

GERHARD KREBS, Das Moderne Japan 1868-1952.

Oldenbourg Grundriss der Geschichte. Band 36. München: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2009. 249 pages, 1 map, Ln. € 44.80, br. € 29.80. ISBN br. 978-3-486-55894-4

Research in modern Japanese history is prolific in German, Japanese and English publications, but how to keep track? Gerhard Krebs' overview, with his extensive digest of Japanese sources, is a welcome tool. The layout is in line with the features of the Oldenbourg series of history:

I. Summary of the events of the period; II. Detailed report about the present status of research and related problems; III. Selected bibliography arranged in thematic order.

I. Summary of the events

Gerhard Krebs provides a concise summary of circumstances and events. He questions the term "Meiji-Restoration". The only restoration was that of placing the Emperor back into a position of power he had not held for centuries, everything else was transformation. Japan's internal problems towards the end of the Tokugawa Period (1603-1867) were oppressing. The crippling effect of the isolation policy, the local lords and the warrior class as a heavy burden, extreme poverty and the backlog in education led to a crisis. Russia, the US and England exerted pressure to open the country to their ships and trade. All this called for a radical political change, culminating in the transfer of power from the Shogun to the Emperor in 1868, ending the Tokugawa Period.

The loyalty to the Shogun and the local lord had to be shifted to a new, undisputed authority, the Emperor. He was vested with unlimited power and a quasi-religious status. The military reported to him, not to the government. A modernization in accordance with Western standards was launched. Britain, France, Germany and the US were the models. Foreign experts and scientists were hired and Japanese sent abroad for study.

In stark contrast with the isolation policy, Japan began to reach out to the neighboring territories by seizing Okinawa, Taiwan, showing a keen interest in Sakhalin, the Kuriles and Manchuria. The victory in the Chinese-Japanese War, 1894-1895, followed by that in the war with Russia, 1904-1905, and the annexation of Korea in 1910, were strong signals to the outside world of a new, powerful Japan.

In WW I Japan sided with the Allies, took the German territories in the Pacific and the leasehold around Shandong-Tsingtao. China, weakened by the revolution of 1911, was coerced into concessions. A treaty for mutual support was concluded with Russia in 1916. Ideas to place Asia under the rule of the Emperor cropped up. In order to keep Japan at their side, Great Britain, France, Italy and also the US were lenient to Japanese claims.

The Versailles Peace Conference of 1919 did not fulfill all of Japan's expectations, besides it was deeply offended by racist discriminations. Nationalist emotions soared up and frictions with the US increased. In the Taisho Era, 1912-1925, Japan was constantly grappling with both internal and external political, economic and military disputes.

The economic crisis and the London Naval Treaty of 1930 heated up the political climate. Manchuria, over which Japan had gained more and more control, since the victory of 1905, offered prospects for development, hence was made the immediate target for expansion, subsequently engulfing China and South East Asia, culminating with the attack on Pearl Harbor. The stance towards the Soviet Union was one of neutrality, but nevertheless led to serious border clashes. The war engaged with the US, fought over a vast area, outreached Japan's power. In the Potsdam declaration of August 1945 the Allies laid down the future of defeated Japan. The joint occupation, similar to that of Germany, was thwarted by President Truman, scared of repeating the German experiment.

Postwar Japan was confronted with enormous social, economic and political problems. Reforms included e.g. a new role for the Emperor, admission of trade unions and political parties, landowning, constitution, abolition of the armed forces, education system, civil and penal law.

II. Basic problems and tendencies in research

Westerners were the pioneers of Japanese historiography, amongst them Engelbert Kämpfer, Philipp Franz von Siebold, James Murdoch, Basil Hall Chamberlain. Gerhard Krebs provides an impressive review of a large number of publications. These reflect how access to evidence, either barred, delayed or partial only, nationalist views in both Japan and abroad, the influence of ideologies and the lack of or a sometimes inadequate quality of translation markedly influence the way conclusions are arrived at and presented. Exemplar is the controversy about the dropping of the atomic bombs: A necessity to quickly terminate the war, or rather a signal to Stalin?

III. Sources and bibliography

The bibliography comprises over 900 titles. Japanese titles are not listed, unless translated into English or German. The book comes with a handy list of contents, side-notes, index, chronological table and a Japanese glossary with Japanese characters.

The condensed presentation of the major events between 1868-1952 makes this book a welcome, user-friendly reference work. I wish it had been available 20 years ago.



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