The Dark Years: 1931-1945

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During the 1930s in both Germany and Japan, nationalist political and cultural ideologies, fuelled by paranoid feelings of threats from outside, led to increasingly aggressive and reckless military escapades. With the logic of self-justification, these escalated from initial regional incursions into the first war ever to be fought on a truly global scale.

Yet although Germany and Japan had extreme nationalism and militarism in common, the nature of their cultural ideology was very different. Ever since the beginning of the 1920s Hitler had been obsessed by the idea that racial and political degeneracy had led to Germany's defeat in World War I and the "unfair" Versailles settlement after it. Eugenic theories of Social Darwinism had developed in Europe and America since the end of the nineteenth century and Hitler and other right wing ideologues, simplified these this into a hierarchy with the "healthy" Nordic, Aryan and Teutonic races at its summit and Jews, Africans, Communists, criminals and the insane at its base. Modern art was regarded as degenerate because it was "unclean", often of left-wing persuasion, and distorted reality.

Initially not all Nazis agreed with this and a debate had continued within the Party about whether Expressionism, with its German roots and insistence on the importance of "Blood and Soil", could express the authentic spirit of a new Germany. Josef Goebbels, a collector of modern art, supported these ideas, whereas party ideologue Alfred Rosenberg propounded more conservative views. But this conflict was not really about art or aesthetics but about power. Goebbels wanted to control the whole realm of culture and propaganda and although he was the eventual victor - in 1933 the *Reichskulturkammer* that controlled all cultural production came under the direction of his Ministry for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda - his public statements about art became increasingly conservative.[1] Rosenberg's influence declined and he became editor of *Kunst im Dritten Reich* [Art in the Third Reich], a cultural propaganda magazine [Cat.8-19 to 8-21].

Academic kitsch – whether *völkisch* genre painting or bombastic neo-classical sculpture or architecture - now became the official Nazi style. Modern artists were branded "degenerate," and their works ridiculed, removed from museums and destroyed or sold abroad. Many, like Max Beckmann, went into

[1] A full record of this conflict and the fate of art under the Nazi Party can be read D. Elliott "A Life and Death Struggle" in D. Ades, T. Benton, D. Elliott, I. Boyd Whyte (ed.), *Art and Power: Europe under the Dictators 1930-45*, Stuttgart, Oktagon, 1995, pp.270-276.

exile, those that stayed were forbidden to exhibit and in some cases even to work [Cat.8-1,2,4,7].

Arno Brecker's or Josef Thorak's steroid-pumping neo-classical heroes are typical of the new official taste while Georg Kolbe's "Menschenpaar" [Couple], 1936, treads a more delicate line between a vision of an ideal breeding unit and a softer, more personal touch [Cat.8-6]. In spite of oppression, many "degenerate" artists continued to work even through the darkest years of the war. Käthe Kollwitz was to some extent protected by international respect as a feminist and communist and her studio on Klosterstrasse became a haven for sculptors and painters who felt out of step with the regime. "Pieta", 1938, is a universal image directed against the carnage of war as well as a personal homage to the memory of the son she had lost in World War I [Cat.8-7].

Hans Grundig also was a Communist and a painter of proletarian life, yet his "Battle of the Bears and Wolves", 1938, an image of a country tearing itself apart, has an epic resonance with Ernst Jünger's critical novel "Auf den Marmorklippen" [Under the Marble Cliffs] of the following year [Cat.8-2]. Grundig was systematically harassed by the Gestapo and from 1940 to 1944 was interned in Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp. From the end of the 1920s, Carl Hofer had started to suffer from premonitions of disaster that figured increasingly in his work. "Black Rooms" 1943, a version of a previously destroyed painting, shows a confined, naked figure impotently beating a drum of alarm [Cat.8-4].

In Japan there was no consolidated cultural ideology or bureaucracy as in Nazi Germany. The passing of the Peace Police Law 1900 was one of the first measures directed against radical groups and this, with subsequent legislation, was applied with varying severity according to the character of the government in power. The police tended to equate radicalism with foreign influence and novelist Mori Ogai remarked in 1910 that "…men of letters and artists were looked at askance in case they might be Naturalists or Socialists. Then some of them discovered the phrase 'dangerous western books'…."[2] By the 1930s Surrealism rather than Naturalism became associated in the military police's mind with Communism and Fukuzawa Ichiro, among others, was imprisoned as politically suspect on the grounds of his work [Cat.9-1].

The period of Taisho Democracy in the 1920s saw the foundation of the Communist Party of Japan in 1922 and the devastation of the Kanto Earthquake in the following year when vigilante committees roamed Tokyo, randomly attacking Leftists and others. In 1925 universal male suffrage was introduced along with the repressive Peace Preservation Law. This was followed by the Tanaka Government's punitive Maintenance of Public Order

[2] Marius B. Janssen, *The Making of Modern Japan*, Cambridge Mass, Belknap Press, 2002, p.505.

Act 1928 which led to over 1600 arrests of workers, tenant farmers and students.

It was during and immediately after this time that, particularly in the Armed Forces, an extreme nationalism developed that led to a number of attempted *coups d'état*. Militancy on the Right was accompanied by flexibility on the Left which led in 1933 to the dramatic dissolution of the Japanese Communist Party when from his prison cell Sano Manabu, its Chairman, renounced Soviet Russia and espoused the national cause. Within three years 74% of all communist detainees had followed his path. In 1934 the Proletarian Artists' League was dissolved. One of the main reasons for this was that left intellectuals had started to feel isolated from the public who had responded so enthusiastically to the Military's incursion into Manchuria.[3]

Against this background Tsuda Seifu's painting "The Victim" 1933 seems all the more remarkable. It shows the death of proletarian novelist Kobayashi Takiji who had been tortured by the military police [Cat.8-14]. Hamamatsu Kogenta's "The Genealogy of the Century" 1938 seems to criticise the futility of the military ambitions of the Axis powers [Cat.8-3], while Namba Kakuzo's "Chiang Kai-shek Where are you going?" 1939 replaces the allied Axis swastika flag in Hamamatsu's work with that of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Chinese army [Cat.8-9]. But, in spite of its surrealist style, this painting seems to be supporting the Military. By the end of 1938 most major Chinese cities were in Japanese hands but Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang government which at one point had tolerated the Japanese presence in its fight against the Communists had retreated from Nanking to Chungking and refused to surrender. The Japanese army was over extended and frustrated because it could not force the issue.

There was no official Japanese art because there was no single Party to demand it. In 1934 the cultural propaganda magazine "Nippon" was set up with the help of photographer Natori Yonosuke who in 1936 would work in Berlin covering the Olympic Games. Its radical, eye-catching design aimed to show the best of both traditional and new Japan [Cat.8-15 to 8-18]. In 1942 the Tohosha Publishing House launched the war propaganda magazine "Front" which paradoxically owed a debt to the photography, neo-constructivist designs and high production standards of the Soviet propaganda magazine "USSR in Construction" [Cat.8-25 to 8-28].

[3] Tsurumi Shunsuke, *An Intellectual History of Wartime Japan 1931-1945*, London, KPI, 1986, pp. 11, 63-64. The Manchurian Incident 1931 was staged by the Japanese Kwantung army against the Chinese army to give them a pretext to occupy Manchuria where they set up a puppet government. It is generally regarded as the starting point of the Pacific War.

In 1938 the National Mobilisation Law allowed the co-option of painters into the army and a "Painter Unit" led by Commander Nakamura Kenichi was formed at the request of the Army Press Department.[4] In 1939 the *Seisen* [Holy War] Exhibition of over 300 works including 200 war paintings was held in the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum. Nakamura traveled from Singapore through Indochina in 1942 and made a number of prize-winning paintings. But in the war's closing years he worked on the Home Front, recording with the spare beauty the *kamikaze* attack of Sgt. Nobe on two American B 29s over North Kyushu [Cat.8-8]. *Nihonga* artist, Kawabata Ryushi adopted a similarly spare format in his traditional painting of leaves and insects that subtly, but no less effectively, showed the impact of an exploding bomb in a Tokyo neighborhood [Cat.8-5].

[4] Ichikawa Masanori, "20th Century Japanese Art in the Context of Civilisation and Culture" in *The Unfinished Century: Legacies of 20th Century Art*, [ex. cat.], Tokyo, National Museum of Modern Art, 2002.