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Source: *Monumenta Nipponica*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Summer, 1991), pp. 203-209

Published by: [Sophia University](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2385401>

Accessed: 03-01-2016 00:56 UTC

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# Nishida and the Question of Nationalism

MICHIKO YUSA

**I**N his review of Professor David Dilworth's translation of Nishida Kitarō's 西田幾多郎 last essays, *Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*, in MN 43:3 (1988), pp. 353–62, Professor Valdo H. Vigieliemo raised two questions that he wished Dilworth had addressed in his introduction. They were (1) the connection between *Zen no Kenkyū* 善の研究 and *Bashoteki Ronri to Shūkyōteki Sekaikan* 場所的論理と宗教的世界観, Nishida's first and last writings, and (2) Nishida's historical perspective and view of the nation as expressed in his final work. These two points are well taken, but I will here address only the second one. The clarification of the first point will have to wait for another occasion.

Vigieliemo seems to have made an inference, based on the fact that Nishida did not actively oppose the Russo-Japanese War as his contemporary Uchimura Kanzō 内村鑑三 did, that the philosopher supported Japanese nationalism and imperialism, or rather, that he was 'blind' throughout his life as to the 'demonic aspects of nationalism and its even more demonic extension, imperialism' (pp. 361–62). My research shows otherwise, and the purpose of the present brief note is to question the validity of characterizing Nishida in these terms.

If we do not find many political statements in Nishida's formal philosophical writings, we need only turn to his diary and to his numerous letters written to friends and colleagues. Also Volume 12 of his collected works<sup>1</sup> contain pieces such as 'Gakumonteki Hōhō' 学問的方法, 1937 (pp. 385–94), and 'Tetsugaku Rombunshū Dai-yon Hoi' 哲学論文集第四補遺, 1944, under which unassuming latter title Nishida addressed the notion of *kokutai* 國体 (pp. 397–426), the imperial family, *kōshitsu* 皇室 (pp. 416–19), and the formation of the state, *kokka* 国家 (pp. 420–26). 'Sekai Shinchitsujo no Genri' 世界新秩序の原理,

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<sup>1</sup> Shimomura Toratarō 下村寅太郎 *et al.*,

ed., *Nishida Kitarō Zenshū* 西田幾多郎全集, Iwanami, 3rd ed., 1978–1980. Untitled references to volume and page numbers in the notes below are to this work.

1943 (pp. 426–34), is an appended work, but in fact this is a separate article written in response to a request by some officials of the Tōjō 東条 government. Also included in Volume 12 is *Nihon Bunka no Mondai* 日本文化の問題 (pp. 275–383), originally a series of lectures delivered in April and May 1938 at Kyoto Imperial University and later published in book form in May 1940.<sup>2</sup>

These articles and lectures are in fact the outcome of Nishida's concern for and involvement in the socio-political environment and issues of the late 1930s and 1940s. Far from being a recluse or an armchair philosopher, he was actively involved in the preservation of freedom of learning and education in opposition to the domestic policies of the nationalistic and militaristic government. Although he did not go out on the street with a placard to publicize his views, he voiced his opposition as a philosopher through his lectures and writings, both of which had no little impact on the public. For instance, *Nihon Bunka no Mondai* sold 40,000 copies immediately on publication.<sup>3</sup> '*Gakumonteki Hōhō*' was also originally a public lecture given in October 1937 in Tokyo in response to a request by the Ministry of Education. On that occasion Nishida spoke against the irrational trend of nationalism, which had begun to plague scholarly activity, and insisted on the rational method as the basis of any scholarship.<sup>4</sup>

As the tendency toward militarism became stronger in the 1930s, shaking the frail foundations of the parliamentary system, Nishida grew increasingly critical and wary of the expansion of military power within and without the government. Concerning the 5.15 Incident in 1932, he wrote to his friend Yamamoto Ryōkichi 山本良吉, 'It is as if the country has turned to anarchy. I wonder what the next cabinet is going to be like.'<sup>5</sup> When the 2.26 Incident occurred in 1936, he called it 'cruel violence' and the 'destruction of the country', fearing 'from now on, the military will begin to control Japan.'<sup>6</sup>

Regarded as the guardian figure of academia, Nishida commanded the highest respect. As such, he was exposed to accusations and threats from the ultranationalist camp, for which anything that had a trace of Western in-

<sup>2</sup> An abridged translation is provided in Ryusaku Tsunoda *et al.*, ed., *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, Columbia U.P., 2, 1964, pp. 350–65, with a helpful short introduction in which we read:

'In spite of the dangers to which it exposed him, and against the advice of some of his colleagues, Nishida decided to publish his lectures in order that the true meaning of the Japanese spirit might be understood and the Japanese people not be misled in coming to crucial decisions at that moment in history. It was mainly on the basis of this book [*Nihon Bunka no Mondai*] that he was attacked as pro-Western during the war, and also as a reac-

tionary by many "progressives" after the war' (p. 351).

<sup>3</sup> Nishida to Iwanami Shigeo 岩波茂雄, 8 April 1940, #1463 (19, pp. 110–11).

<sup>4</sup> Nishida stated that 'scholarship must be respected' (letter to Hori Koretaka 堀維幸, 12 October 1937, #1150; 18, p. 621), and that studies in Japan must be logical (letter to Yamamoto Ryōkichi 山本良吉, 2 December 1937, #1170; 18, p. 630).

<sup>5</sup> 18 May 1932, #733 (18, p. 453).

<sup>6</sup> To Hori Koretaka, 27 February & 2 March 1936, #1005 & #1009 (18, pp. 561 & 563).

fluence was incompatible with the 'Japanese spirit' (*nihon seishin* 日本精神). Nishida's physical safety was not always guaranteed. His letter to Mutai Risaku 務台理作 provides a glimpse of the situation in which leading intellectuals were placed.

I heard that Minoda [Muneki] and his group intend to bring an accusation against me, Tanabe [Hajime], Amano [Teiyū], Watsuji [Tetsurō], and others in order to do us in. They have picked me first as their target.<sup>7</sup>

In view of the advent of nationalism and militarism, Nishida was particularly concerned with the plight of education, for 'the aim of education is to cultivate a human being; to cultivate a human being is to create the world.'<sup>8</sup> He remained especially critical of the militarist policy toward education under Education Minister Araki Sadao 荒木貞夫.<sup>9</sup>

It is important to note that Nishida had taught from 1909 to 1910 at Gakushūin before he moved to Kyoto Imperial University, because it was through his Gakushūin connection that he came to know Konoe Fumimaro 近衛文麿, prime minister three times 1937–1941; Kido Kōichi 木戸孝一, who occupied important cabinet posts and later became Minister of Imperial Affairs and worked closely with the Shōwa emperor; and Harada Kumao 原田熊雄, who acted as secretary for Saionji Kinmochi 西園寺公望, the last *genrō* 元老. Nishida remained closely in touch with Harada, and it appears that thanks to this contact he was kept well informed of current movements on the political front.

When Konoe was appointed prime minister in 1937, the public reacted enthusiastically to the young, princely statesman. In the honeymoon days of the Konoe cabinet, Nishida was also hopeful, only to be later disillusioned, that Konoe would redirect Japan's political course, which by that time was moving toward conservative nationalism and militarism. Nishida met with Konoe on 16 September 1937 and advised him that 'the direction of the contemporary world' should not 'negate individuals but value and embrace them'; and that, contrary to what many ultranationalists were advocating, 'orientalism' was not the denial of reason and rational thinking, but 'oriental culture must have its own *logic*,<sup>10</sup> that is, it has to be rational and reasonable, and not blind. Again, when Kido was Minister of Education, Nishida met with him twice, on 26 October 1937 and 19 April 1938, and expressed his reservations about the policy of thought control, and in the latter meeting Kido listened to his views against narrowly conceived nationalism. In his diary Kido noted that Nishida lectured him that the concept of 'the world' (*sekai* 世界) was no longer an

<sup>7</sup> 4 July 1938, #1243 (19, p. 30).

<sup>8</sup> To Kimura Morimoto, 21 September 1938, #1280 (19, pp. 45–46).

<sup>9</sup> To Harada Kumao 原田熊雄, 16 June 1938, #1238 (19, pp. 27–28). See also the letter

to Yamamoto Ryōkichi, 21 June 1938, #1239 (19, p. 28).

<sup>10</sup> To Harada Kumao, 18 September 1937, #1138 (18, pp. 615–16). Emphasis added.

abstract idea; that it would be a mistake for a nation to withdraw within itself in the name of nationalism; and that every nation ought to interact with every other nation on a global scale.<sup>11</sup>

If the ultranationalists threatened Nishida, others needed him as the leading philosopher and foremost thinker of the time. He was even asked by military officials in 1943 to draft a proclamation of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere for the Tōjō cabinet in connection with the Greater East Asia Meeting scheduled later that year. Some politicians believed that a lofty philosophical vision and erudition were necessary for the occasion, and they approached Nishida for such a statement. He was first outraged by the very idea, but he eventually agreed to write a draft in the hope of presenting his philosophical vision to the military. In this connection he wrote the original draft of '*Sekai Shinchitsujo no Genri*'. As might have been expected, his essay turned out to be far too philosophical and difficult for the officials to understand, and in the end nothing of his views was taken into account.<sup>12</sup>

Letters to Watsuji reveal that Nishida wanted to emphasize 'over against fanatic nationalists, that there is a universal dimension in the "Japanese Spirit".' He hoped that his philosophical vision might be finally heard, but was bitterly disappointed in the end.<sup>13</sup> He may perhaps be regarded as naive even to entertain such a possibility of enlightening the military, but from Nishida's point of view, he acted according to his conviction that 'a philosopher's mission is to grasp the historical problem of the given historic world.'<sup>14</sup> (This sentence especially caught Viglielmo's attention, p. 356.)

Nishida viewed Japan and East Asia in terms of the formation of a 'global world' (*sekaiteki sekai* 世界的世界, or sometimes *sekaishiteki sekai* 世界史的世界, literally, 'the world of global history'). In '*Sekai Shinchitsujo no Genri*', he wrote, 'Each nation should develop its unique tradition *in accordance with its heritage and tradition*, but at the same time, it should go beyond itself [that is, its national interests] in order to form a global unity.'<sup>15</sup> Underlying this vision is his philosophical view of the world as 'a dialectical world' in which the individual many (be it individuals or nations) and the one (be it a nation or the global world) are inseparably related, and in which dialectical unity individual uniqueness is not swallowed up but preserved.

Nishida continued, 'The principle of the formation of the global world does not negate the individual uniqueness of each nation. On the contrary. Each nation fully lives its historical existence, and yet the world concretely realizes its unity.' This global world is compared to an organic body. 'For the body

<sup>11</sup> Kido Kōichi, *Kido Kōichi Nikki* 木戸孝一日記, Tōkyō Daigaku Shuppankai, 1966, 1, p. 598 (26 October 1937) & 2, p. 637 (19 April 1938).

<sup>12</sup> See my article, 'Fashion and *A-letheia*: Philosophical Integrity and the War-Time Thought Control', in *Studies in Comparative*

*Philosophy*, Tokyo, 16 (1989), pp. 281-94.

<sup>13</sup> To Watsuji Tetsurō 和辻哲郎, 14 & 23 June 1943, #1781 & 1784 (19, pp. 243 & 245).

<sup>14</sup> *Bashoteiki Ronri to Shūkyōteki Sekaikan*, in 11, p. 442.

<sup>15</sup> 12, p. 428. Emphasis in original.

to function as a whole, its individual members must fully become themselves [that is, each organ ought to function to its full capacity]. For each individual to become itself is the whole to become one.' Such an organic body is 'unique', endowed with 'personality'. He claimed that the basis of morality of the modern world is 'neither a Christian philanthropism nor the ancient Chinese Way of the King'; instead it is found in the endeavor of each nation to transcend itself to become the constructor of the global world.<sup>16</sup> According to Nishida, the 'self-transcendence' has a religious basis, and this must be why he declared, 'The true nation has its ground in the religious,' a statement that Viglielmo finds 'disturbing' (p. 361). 'Religion' here should not be identified with any particular religion, sect, or creed, but rather with the source from which human awareness of religiosity springs forth.

Nishida maintained that it was essential in education to teach this global vision. If the Japanese must denounce British and American ways, then they should denounce not their ways of thinking but rather their imperialism.<sup>17</sup> His criticism of Japanese nationalism and imperialism is based on their lack of universality and of a global and historical perspective. Merely self-centered nationalism is but an 'ethno-egocentrism' (*minzoku-jikoshugi* 民族自己主義), he argued, and such ethno-egocentrism is not free from expansionism (or 'invasionism', *shinryaku shugi* 侵略主義) and imperialism.<sup>18</sup> Only when a nation embraces transcendence and universality within itself, that is, when it transcends itself from within, does it become a genuine nation (*kokka* 国家), a moral entity, and only such a nation with its moral principles can become the leader of the global world. Only by discovering 'globality' and 'universality' within the Japanese tradition could Japan play a leading role in East Asia.<sup>19</sup> Nishida was able to express his criticism of Japanese militarism and imperialism only to this extent, but given the fact that voicing any criticism at all could cost a person's life, the aging philosopher put up a remarkable resistance. As regards his pluralistic vision of the 'global world' that blossoms while being rooted in various ethnic heritages, Nishida was surely ahead of his time.

While engaged in philosophical thought, Nishida always kept his eyes on the current world situation. After writing '*Sekai Shinchitsujo no Genri*', he produced another essay on the controversial subject of *kokutai*, or 'national polity', in response to a request by friends and acquaintances.<sup>20</sup> In this work he reiterated his view of 'the nation' as a member of the global community. He defined the personality (*kosei* 個性), that is, the particular features, of Japan as *kokutai*, which, he maintained, should not be exclusive but open to the world; it should harbor within itself the universality of the human spirit and history.

<sup>16</sup> 12, pp. 429–30.

<sup>17</sup> 12, p. 431.

<sup>18</sup> 12, pp. 432–34.

<sup>19</sup> 12, pp. 429 & 433.

<sup>20</sup> Diary, in 17, p. 178; the essay is given in 12, pp. 397–416.

See also Nishida's diary for 10 January 1944 (17, p. 678) and his letter to Osada Arata 長田新, 10 March 1944 (19, pp. 230–31, #1751). The letter is misdated 1943 in the current edition of *Zenshū*.



Nishida was against Japan's going into the Pacific War. He attributed the reason for the war and its devastating consequences to lack of knowledge, which in turn was the result of narrowly framed, poor education. In 1944, a year before his death, he wrote to Kimura Motomori 木村素衛:

Looking at the state in which our country is today, I painfully feel the importance of 'making human beings' [*ningen o tsukuru* 人間を作る] more than making organizations or systems. I desire only the well-being of the Japanese people. Everything comes back to education. If the people are uncritical and blind, as today's Japanese are, then nothing can be expected of them.<sup>21</sup>

On 14 March 1945 he wrote to Nagayo Yoshirō 長興善郎:

As to the present condition of the country, . . . unfortunately it has come to what we foresaw. It is nothing but the natural consequence of the doings of those arrogant and reckless hicks [*inakamonodomo* 田舎者共] who don't look at the world. . . . I think that it was a fundamental mistake to have identified the national polity with military power, and to have placed national confidence in military power. Since of old, no country has prospered by the sword alone. Military power soon comes to a deadlock. An ever-enduring country stands on the foundation of respectable morality and culture. Isn't it now time for the Japanese to fundamentally turn [the course of events]? After [the government] has guided the people with only military power, neglecting diplomacy and everything else, and when the military power crumbles, how are the people to find self-confidence? People who have lost self-confidence are people without a country. But even if the country suffers the loss of its military power, if the people manage to possess self-respect by assuming a higher and larger standpoint, they will surely rise again. I believe that the Japanese people are an excellent people. Only the leaders were rotten. [What has happened to Japan] is truly lamentable. Scholars and literary critics did not think deeply, either, and they merely followed blindly and supported [them]. I have never deplored so much in my life until today the poverty of ideas in our country.<sup>22</sup>

Nishida expressed his lament to many friends, but at the same time he also hoped, as he wrote to Kōsaka Masaaki 高坂正顕 on 8 April 1945, that 'the future of Japan is ahead of us,' and that this could be achieved through 'rebuilding a new vision of scholarship'.<sup>23</sup>

In the foregoing I hope that I have responded to some extent to Viglielmo's query and clarified Nishida's political stance and historical view that formed the background of, and were echoed in, his ideas concerning the state and the war expressed in his final work, *Bashoteki Ronri to Shūkyōteki Sekaikan*. But it remains true that a systematic study of Nishida's writings on the topic of nation and national polity is needed for further clarification of his views and position.

<sup>21</sup> 3 July 1944, #1952 (19, pp. 310-11).

<sup>22</sup> 19, pp. 401-02, #2147.

<sup>23</sup> 8 April 1945, #2173 (19, pp. 412-13).

As an unrelated addendum, I have made a comparative study of Nishida's letters, diary, and other related documents, and have found cases of misdating of his letters in the *Zenshū*. These are tabulated as follows:

Letter#	<i>Zenshū</i>	Correct
901	10.03.1935	10.03.1936
985	uncertain, 1935	ca 24.09.1935
989	19.01.1936	19.01.1938
1052	17.10.1936	17.10.1933
1078	13.03.1937	13.03.1936*
1302	19.11.1938	19.11.1937
1427	12.03.1940	12.03.1938
1563	23.03.1941	23.03.1937
1609	25.09.1941	25.09.1943
1751	10.03.1943	10.03.1944
1761	8.04.1943	8.04.1938
1764	30.04.1943	30.04.1944*
1802	9.08.1943	9.08.1941*
1824	25.09.1943	25.09.1938
1836	10.10.1943	10.10.1941
1914	18.03.1944	18.03.1943
1923	10.04.1944	10.04.1945*

\*most likely

The list will probably grow longer and be further amended as we continue to study critically Nishida's life, thought, and writings in relation to their socio-historical context.