaders".

When the author of the report, who apparently was present when the speeches were given, heard this, he could not help thinking that the young German “was also speaking about the outcome of the Buddhist world, not just the religious world in Germany”, and that he “had put his finger on a sore spot”. The other report said that the monks of Eihei-ji were “truly surprised” to learn “that Christianity had [...] lost its power to guide” the German spirit, and that they were overjoyed to have experienced for themselves “the true path” shown to them by Zen Master Dogen and thus be able “to guide the nation’s citizens”. Perhaps they thought the same path could serve to guide the citizens of Germany, too. At least the author of the first report appeared convinced that the visit to Eihei-ji deeply impressed the delegates of the Hitler Youth. He wrote without further explanation that spending a night at the monastery and having the opportunity to observe three religious practices – *zazen*, the offering of tea before the image of Zen Master Dōgen, and a *sutra* recitation service – and to take part in a solemn morning service “meant so much to them”. He was also sure that they “profited [...] immensely” from a basic introduction to Buddhism, Zen and Japanese culture as well as from a detailed explanation of the teaching of Zen Master Dogen given them by the assistant administrative chief of Eihei-ji.

Victoria adopts for the most part the perception of the report’s author by viewing as “one of the article’s striking features” the “degree to which the German side admits to an ongoing struggle to create a new and authentically German faith” and by pointing out that the article “reveals important features of the values and religious outlook of both Nazi youth and Japan’s wartime Zen leaders”. He goes on to offer a brief discussion of the search for a new German religion in Nazi Germany and of how the Japanese people’s commitment to the war effort was enhanced by prominent Japanese Buddhists, who thereby effectively acted as the

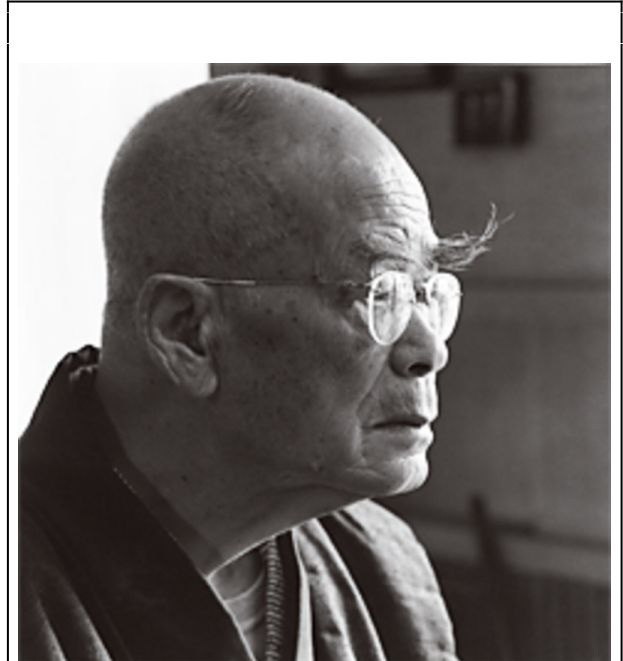
‘spiritual custodians’ and ‘trainers’ of what was then popularly known as “the spirit of Japan” (*Yamato-damashii*).

Victoria’s remarks about Japanese Zen leaders are quite accurate and known to those familiar with his earlier writings. Having studied the support by Japanese Buddhists of Japan’s imperialist efforts for many years, Victoria, perhaps understandably, thus seems to assume that religious forces in Germany played a similar role in supporting National Socialist rule. Those, however, who are familiar with the history and language of the Third Reich will recognize that, in the context of Nazi ideology, the statements made by the young Nazi delegates and quoted in the Japanese reports had a meaning different from that attributed to them by the monks of Eihei-ji and by Victoria. Although the delegates described themselves as “believing in God”, this was – contrary to the interpretation given in the Japanese reports – by no means an indication of a “very strong religious spirit”. Indeed, support of Christianity was diminishing in Germany, and an increasing number of Germans no longer considered themselves to be Christian. Furthermore, it is also true that only a few Germans described themselves as being atheists since atheists in Nazi Germany were classified as “*glaubenslos*” (“without faith”), a nonbelief associated with socialism and Bolshevism and were persecuted. For Germans who saw themselves as being neither Christian nor atheist, a new description, “*gottgläubig*” (“believing in God”), was invented in 1936. “*Gottgläubig*” became the official term for people who were neither Protestant nor Roman Catholic (let alone Jewish) but who adhered to what was referred to as a “form of piety originating from the German character” (“*arteigene Frömmigkeit deutschen Wesens*”). “*Gottgläubig*” indicated mainly an ideological affinity to National Socialism and may therefore in many cases have even been employed by individuals who were, in fact, atheists. Thus, when the members of the delegation visiting Eihei-ji described

themselves as being “gottgläubig”, they were not necessarily indicating that they possessed “a very strong religious spirit” but rather that they were simply good National Socialists.

Another source of misunderstanding on the part of both the Japanese hosts and Victoria can be found in the delegates' statements concerning “a new religion that [could] fully satisfy the German people”. In Nazi Germany, there was indeed “an ongoing struggle to create a new and authentically German faith”, as Victoria states. Influenced by National Socialist theories on race, Heinrich Himmler, leader of the SS, displayed an interest in “Aryan” religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. In his view, Buddha was an Aryan and a “warrior yogi” (“*Kriegeryogi*”); this was the categorization of the leading National Socialist theorist on racial questions.<sup>6</sup> Himmler also admired the samurai, not for their spiritual training but for their preparedness to fight and sacrifice their lives for their ruler, and therefore saw them as role models for the SS: a community with a staunch commitment to placing its mark on all society. Other Nazi leaders saw religious models in Germanic gods and heroes, and yet others were more or less uninterested in religion.

For the Nazi leadership as a whole, the policy of creating a new German faith did not have immediate priority and was an issue to be dealt with after the war. In 1940, there were only drafts and sketches of what such a new faith would entail: an abrogation of all traditional religions, a glorification of Germanic legends and myths such as those surrounding the Holy Grail and Valhalla, and a deification of Hitler. Nothing indicated that Buddhist elements would be incorporated as well. When the delegates of the Hitler Youth who were visiting Eihei-ji declined to elaborate on the nature of a future German faith, they were merely reflecting the state of relevant discussions current in Germany at the time.



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Other statements made by the delegates may also need to be understood or interpreted in a context different from the one used by the Japanese hosts. One example would be the delegates' gratitude for the “wonderful opportunity to directly experience the spirit of Zen” after they had “only been able to read about Zen in books”. This statement may have been meant as nothing more than a polite phrase. Zen Buddhism was still little known in Germany in 1940; only one book, written by Daisetz Suzuki, the most influential contemporary Japanese interpreter of Zen Buddhism in the West, had been translated into German at that time.<sup>7</sup> Although it is possible that the members of the delegation had glanced at the book in preparation for their trip, there is no indication that the delegates in particular or even the Hitler Youth organization in general were particularly interested in Zen Buddhism or Buddhism as such.

Finally, there is no proof for the assertion made in one of the Japanese articles that Hitler had personally given instructions to the delegation

prior to its visit to Japan in 1940. Most likely, the Japanese interpreter misunderstood a remark made by the delegation's leader or one of its other members. The delegation had certainly been given instructions, but they presumably came from the *Reichsjugendführung* ("National Youth Leadership": the highest level of the Hitler Youth) or from Hitler's deputy Martin Bormann.

Victoria admits that the two Japanese articles about the visit by the delegation of the Hitler Youth to Eiheiji convey only "a necessarily shallow understanding of the spiritual orientation of Nazi youth" on the part of the Japanese and poses the question as to "how members of the *Hitler Jugend* delegation viewed their visit to Eiheiji", and what they wrote or said about their visit upon returning to Germany. Heinrich Jürgens, leader of the delegation who is quoted by name in the long Japanese report, did indeed publish the diary he had kept during the visit to Japan upon his return to Germany. Mostly, he wrote about meetings with Japanese politicians, military brass, industrialists, and leaders of youth organizations. Much was also written about visits to schools, universities, museums, temples and shrines, barracks, hot springs, and about meetings with German diplomats and representatives of Nazi organizations in Japan. In addition, the diary contains a lengthy account of the Tokyo celebration of the imperial dynasty's jubilee and tells of the considerable impression made upon the delegates by "the deep inner bond of the Japanese people with their imperial family" ("*tiefinnerliche Verbundenheit des japanischen Volkes mit seinem Kaiserhaus*")<sup>8</sup>.

Jürgen's mention of the visit to Eiheiji consisted of only four short sentences: "We spent two days in the Buddhist temple in Eiheiji. An enormous complex on a hillslope under very old trees with innumerable stairs, hallways, courts, floors. At night we observed meditation

exercises and participated in a holy ceremony lasting several hours. Solemn meal together with the abbot and priests". ("*Zwei Tage verbringen wir in dem buddhistischen Tempel in Eiheiji. Gewaltige Anlage am Berghang unter uralten Bäumen mit unzähligen Treppen, Gängen, Höfen, Stockwerken. Wir erleben nachts Meditationsübungen und nehmen an einer mehrstündigen heiligen Zeremonie teil. Gemeinsames feierliches Essen mit Abt und Priestern.*")<sup>9</sup>) The leader of the delegation seems to have been impressed by the buildings of the monastery and the solemnity of the ceremonies he witnessed. Nevertheless, he did not devote one word to having experienced any kind of spirituality, nor did he refer to Buddhism in general or to Zen Buddhism and Dōgen's teachings in particular. For him, the visit to Eiheiji appears to have been nothing more than one of many visits to Japanese institutions where the delegation of the Hitler Youth represented Nazi Germany and, beyond that, simply observed what was going on. The diary suggests that the visit impressed him much less than his Japanese hosts assumed. Perhaps other members of the delegation were more impressed by the visit to Eiheiji, but none of them are known to have published different views. The Japanese assumption that the delegation was especially receptive to spirituality or to Buddhism thus seems to have been false and what Victoria calls the "Zen of Hitler Jugend" pure fantasy.

Further sources reveal that issues of spirituality and religion as such did not play a major role in cultural relations between Germany and Japan during the years of Nazi rule. Pertinent references can be found neither in German reports on the first visit by a delegation of the Hitler Youth to Japan in 1938 nor in reports on propaganda tours of Japan by Nazi officials in 1938/39. They are absent as well in accounts of a visit by a delegation of the *Reichsstudentenführung* (National Student Leadership) to Japan in the spring of 1940, a visit that occurred some months prior to the

visit to Eiheiji by the delegation of the Hitler Youth. It would be interesting, though, to compare these reports with corresponding Japanese reports. Perhaps Japanese observers believed German guests possessed a degree of receptiveness of spirituality similar to that of the monks of Eiheiji.

In any case, a comparison of the Japanese reports and the corresponding German report on the visit of the delegation of the Hitler Youth to Eiheiji in November of 1940 provides an instructive example of how perceptions of the same event can differ considerably when value systems, expectations, interests, foci differ and perhaps even when language problems are involved. Another interesting aspect of the Japanese reports is that they serve as rare example of the belief on the part of the Japanese that many similarities were to be found between them and the Germans which, in reality, did not exist – a belief that was in fact much more common among Germans.<sup>10</sup>

### Related Articles

- **Hans-Joachim Bieber**, "*Zen and War: A Commentary on Brian Victoria and Karl Baier's Analysis of Daisetz Suzuki and Count Dürckheim*", *The Asia-Pacific*

*Journal*, Vol. 13, Issue 19, No. 2, May 19, 2015

- **Brian Victoria**, [Sawaki Kōdō, Zen and Wartime Japan: Final Pieces of the Puzzle](#)
- **Narusawa Muneo and Brian Victoria**, ["War is a Crime": Takenaka Shōgen and Buddhist Resistance in the Asia-Pacific War and Today](#)
- **Karl Baier**, [The Formation and Principles of Count Dürckheim's Nazi Worldview and his interpretation of Japanese Spirit and Zen](#)
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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Heinrich Jürgens: *Reise nach Japan. Tagebuchaufzeichnungen von der Japanfahrt der HJ 1940*, in: *Junge Welt*, March 1941, p. 22; further parts of Jürgens' report were published in the editions of April 1941, pp. 20-22, and May 1941, pp. 21-23.

<sup>2</sup> “Japans Lebensraum”, in: *Junge Welt*, Nov. 1940, p. 8 f.

<sup>3</sup> *Völkischer Beobachter*, 9.1.1941.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Jakob Wilhelm Hauer: *Das religiöse Artbild der Indogermanen und die Grundtypen der indoarischen Religion*, Stuttgart 1937, p. 239 ff. and 269 ff.

<sup>7</sup> Daisetz Suzuki: *Die große Befreiung*, Leipzig 1939; cf. Hans-Joachim Bieber: *SS und Samurai. Deutsch-japanische Kulturbeziehungen 1933-1945*, Munich: iudicium 2014, p. 640.

<sup>8</sup> Heinrich Jürgens: *Reise nach Japan. Tagebuchaufzeichnungen von der Japanfahrt der HJ 1940*, in: *Junge Welt*, May 1941, p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Bieber 2014, passim.