

**GOING POSTAL:
EMPIRE BUILDING THROUGH MINIATURE MESSAGES ON
GERMAN AND JAPANESE STAMPS**

*Fabian Bauwens
Johns Hopkins University*

Overview

Starting in the late nineteenth century postage stamps increasingly served as a business card of the state internally and externally. The Japanese and German idea of their respective political space thus was expressed through the mundane medium of postal stamps. As with other territorial currencies, images on postal stamps help shape the image of the nation to its people and the public abroad. Despite a striking number of similarities between Germany and Japan in its nation-building and consolidation process, the story their respective state building elites propagate through postal stamps is very different. The comparison of German and Japanese postal depictions of political space serves as an argument that governing elites engineer the image of the nation internally and externally through the proliferation of miniature message on banal objects, such as stamps. Furthermore, this comparison serves to illustrate how Anderson's "official nationalism" via said objects can distort historical fact in favor of nationalist fiction through the propagation of one image of the nation's political space.

This paper builds on Jack Child's work on political significance of stamps, literature on the visual depiction of political space, and Eric Helleiner's work on territorial currencies.¹ Postage stamps are mundane micro-historical artifacts that rapidly went beyond their primary purpose of mailing. Through repetition and widespread use, they serve to frame perceptions of the nation, its symbols and policies domestically and abroad. For the purpose of this paper, postage stamps are approached as primary sources. For both countries the period examined will be extended past

¹ Jack Child, *Miniature Messages: The Semiotics and Politics of Latin American Postage Stamps* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Eric Helleiner, *The Making of National Money: Territorial Currencies in Historical Perspective* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

WWII to point out some interesting continuities and differences despite the end of imperial ambitions in 1945.

Introduction

This article is based on the following three assumptions: Stamps can be approached as primary source materials for research on state and elite sanctioned “official” nationalism; stamps are also considered as modern territorial currencies; and they are to be viewed as examples of what Michael Billig termed “banal nationalism.”² Banal nationalism compared to nationalism proposes “...to cover the ideological habits which enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced. It is argued that these habits are not removed from everyday life, as some observers have supposed. Daily, the nation is indicated, or ‘flagged,’ in the lives of the citizenry. Nationalism, far from being an intermittent mood in established nations, is the endemic condition.”³ Jan Penrose connects the term to the emission of banknotes and stamps by national governments as examples of banal nationalism:

When members of nation states use this money, [Penrose refers here to previous study on currency but adds stamps later] they help reify their imagined community by trusting the value of ‘their’ money and by identifying with the images of the nation-state that it promotes... Similarly, when people use ‘foreign’ currencies, differences and boundaries between nation-states are marked and reified at the same time as the legitimacy of specific states and the global system of nation-states is subtly reinforced. These practices of using money are banal because they become so normalized through daily repetition that they tend to be overlooked by those who enact them. They are also banal because the national

² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Books, 1983); Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995); Jan Penrose, "Designing the Nation. Banknotes, Banal Nationalism and Alternative Conceptions of the State," *Political Geography* 30.8 (2011), pp. 429–440.

³ Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, p. 6.

emblems and images that grace this money go largely unnoticed in commercial transactions because most people never stop to think about either historical recentness of territorial currencies or the ideological functions that they fulfill.⁴

In addition, echoing Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, Tramell writes: "Stamps are in fact extraordinary social objects that reveal [...] the near universal human striving to remain in touch with people physically removed from our immediate presence."⁵ Just like banknotes and coins or other objects, stamps also help to preserve imagined communities not just in space but also over time—in the sense that they bridge several generations and embody the *immortal* aspect of the nation. Consequently, I argue that postage stamps can be put in the same category as coins and banknotes as "territorial currencies."⁶ There are, however, a number of differences that make stamps an even more interesting research material to study banal nationalism than other types of territorial currencies. First, there is the larger variety of stamps. Types of coinage and banknotes are usually replaced after having been in circulation for a longer period of time to have some stability in financial transactions.⁷ Postage stamps on the other hand are printed in a wide range of styles, unlike commemorative coins; commemorative stamps are more frequently used for postal transactions instead of simply being bought by collectors. The larger variety—commemorative issues in particular—create the opportunity for governments to depict more images defining and reproducing the nation.

⁴ Penrose, "Designing the Nation," pp. 429–430.

⁵ Jack Tramell, "Examining Postage Stamps as Visual Cultural Markers" in *Winton M. Blount Postal History Symposium: "Stamps and the Mail: Imagery, Icons, & Identity"* (2010), pp. 69–74, Smithsonian National Postal Museum; Also cf. Marcia Pointon, "Money and Nationalism," in G. Cubitt ed., *Imagining Nations* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), pp. 229–254.

⁶ Cf. Helleiner, *The Making of National Money* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009); Penrose, "Designing the Nation," pp. 429–440.

⁷ Obvious exceptions that come to mind are rapid inflation, emergency issues, or issues prompted by a radical regime change.

Second, the primary use of stamps is to ensure communication by mail.⁸ Stamps can already be understood as being implicitly part of the messages that are exchanged between postage stamp users, such as the holiday stamps used during holiday season, or stamps commemorating events related to the person or organization that is sending mail. Particularly, sending mail abroad provides an additional means to propagate the image of the nation externally. Unlike other territorial currencies, the primary use of stamps extends beyond the borders of the state as payment for postal communication with foreign recipients. Third, stamps do not retain their value; however, just like coinage and banknotes, they are considered treasured collectables that ensure the banal reproduction of the nation through collectors.

The focus of this study will be on both definitive and commemorative stamps, as these are the major categories of stamps that were primarily printed during the period examined.⁹ Both types are still the predominant types of stamps emitted by national governments. The main difference is that definitive stamps are usually printed as part of a series with a similar design over an extended period of time, whereas commemoratives are sometimes printed in the form of a series and printed once. The design of commemoratives, as the name implies, is also tailored towards the celebration of specific events, places, or persons, whereas definitives often include images of national heraldry, symbols and text.

⁸ Udo Jung, "Germany through Stamps," *Die Unterrichtspraxis/Teaching German* 14/2 (1981), pp. 246–259; Donald M. Reid, "The Symbolism of Postage Stamps: A Source for the Historian," *Journal of Contemporary History* 19/2 (1984), pp. 223–249; Douglas Frewer, "Japanese Postage Stamps as Social Agents: Some Anthropological Perspectives," *Japan Forum* 14/1 (2002), pp. 1–19; Child, *Miniature Messages* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Phil Deans and Hugo Dobson, "Introduction: East Asian Postage Stamps as Socio-Political Artefacts," *East Asia* 22/2 (2005), pp. 3–7; Hugo Dobson, "Japanese Postage Stamps: Propaganda and Decision Making," *Japan Forum* 14/1 (2002), pp. 21–39.

⁹ Child, *Miniature Messages* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009). Japanese stamps encompass even more distinct categories than just commemoratives and definitives: other categories are the national parks issues started in 1936, and holiday and a separate category of holiday and New Year's stamps.

Regime changes may in part explain the changing or continuity of images on postal stamps, yet this would only explain part of the equation. Regime change may to an extent explain discontinuing symbols or forbidden ones. From a formalistic point of view one could argue that—unlike Japan—Germany was a monarchy, then a democratic republic, and eventually a fascist dictatorship, and therefore change in how political space on stamps was depicted could be explained as a mere function of this change. De facto, however, it is more historically accurate to argue that regime change in Germany and Japan (from autocratic monarchy, to broad democracy, to fascist regime) ran mostly parallel. Meiji autocracy mirrored Wilhelmine autocracy, both short-lived Taishō liberal democracy mirrored Weimar democracy, and Imperial Rule Assistance Association (IRAA) statist government and militarist support resembled Nazi-Germany. The national narratives on German and Japanese stamps, however, differ greatly from each other.

Meiji Japan and Wilhelmine Germany 1871–1912/18

Both Wilhelmine Germany and Meiji Japan were constructs of former feudal political elites, elites that preferred autocratic rule to full-fledged popular sovereignty.¹⁰ For both cases, national unification entailed a series of diplomatic and belligerent maneuvers, necessary to consolidate this unification. The struggle of a latecomer to define itself among the group of great powers can be retraced to depictions of the nation on stamps of the early imperialist era in both countries. However, the significant difference is how the political space is portrayed as part of this external assertion. In the German case, the struggle for self-assertion to the outside world is more strongly connected to a struggle of internal self-assertion and legitimization. The German Empire itself came about as the result of political bargaining between its constituent states and monarchs. While this unification was in essence top-down, it is important to point to the intermediate tier that would give the new German state a proto-federalist characteristic. Imperial stamps reflected this unification yet stamps had been around as products of the predecessor states since the late 1840s.

¹⁰ Hagen Schulze, *The Course of German Nationalism: From Frederick the Great to Bismarck 1763–1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Masao Maruyama, *Thought and Behavior in Modern Japanese Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963).

Although a postal system had been developed earlier, the usage of stamps was novel as part of a modern Western style postal system, which in return was an integral part of Japan's Meiji restoration process. As Maclachlan writes:

In post-1868 Japan, state and postal modernization occurred more or less simultaneously, thus enabling the postal network to assume a wide range of tasks relating to state expansion and consolidation. This arrangement was further facilitated by the network's historical legacy of centralization and close association with state authorities. In short, Japan's postal system was especially active politically—as much an agent of economic, social, and political modernization as a result of those processes.¹¹

The imagery on stamps can therefore be seen as part of state-consolidation and nation building under Meiji rule. Unlike the German case, where unification had only been controversial in some areas like Bavaria, internal legitimacy of early Meiji Japan was contested not only politically but also on the battlefield, yet it bore no philatelist results.

The earliest Japanese stamps illustrate the Meiji government's strife for external acknowledgement. For example, initially the characters used on definitives are exclusively in *kanji*, from 1872 onward; however, English language, Arabic numerals, and Roman script gradually become more prevalent.¹² At first, only the nominal values are spelled in roman script: "20 Sen," etc. As of 1876 with the so-called "Kōban" series, the line "Imperial Japanese Post" or "Japanese Empire Post" is added to each stamp (Figure 1). The same line is also used on the very first commemorative stamps issued by the Japanese postal services. The primary event that is

¹¹ Patricia L. Maclachlan, *The People's Post Office: The History and Politics of the Japanese Postal System, 1871–2010* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 31–32.

¹² Japan Philatelic Society Foundation ed., *Sakura 2011 Catalogue of Japanese Stamps*. Other new non-European states often opted for the addition of text in Western language, usually English or French. Postal emissions of the Korean empire between 1895 and 1910 bore French text whereas Egypt shifted from French to English.

commemorated was the silver wedding of Emperor Meiji (Mutsuhito), issued on March 9, 1894. As with all Japanese stamps, the emperor himself is not depicted, but instead of the regular smaller chrysanthemum emblem, the latter is featured central in this stamp. The occasion of the issue is not only written in Japanese but also in English: "Imperial Wedding 25 Anniversary."¹³



Figure 1. The 12 Sen "Kōban" series¹⁴



Figure 2. Silver Wedding (1894); Sino-Japanese war (1896)

The second of the above-mentioned changes commemorates Japan's victory in the first Sino-Japanese war of 1895. The four stamps issued in 1896 to memorialize this event depict Prince Kitashirakawa Yoshihisa and Prince Arisugawa, both belonging to branches of the imperial family, with Prince Kitashirakawa representing the Imperial

¹³ Ibid., C 1.

¹⁴ Image of the *Aachener Krone* Edition Winkler-Hermaden, "Neuer Kronen-Atlas Impressionen aus dem Band," (accessed July 2012, <http://www.edition-wh.at/kronen-atlas/kronen-atlas-impressionen.php>). All other images as listed in Japan Philatelic Society Foundation ed., *Sakura 2011 Catalogue of Japanese Stamps* and Michel ed., *Deutschland Spezial Katalog 2011, Vol I-II*.

Japanese Army (IJA) and Prince Arisugawa representing the Japanese Naval forces (Figure 2).¹⁵ What is interesting about these four issues is how they subtly mark a turning point in Japanese history.¹⁶ These were the first Japanese stamps illustrating people, both drawn in Western style uniforms and groomed facial hair. These issues would also be the last to bare English writing until after WWII. The celebration of military victories and colonial empire became one of the continuous themes of commemoratives until the end of WWII.¹⁷ The initial usage of English text as well as the Western depiction of members of the imperial family illustrate how the Japanese government was concerned with portraying political space and Japanese nationhood for an external audience. Gradually, the focus of postal emissions was directed towards the internal perception of nationhood. The dropping of English text, Arabic numerals, and to a lesser extent, Western style dress, could thus be interpreted as a precursor to a general trend of policies aimed at emphasizing the Asiatic tradition as opposed to Western influence on Japanese society.

A very intriguing case were the ¥5 and ¥10 high value definitive issues of 1908/14 showing Empress Jingū-kōgō (Figure 3).¹⁸ The image used for both stamps is the same as the one used for a banknote issued in 1881.¹⁹ Empress Jingū was a legendary figure in Japanese history living about 1800 years ago. The Jingū on the stamps looks very Western/Victorian and modern. An Italian artist working for a German printing company did the artwork, which illustrates the interplay between the Japan of the present and ancient Japan, but also between Western and

¹⁵ Scott, *World Stamp Catalogue* 4, O-J, 2009: A-32-3. Kitashirakawa died from illness after the capture of Taiwan and was subsequently elevated to a *kami*—a personified deity—under state Shinto.

¹⁶ Japan Philatelic Society Foundation ed., *Sakura 2011 Catalogue of Japanese Stamps*, C 3–6.

¹⁷ Cf. Frewer, "Japanese Postage Stamps as Social Agents," pp. 1–19.

¹⁸ Japan Philatelic Society Foundation, ed., *Sakura 2011 Catalogue of Japanese Stamps* 231/32 (2011), pp. 119–122.

¹⁹ Melanie Trede, "Banknote Design as a Battlefield of Gender Politics and National Representation in Meiji Japan," in Doris Croissant, Catherine Vance, et al., eds., *Performing "Nation": Gender Politics in Literature, Theater, and the Visual Arts of China and Japan, 1880–1940* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2008), pp. 55–104.

Japanese aesthetics. A 1924 issue (printed until 1937) of the definitive high values of ¥5 and ¥10 also includes Jingū, but the image was created by a Japanese artist, thus attributing a more Japanese aesthetic style.²⁰ Jingū was the first woman ever drawn on Japanese currency, and until present day, only three women have been depicted on banknotes. With the exception of a factory girl in the 2nd Shōwa definitive series of 1942–46 (Figure 3), no other women have been illustrated on Japanese stamps until after WWII.²¹ The choice for Jingū as a national symbol on the highest definitive values thus requires some explanation.



Figure 3. Empress Jingū Kōgo (1908/14); Empress Jingū Kōgo (1924/37); 2nd Shōwa Series Factory Girl (1942–46)

As previously mentioned, emperors were not portrayed at all on stamps because of resistance from the Imperial Household “Kunai-chō.” Dobson writes on symbols representing the Imperial Household:

... the Meiji government issued the first Japanese postage stamps carrying two dragons which symbolized the Emperor—a symbol which was also used on the first currency issued by the Meiji government. This was a technique adopted from China where the direct representation of the Emperor was frowned upon in favour of a symbolic rendering known as the rhetoric of concealment (*tokai no shuji*). Thus, the mythical dragon,

²⁰ Japan Philatelic Society Foundation. *Sakura 2011 Catalogue of Japanese Stamps* 2010: Nos. 209–12.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Nos. 237, 244.

the *kirin*, or the male phoenix, the *hoo*, were favored (Uemura 1996: 104-5). Both animals were regarded as symbolizing good luck and joy which beautified the Emperor. Another mark used to symbolize the Imperial family was the chrysanthemum, which soon appeared on postage stamps in 1872 as part of the Meiji government's policy of asserting the position of the Emperor and was not removed until Japan's defeat in the Second World War and the Occupation.²²

For high definitive values, the above-mentioned chrysanthemum emblem was retained yet a less abstract reference to the Imperial House was added by using the image of Empress Jingū. Why was the image of Empress Jingū accepted by the Imperial Household despite her imperial lineage? Ever since the expansion of neo-Confucian thought, in particular during the Edo period, Jingū's imperial status has been contested making her somewhat more human instead of divine. The ambiguity between the human and divine origin, on the one hand symbolizing ancient Japan, yet on the other hand being ambiguous enough to be depicted on banal objects like stamps, made her an ideal choice for the high value stamps. In this capacity, Jingū as depicted on stamps could be interpreted as serving as a proxy for Amaterasu-ōmikami or the imperial family.²³ Distance between the god-like emperor and his subjects was maintained even with regard to postal emissions.

After the start of the twentieth century, in tandem with the disappearance of Western writing, the depictions on Japanese stamps become increasingly more Asian or non-Western. What is remarkable is how gradual this process occurs despite tremendous changes and crises in Japanese political and social life encompassing Taishō democracy, and the early Shōwa period. The autocratic statist Meiji era (1868–1912) is followed by the liberal Taishō era (1912–1926) and the fascist early Shōwa period (1926–1945). However, the classification of regime changes as parallel with the ruling monarch is misleading, as the transition from one

²² Dobson, "Japanese Postage Stamps: Propaganda and Decision Making," p. 28.

²³ Trede, "Banknote Design as a Battlefield of Gender Politics and National Representation in Meiji Japan," pp. 63–64.

phase to the next was gradual and often convoluted. Even the military coup attempt of 1936 can only be understood as part of a series of events leading to increased military and de facto one party rule. After 1936, the usage of roman script for the value is dropped as well, a change that will survive until present day. It should be noted that the reason for the survival of the abolition of Western script for value notation—especially with regard to post WWII stamps—may not be entirely grounded in attempts to root out Westernness, yet also as the practical result of inflation since the Yen subdivision of Sen had gone out of use.²⁴



Figure 4. German Empire high values, celebrating the empire (1900-1917); “Aachener Krone”

The postal history of the early imperial period in Germany is similar to that of Japan, yet postal emissions in this period are characterized by more signs of instability and lack of imperial consolidation than in Japan. The separate German states foregoing the empire had already been issuing stamps as early as 1849.²⁵ Unlike imperial Japan, imperial Germany did not issue any commemorative stamps, although some higher definitive values could be seen as pseudo commemoratives like the highest definitive

²⁴ An older subdivision of the Yen, the *Rin* had lost its purpose shortly after the introduction of stamps in Japan. By the early 1940s, the 厘5(Rin) stamps were discontinued. An Edo period subdivision *Mon* was only used in the first definitive stamps series in 1871.

²⁵ Michel ed., *Deutschland Spezial Katalog 2011, Vol I-II* (Munich: Schwaneberger Verlag GMBH, 2011).

values of two, three and five marks issued from 1900 until 1917 depicting celebrations of the empire (Figure 4).²⁶

Despite the imperial era in Germany being the most consistent with regard to continuity of depictions of national symbols, it still appears to have been much less congruent and continuous than Meiji and early Taishō Japan. Unlike the continuity of the state embodied by the always present and clear representation of state sovereignty by using the chrysanthemum emblem of the imperial family, such a symbol is inconstantly present during German Wilhelmine imperial age, and in most cases, not even as a central feature but a mere detail instead. Although one could expect that the most prevalent symbol would be the eagle, in fact, the symbol most consistently reproduced and present on German issues is the imperial crown.²⁷ The eagle, oak, and oak leaf are all three symbols of German nationhood, yet they are in themselves not symbolic of the empire, let alone the reigning imperial dynasty.

The only icon of imperial sovereignty that is present in nearly all imperial issues—either centrally featured or as a mere detail—is the imperial crown also called *Aachener Krone*.²⁸ Although adopted as an official national symbol in October 1871, the crown in fact never existed. The various depictions of the crown, however, do closely resemble the crown of the Holy Roman emperors. The age of the original crown is unclear, yet estimates put its origin between the ninth and twelfth century AD, thereby making it one of the oldest symbols of German nationalism. This crown was last worn by a Habsburg monarch in 1806 until Napoleon dissolved the Holy Roman Empire of the German nation.²⁹ After the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806, and subsequent failures to create a greater German state (including the Austrian lands) the crown was

²⁶ Ibid., Nos. 64–66 and variations.

²⁷ In the first few years, German stamps would feature an imperial eagle yet the only symbol part of that eagle-image to be continuously reproduced was the *Aachener Krone*.

²⁸ Paul D. Van Wie, *Image, History and Politics—The Coinage of Modern Europe* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1999), pp. 27–31; For more background cf.: Schulze, *The Course of German Nationalism—From Frederick the Great to Bismarck, 1763–1867*.

²⁹ Van Wie, *Image, History and Politics—The Coinage of Modern Europe*, pp. 27–31.

kept at the Hofburg in Vienna. Contrary to the Japanese chrysanthemum it is far less predominant and in some cases reduced to a detail, giving much more importance to alternative national symbols like variations on the imperial eagle and the new age deity Germania.³⁰ Whereas Japan had a clear symbol representing the ruling monarch while at the same time incarnating the nation it appears that the elites responsible for the design of German postage stamps were engaging in identity shopping.

The other symbols present on German stamps during the imperial age are variations of the imperial eagle and the Germania. The eagle exists in two large subcategories, one with a large and one with a small breast shield. The most popular German stamp of the imperial age, however, is found in the so-called Germania series: From 1900 until the first years of the Republic (1922), a fictitious female deity Germania comparable to the French Marianne or Lady Liberty symbolizes the German state (Figure 5).³¹ Originally, the stamp design was not popular and received as kitsch; however, it gradually became acceptable and even popular due to its rather uncontroversial nature in the sense of de-emphasizing the dominance of Prussia and the protestant states. Nevertheless, two of the largest kingdoms, Bavaria and Wuerttemberg continued to keep their own postal authority, printing their own stamps until the early years of the Weimar Republic, thus illustrating the division between the North and South inherent in the empire. One of the reasons for the popularity of the Germania series was not only the relatively long period throughout which this stamp type was used (twenty-two years) but also the rather neutral uncontroversial content.³² Unlike the imperial eagle, the Germania issues do not contain a direct link to the Kingdom of Prussia or the imperial house of Hohenzollern. Instead, a Valkyrie-like female figure wearing the fictitious imperial crown is depicted. Unlike the Japanese semi-mythical figure of Empress Jingū, for over 20 years, the image of Germany abroad and at home on postal stamps was that of a figure that never existed. In many of the German postal offices abroad—China, Morocco, Turkey—the same Germania series was used with overprints indicating location and currency. German occupation-issues

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Heinz Hilmer, "Ein Bild ging um die Welt," *Archiv fuer deutsche Postgeschichte* 1 (1975), pp. 96–106.

³² Ibid.

during WWI for Belgium, France, Poland, and Romania, were also predominantly overprinted Germania stamps.



Figure 5. “Germania” variations for domestic and foreign postal offices

Given the absence of overly ostentatious symbols referring to the Prussian imperial dynasty, and dominance of rather neutral allegorical images, it can be surmised that representations of the nation on German imperial stamps were far more focused on forging internal cohesion and less on gaining external acknowledgement when compared to Japanese stamps of the same era. A minor exception to this was the shift in what was written on stamps as of 1902. From 1871 to 1902, the inscription on stamps only provided the value in Arabic numerals, the currency and the term “Reichspost” (imperial postage). The name of the country was not mentioned until 1902 when “Reichspost” was replaced with the term “Deutsches Reich” (German realm/empire). At the advent of the introduction of stamps, it was common for issuing states to ignore mentioning the country name on the stamp as its primary use was internal communication; a slow increase of postal traffic abroad may have triggered the indication of the country name. It was only gradually that the name was added often when a clearly identifiable national symbol abroad was

possible. Instead of using the country name on stamps, Great Britain to this day opts for the image of the reigning monarch's head instead. Using the image of the reigning monarch was a widespread alternative to using other national symbols; Germany and Japan were notable exceptions.³³

There are two common explanations as to why this did not happen in Wilhelmine Germany. One is anecdotal and probably based on fiction, while the other one is more plausible. The first account is that emperor Wilhelm II was presented with the idea of having him portrayed on stamps but declined the offer because it would mean people would stamp his head while licking his backside.³⁴ This explanation is most likely part of the Berlin folklore of that period, which contained a number of stories around the monarch's flamboyant personality. The more plausible explanation is that the Prussian (and Protestant) emperor was still not fully recognized by many of his subjects, even in officially Prussian yet predominantly Roman Catholic areas like the Rhineland, and he did not want to provoke the neighboring kings and royals unnecessarily.³⁵ An additional reason explaining the need for neutrality was the planned integration of the Bavarian and Württemberg postal services.³⁶ The higher values of German imperial coinage depicted the local state monarch on the obverse and national eagle on the reverse.³⁷ This made it possible that the imperial eagle with the Hohenzollern shield—emblem of the Prussian royal house—on its breast was less contested as the national symbol because the image of the local monarch was featured on the obverse. Postal stamps, however, only have one side available for images and as such, a pragmatic solution as for the imperial coinage was not possible.

From 1900 until the end of WWI, the high value of two marks depicted an allegoric image celebrating unity between northern and

³³ The Japanese government briefly considers depicting the emperor on stamps after WWII yet rejects the idea (Dobson 2005).

³⁴ "Kaiser Wilhelm II," Philadelphia Das Lexikon der Philatelie (accessed March 2012, http://www.philapedia.de/index.php/Kaiser_Wilhelm_II).

³⁵ Unlike monarchs of the other German states, Wilhelm was King of Prussia and Emperor of Germany at the same time.

³⁶ Hilmer, "Ein Bild ging um die Welt," p. 101; Michael Jäschke, *100 Jahre Germania*, (Dessau: Lantelme, 1999).

³⁷ Van Wie, *Image, History and Politics—The Coinage of Modern Europe*, pp. 27–28.

southern German states, suggesting that four decades after the founding of the empire it was still necessary to stress unity among German states.³⁸ Briefly stated, the external depiction of German political space was influenced by a significant lack of internal cohesion. The existence of postage stamps of predecessor states like Bavaria, Prussia, Hamburg, and others, as well as the schism between those in favor of a greater Germany (Germany and Austria) and smaller Germany made “forgetting banal nationalism” of the past and “remembering banal nationalism” of the present difficult.³⁹ It would be inaccurate to argue that all German states preceding the second German Empire were modern nation-states. Some, like Prussia were; others, mostly small states, could be seen as states that, according to Spruyt, were merely “mimicking” the modern nation state in its outer reproductions like coinage and postal stamps while also continuing to display characteristics of feudal states.⁴⁰

In contrast, the Japanese people did not have a history of *Kleinstaaterei* (small-state-ism) since Meiji Japan as a modern nation-state abruptly replaced the semi-feudal Shogunate state. As such, the illiterate Japanese people unlike the German population did not remember any type of modern state, but instead had to get used to the concept of a modern state to begin with. The rapid transformation of Japan into a modern nation-state was much more invasive and dramatic for Japanese subjects than the creation of the German empire had been for the German public. The feudal allegiances to Shogunate clans and local lords were replaced by a centralized state; the only element that remained the same was the symbol of the emperor, whereas the link between the Hohenzollern dynasty and the Holy Roman Emperors was faint at best. Creating some sense of continuity with the past without focusing on the emperor was thus almost impossible. Remembering banal nationalism, with regard to depiction of political space on stamps became the emblem of the emperor symbolized by the chrysanthemum emblem. This is also a difference in how Germany and Japan became modern nation states. In the German case, the imperial house of Hohenzollern and its faux-pre-modern symbols were reluctantly accepted

³⁸ Michel ed., *Deutschland Spezial Katalog 2011, Vol I–II*, No. 64 and variations.

³⁹ Billig, *Banal Nationalism*.

⁴⁰ Cf. Hendrik Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors: An Analysis of Systems Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

and did not form the glue keeping the empire together; the *modern* German nation had in part already formed before statehood had. In the Japanese case, the imperial house and its pre-modern symbols were the most important element creating a sense of a modern national belonging among the population, whereas the state created the modern conception of state-belonging. Territorial currencies like stamps thus enabled the Meiji rulers to fuse the pre-modern idea of the Emperor with the modern idea of the Japanese nation-state.

Japanese and German imperialist postal emissions for colonies and occupied territories during the early imperialist era differed even more from each other than the domestic issues. Japan did not issue any specific colonial issues for its Korean, Taiwanese and other colonies; instead the local postal services were amalgamated into the Japanese postal office and the area was annexed. This process was facilitated by the fact that Japan's colonies were mostly adjacent to Japan. In contrast, Germany did supply specific colonial issues for its overseas territories.⁴¹ All of Germany's colonies were far away from the motherland; its closest territories were located in Central-Africa but some as far away as the middle of the Pacific Ocean. The contrast between German colonial and domestic stamps could not have been greater. Whereas a connection with the imperial house was avoided for domestic stamps, this connection was very ostentatiously depicted on colonial stamps. As of 1900 all German colonial stamps bore the image of the imperial yacht HMS Hohenzollern, hinting to the personal colonial ambitions of Wilhelm II and the imperial navy (Figure 12). Colonies were unimportant to the majority of the German population until their loss was used for propagandistic goals after WWI.

The First Democratic Experiment: Weimar Republic and Taishō Japan

The Taishō era—similar to the Weimar experiment in Germany—was a relatively brief period of liberalism that eventually ended in part because of a series of internal and external economic and political crises. Ideologically speaking, the Taishō era could be argued to extend beyond the passing of the Taishō emperor into the early years of Shōwa rule as the

⁴¹ Given the scope of this article, this topic is addressed briefly. Both countries used domestic stamps—often with over-prints indicating the location—for national post offices abroad; Germany had for example a wide network of post offices ranging from Istanbul to Beijing.

change of regime happened more gradually than in Germany. The Taishō era lasted from 1912 until 1926; Weimar from 1919 until 1933. In both cases, autocratic pseudo parliamentary rule was briefly replaced with a democratic experiment for fourteen years. The end of Taishō democracy happened incrementally with the creation of the so called “peace preservation law” of 1925 retracting individual freedoms aimed at leftist political opposition of the government, and culminated in the appointment of military heads of government as of 1932.⁴² Weimar Germany saw an increase of parliamentary power moving away from autocratic rule that, despite equal male suffrage, had characterized the imperial governments. What both countries had in common were strong anti-democratic conservative elites with an aversion to communist and leftist parties. Ironically, while civil liberties were infringed, the suffrage increased. In both nations, extra-parliamentary military leaders would become appointed as heads of government eventually culminating in one-party rule and extreme nationalistic ideology.

For both countries, the biggest crisis during this period occurred in 1923, which was mirrored in postal emissions. Germany suffered hyperinflation originating from the inability to pay its war debt and accelerated by a crippled economy; most of the postal issues during this year were numeral definitive issues reaching the record value of 50 billion marks (Figure 6).⁴³ In Japan, the big Kanto earthquake was a natural catastrophe that bore significant political and economic consequences. For days during the chaotic aftermath of the earthquake, ethnic minorities and political opposition became a target resulting in the murders of thousands of Japanese subjects, in particular Koreans and leftist politicians. Most victims were killed at the hands of mobs but the Japanese police and army murdered many political opposition leaders.⁴⁴ An emergency series of definitives was issued the same year, featuring no scalloped edges and

⁴² James L. McClain, *Japan, A Modern History* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2010). A number of military Chancellors also led the Weimar Republic in the years leading up to the Nazi takeover.

⁴³ Michel ed., *Deutschland Spezial Katalog 2011, Vol I–II*, No. 330.

⁴⁴ Sonia Ryang, "The Great Kanto Earthquake and the Massacre of Koreans in 1923: Notes on Japan's Modern National Sovereignty," *Anthropological Quarterly* 76 (2003), pp. 733–744.

printed on inferior paper.⁴⁵ The new definitive high values of ¥5 and ¥10 stamps issued in 1924 until 1937 once again bore the image of Empress Jingū as the 1908/14 issue did (Figure 3).⁴⁶ The earthquake had destroyed the printing plates of the old Jingū image and the new design was significantly more Asiatic in its appearance than the previous Italian design of a westernized Jingū.



Figure 6. German 50 billion mark hyper-inflation stamp (1923); Kanto earthquake emergency issue (1923); German issues Weimar Republic; Presidential series 410-22/435-7/454/465-6 (1928–32); 1000 year celebration Rhineland 372-4 (1925); End of Rhineland Occupation 444-5 (June 30, 1930)

⁴⁵ Japan Philatelic Society Foundation ed., *Sakura 2011 Catalogue of Japanese Stamps*, Nos. 200–8.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Nos. 209–12.



Figure 7. Enthronement Emperor Yoshihito C12 (1915); Silver Wedding Emperor Yoshihito C38 (1925); 2nd Census C52-3 (1930)

The first stamps of the Weimar republic were the last of the Germania series and circulated until 1922, four years after the proclamation of the republic.⁴⁷ For the remainder of the Weimar era the commemorative and definitive designs on German stamps were rather politically uncontroversial; most issues included depictions of composers, artists, famous buildings and images of both presidents (the Social democrat Ebert and conservative Hindenburg).⁴⁸ An exception, if any, were the versions commemorating the millennial of the Rhineland in 1925 and those memorializing the end of the Rhineland occupation by Franco-Belgian troops in 1930 (Figure 6).⁴⁹ The purpose of both series was to emphasize the Rhineland area as an integral part of a sovereign German state through postal depiction of German political space.

⁴⁷ Michel ed., *Deutschland Spezial Katalog 2011, Vol I-II*, Nos. 197–8.

⁴⁸ Ibid. Presidential series 1927: Nos. 403–406; Presidential series 1928–1932: 410–422, 435–437, 454; Hindenburg medallions 1932: 465–466, 467–473.

⁴⁹ Ibid., Nos. 372–4, 444–5.



Figure 8. Crown Prince Hirohito visit to Taiwan C37 (1923); Military Review Russo-Japanese War C9-10 (1906); Fall of Singapore C85-6 (1942); 1st Anniversary of the “Greater East Asia War” C92-3 (1942); Definitive 2nd Shōwa series stamp, map of Japanese realm 255/6 (1942–5); Definitive 1st and 2nd Shōwa series Admiral Nogi (1937–45)

The images on Japanese stamps of the same period are undoubtedly more nationalistic than their German counterparts, except when compared to late Meiji and early Shōwa emissions. The type of topics covered during this era in Japan include several variations on celebrating the Empire: such as the enthronement of Emperor Taishō (Yoshihito), the silver wedding of Emperor Taishō, and the enthronement of Emperor Shōwa (Hirohito) (Figure 7).⁵⁰ Other stamps of that period allude to Japan's colonial empire in a secondary fashion: depiction of flags on the 50th anniversary of postal services emission, and crown prince Hirohito's visit to Taiwan, and the second census issue showing the map of Japan and its dependencies (Figure 8).⁵¹

Nazi Germany and Militarist Japan

For both countries, this period is marked by imperial expansion, wars of aggression, and reclusion from the international community and international security organizations. In the German case, it appears as if there were indications that the Weimar system that lacked support internally and externally might be destined for this path, albeit not necessarily in its most extreme form like Nazism. In the case of Japan, imperial ambitions and warfare became significantly greater, yet were not a break with the past. Although the political atmosphere of the Meiji (1868–1912), Taishō (1912–1926), and Early Shōwa eras (1926–1945) were considerably different to the point where one could speak of regime changes, the logic of Japan's foreign policy remained the same, a fact that is mirrored by the depiction of Japanese political space on stamps. Despite failing to establish a military and a de facto fascist dictatorship in the 1930s, military supported take-over of government did not happen in 1940. However, the Japanese variant of *Realpolitik*: “Strong army, rich country” [“Enrich the country, strengthen the military”] appears to be an uninterrupted theme throughout Japan's postal history from the 1890s until 1945.⁵² Japan did not become militarist in 1940; it had been militarist ever since the Meiji era. The

⁵⁰ Japan Philatelic Society Foundation ed., *Sakura 2011 Catalogue of Japanese Stamps*, Nos. C 38–41, C 46–9.

⁵¹ Ibid., Nos. C 28–31, C 36–7, C 52–3.

⁵² Cf. Richard Samuels, *“Rich Country, Strong Army”: National Security and the Technological Transformation of Japan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

narrative of a militarist take-over was a myth that conservative politicians used to revert responsibility from themselves and the Emperor.⁵³ In this illustration of Japan on postal stamps, it is furthered evidenced by several examples of skirmishes and attempts at imperial expansion, that despite the internationalist Meiji and liberal Taishō eras, imperial expansion and military aggression had been an integral part of Japanese foreign policy—long before the establishment of Manchukuo in 1931, the bombing of Shanghai in 1932, the Marco Polo bridge incident and war with China in 1937, and even Pearl Harbor in 1941. The brief period of supposed Japanese *internationalism* signified by Japan's participation in WWII and membership of the League of Nations was at best secondary to imperialist ambitions and probably more of a means to that end. This continuity is mirrored in Japan's postal emissions. In particular, when analyzing the postal emissions from the Meiji era until 1945, the only thematic change that occurred was that Japan's adversaries and scope of military aggression changed. Instead of a focus on its weaker regional neighbors China and Russia, attention shifted towards the British and Dutch colonial empire, as well as the US influence in the region or from the East to the West (Figure 8).

Frewer argues that the depictions on Shōwa emissions from 1937 onward clearly indicated the regime change that had taken place when compared to post war Shōwa emissions, or as he puts it: "However, Japan's issues were relatively few (less than twenty) [Frewer writes about commemoratives] until the 1930s when her stamp designs became a tool for promoting government ideology."⁵⁴ However, there are three reasons in which Frewer falls short in this claim. First, the number of issues emitted in earlier decades was not that much lower.⁵⁵ Second, when taking into

⁵³ The consecutive wars with China in 1895, and Russia 1905, the annexation of Korea, the participation in the First World War and subsequent administration of former German territories as of 1914, the assassination of Manchurian warlords and targeted destabilization of the region in 1928, all happened long before the transformation of Japan into a military backed one-party regime.

⁵⁴ Frewer, "Japanese Postage Stamps as Social Agents," p. 3.

⁵⁵ Japan emitted 27 commemorative stamps or series of stamps before 1937; Ten commemorative stamps or series of stamps are emitted between 1937–1945

account the emission of national parks stamps (counting as a separate stamp category in Japanese philately yet considered commemorative from a Western perspective) the number of peaceful issues in the period of 1937-1945 is far higher than the previous decades. Third, and most important, when compared to the earlier Meiji, Taishō, and early Shōwa eras, this difference of promoting government ideology of military conquest and empire is subtle at best. In fact, it is striking how continuous and similar issues are with regard to topical variation for all eras preceding 1945. As mentioned previously, depictions demonstrating Japan's imperial ambitions were put on postal stamps as of 1896.⁵⁶

Other images celebrating Japan's colonial empire in East Asia are featured on several occasions well before one could speak of the full establishment of a militarist regime. Good examples for this are the emissions for the 1906 military review for Japan's triumph over Russia in 1905, the Crown Prince Hirohito's visit to Taiwan in 1923, the second census in 1930 depicting Japan, Korea, the Kwantung peninsula, and Taiwan as one (Figure 8).⁵⁷ In addition, the shift away from Western script dates from much earlier than the late 1930s, although targeted anti-Western and Pan-Oriental propaganda will become much more predominant in the late 1930s. Despite a significant regime change in the late thirties, political crisis, and an attempted military coup d'état, the depiction of the nation on Japanese stamps changes very subtly during this period. The general theme of depicting the nation remains focused on "Strong army, rich country."

The subtle changes that did take place with regard to the depiction of political space centered around the changed aim of Japanese imperial ambitions as of 1941 selling the war as "The greater East Asia war" after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Two emissions stress this shift in Japan's ambition in the region: one is commemorating the fall of Singapore in 1942, one glorifying the first anniversary "The greater East Asia war" in 1942 depicting tanks in Bataan and the attack on Pearl Harbor.⁵⁸ The definitive issues printed as of 1937 include a number of stamps that also emphasize

⁵⁶ Japan Philatelic Society Foundation ed., *Sakura 2011 Catalogue of Japanese Stamps*, p. 16.

⁵⁷ Ibid., Nos. C 9–10, C 36–7, C 52–3.

⁵⁸ Ibid., Nos. C 85–6, C 92–3.

Japanese imperialist ambitions like the images of military leaders, fighter planes, and fighter pilots.⁵⁹



Figure 9. Golden Bird 2600th anniversary Imperial Calendar C79 (1940); 10th Anniversary of Manchukuo C87-90 (1942)

Although some of the images were discontinued after the US occupation of Japan commences in 1945—notably the most obvious

⁵⁹ Ibid., Nos. 236–7, 223, 225, 231, 255–6, 259, 260.

militarist emissions—many of the other definitives remain in circulation or their motives are reprinted in future definitive series unless explicitly forbidden by SCAP (Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers).⁶⁰ The best illustration of attempting to connect Japan's mythical past with the present during this period is the issue commemorating the 2600th anniversary of the Japanese imperial calendar in 1940. The depicted images include an imperial golden bird, carps, shrines and Mt. Fuji (Figure 9).

The most overt propagandistic issue is the 1942 tenth anniversary of Manchukuo issue. The stamps glorify the ideal and propagated image of Manchukuo as a place of ethnic harmony despite a very different reality (Figure 9).⁶¹ Regardless of the prevalence of anti-Chinese racism in Japanese society and in particular the IJA forces in China, the official narrative conveyed to the Japanese public—and to a lesser extent to the population of Manchukuo and China—through books, movies, posters, and postage stamps was one of racial harmony.⁶² Here you find a deliberate obfuscation of reality by the Japanese government hiding the reality of Japanese rule over Manchuria and instead painting a peaceful harmonic image in line with the continuity of Japan's history.

Unlike the Japanese emissions of 1937–1945 designed to obscure discordance, the emissions of the third Reich 1933–1945 are a much better barometer of regime change. The gradual consolidation of Nazi rule and escalation of the regime's political objectives can be very well illustrated by looking at how different stamp issues—commemoratives in particular—were designed. The first emissions connect with the last ones of the Weimar republic and even create certain continuity between both regimes, like the Hindenburg definitives printed between 1932 and 1934 (Figure 10).⁶³

⁶⁰ Ralph J. D. Braibanti, "State and Religion in Japan," *Far Eastern Review* 16/16 (1947), pp. 185–187; Hugo Dobson, "The Stamp of Approval: Decision-Making Process and Policies in Japan and the UK," *East Asia* 22/2 (2005), pp. 56–76.

⁶¹ Japan Philatelic Society Foundation ed., *Sakura 2011 Catalogue of Japanese Stamps*; Shin'ichi Yamamuro, *Manchuria under Japanese Domination* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

⁶² Eri Hotta, *Pan-Asianism and Japan's War 1931–1945* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

⁶³ Michel ed., *Deutschland Spezial Katalog 2011, Vol I–II*; including the commemorative Hindenburg's mourning issue until 1935.

However, the number of ideologically laden, militaristic issues grows exponentially from that point on.⁶⁴ The first clear reference to Nazism comes with the 1934 airmail issue; an eagle is drawn on the background of a globe with a swastika as a sun behind it. The 1930s issues feature a number of politically motivated images as the one of the airmail stamps celebrating, for example: the return of the Saarland, Army, Hitlerjugend, Party rallies, SA and Hitler's birthday. (Figure 10) With the beginning of the war the number of issues referring to the Nazi party increase dramatically portraying militaristic and nationalistic ideologies that border on utopian.



Figure 10. Hindenburg medallion type stamp, various occupation issues 467-73/482-98/512-28/548-53/+ (1932–1945); Airmail 529-39 (1934); Return of the Saar 565-68 (1935); Hitlerjugend 584-5 (1935); Hitler's 48th birthday 650 (1937)

⁶⁴ Frederick Lauritzen, "Propaganda Art in the Stamps of the Third Reich," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 10 (1988), pp. 62–79.



Figure 11. First issue with Latin instead of Gothic script 764-7 (Spring 1941); First issue with inscription “Grossdeutsches Reich” instead of “Deutsches Reich” 862 (Fall 1943); Volkssturm 908 (1945); SA and SS 909-10 (1945)

There are also a number of other systematic changes like the shift from gothic script to Latin script as of 1941.⁶⁵ As of 1944 the country name on stamps is changed from “Deutsches Reich” (German empire) into *Grossdeutsches Reich* (Greater German empire); signifying the ever more grandiose ambitions of the government as the borders of this empire are already threatened by foreign armies (Figure 11). The last three commemorative issues celebrate the Nazi party’s armed branches of the Volkssturm, SA, and SS.⁶⁶ The depiction of political space for both post-

⁶⁵ Silvia Hartmann, *Fraktur oder Antiqua. Der Schriftstreit von 1881 bis 1941* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1998); Friedrich Beck, “Schwabacher Judenlettern—Schriftverruf im Dritten Reich,” in Botho Brachmann ed., *Die Kunst des Vernetzens. Festschrift fuer wolfgang Hempel* (Potsdam: Verlag für Berlin-Brandenburg, 2006), pp. 251–269.

⁶⁶ Michel ed., *Deutschland Spezial Katalog 2011, Vol I–II*.

1940 Japan and Nazi-Germany serves merely as propaganda, distorting historical fact in favor of a nationalistic narrative. The way in which this is done, however, differs significantly. Japanese wartime postal stamp images perfectly connect with the previous narrative depicting modern Japan as the result of a harmonious evolution of the Japanese nation over the past three millennia; the present is closely tied to the past. The depiction of political space on postage stamps increasingly developed a-temporal characteristics, especially in the case of Nazi-Germany (a-temporal in the sense that there is no direct link with the immediate present). Unlike the Japanese issues of 1942 the depiction of army formations or military vehicles lack a clear connection to specific battles or timeframes. The images on Nazi postage stamps depict bombastic ideals of what the state aspires to be in an unspecified future, which at the same time also attempts to hint at past and present.

With regard to the WWII occupation issues, there was another significant difference between Japan and Germany. Despite racism towards the populations of occupied areas being wide-spread among both occupation regimes, the Japanese issues are often framed as an attempt to depict the occupation as liberation from Western powers, especially after the propagation of the concept of the “Greater Asian War” (against the West) following the attack on Pearl Harbor. German issues for occupied territories, on the other hand, were not at all concerned with the liberation of the occupied populations, with the exception of German-speaking areas that were however amalgamated into the Reich and its postal network.



Figure 12. German colonial stamps depicting HMS Hohenzollern for Kiautschou (Jiaozhou China), German East Africa, and Samoa



Figure 13. Japanese Constitution C102 (1947); Wedding Crown Prince Akihito C292 (1959); Emperor and Empress Visit to U.S. C709 (1975)

Allied Occupation

After the war, the occupying forces decreed limitations on what can and cannot be depicted on postal emissions. The new SCAP (Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers in Japan) influenced constitution is commemorated with the issuing of two stamps, that given its content, could be seen as revolutionary compared to earlier issues (Figure 13). As Mackie explains:

Two postage stamps were issued in May 1947 in commemoration of the promulgation of the new constitution. In the foreground of one stamp, we can see a woman holding a baby. She is dressed like a farming woman in Japanese dress with scarf on her head. To the left of the frame, we can see the distinctive shape of the diet building... the placing of the woman in the same frame as the Diet building suggests a new form of legitimacy—indeed, we could refer to this as

governmental belonging. Her presence there is naturalized, there is no ridiculing of her claims to political legitimacy, and no emphasis on her sexuality. She is no longer seen as 'out of place.' By contrasting this visual representation with those of the 1920s and 1930s, we can see that discourses of gender, national belonging and governmental belonging are specific to particular times and places.⁶⁷

For Japanese postal standards, this is a dramatic change since the 1930s that gradually pushed women out of the public and into the private sphere. It also reflects the foreign influence in Japanese politics until 1952 as the inclusion of women into political life in part originated from SCAP advisory committee on drafting the constitution.⁶⁸ Unlike German issues, the national symbol of the previous regime was also depicted on both issues thereby preserving continuity of the nation. The chrysanthemum is featured on top of both of the above-mentioned stamps. Ironically, it is the last time the chrysanthemum emblem is featured regularly as the allies restricted its use in 1948.⁶⁹ The only time it reappears on post-1947 issues is in direct reference to an event related to the imperial family like the nomination of then Crown Prince Akihito in 1952 or the wedding of the same in 1959 or visits of the emperor to foreign countries and the like (Figure 13).⁷⁰ The Hinomaru—rising sun/sun disk flag—reappears in 1951 on an issue commemorating the signing of the peace treaty.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Vera Mackie, "Picturing political space in 1920s and 1930s Japan," in Sandra Wilson, ed., *Nation and Nationalism in Japan* (Psychology Press, 2002), pp. 53–54.

⁶⁸ John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*. W.W. (New York: Norton & Company, 1999).

⁶⁹ Hugo Dobson, "The Stamp of Approval: Decision-Making Process and Policies in Japan and the UK," p. 60. Willard Woodward, *The Allied Occupation of Japan 1945–1952 and Japanese Religions* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972).

⁷⁰ Japan Philatelic Society Foundation ed., *Sakura 2011 Catalogue of Japanese Stamps*, pp. 21, 30, 34.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

In the immediate period after WWII, German postal authorities were governed by the allied occupation forces. Local post authorities had been installed and gradually integrated in regional and national networks between 1945 and 1949. Nazi symbols like the swastika were prohibited in Germany after the war and it is not surprising that they did not reappear. Although not explicitly forbidden, other national symbols like the eagle or oak leaf would not reappear for years. The postal issues emitted under allied occupation—with the exception of the Soviet sector—are unusually neutral from a political point of view, a trend that continued after West German authorities took over. The images depict trades, buildings and numerals yet no images that could be deemed politically controversial. The GDR is the exception; similar to Nazi postage stamps the images had a strong ideological content. In Japan, certain national symbols like the Yasukuni shrine were forbidden by SCAP, whereas other symbols like the national flag Hinomaru were not forbidden but temporarily restricted.⁷² Unlike the German case, it was possible for the Japanese government—in particular after 1952—to reuse symbols that had been used by the imperialist government before and foster continuity in the depiction of the nation over time.

Concluding Remarks

The use of banal objects in the retelling of national history is a fascinating topic that should remind us how even the most insignificant aspects of our lives are relics of a shared history, however that history may be influenced. Postage stamps tell us how countries' rulers want that country to be perceived internally and externally. This analysis revealed how political space was imagined in pre-1945 Germany and Japan, and despite striking similarities in nation-building and consolidation processes, the way political space was depicted from above was very different. The almost parallel regime evolution in Germany and Japan notwithstanding, there is no such similarity discernible when comparing the images on postage stamps of both nations. The absence of change, the repetition of the same themes, and the almost static depiction of the nation on Japanese stamps conflicts with pre-1945 Japan's tumultuous, and at times, chaotic

⁷² Woodward, *The Allied Occupation of Japan 1945–1952 and Japanese Religions*, pp. 157–180; Dobson, "The Stamp of Approval: Decision-Making Process and Policies in Japan and the UK."

history. Depictions on German stamps are marked by the uncertainty of the state of the nation. Early images are sterile culminating in the proliferation of kitschy Germania. Later images—in particular Nazi-stamps of the early 1940s—appear to have lost their connection with the present, instead focusing on a utopian future. In both cases, the way in which political space is drawn is marginally connected to historical fact; instead, history is used to feed a specific logic of depicting the nation. It is remarkable how one can retell the histories and historical differences between two (similar but dissimilar) nations through intentionally framed stamps in order to generate a specific image of a nation; as a result, it is worth noticing how powerfully imbued mundane items like stamps are in tracing national history.

