

## ARTICLE

# Honorary Aryans? Japanese German *Mischlinge* and the Negotiation of Identity in Nazi Germany

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Race is the black box at the centre of the German–Japanese alliance during the Second World War. Early Nazi racial legislation provoked speculation regarding its potential impact on Japanese German *Mischlinge* (individuals of mixed race), and the regime’s reluctance to define its position helped to spread the rumour that they had been recognised as ‘honorary Aryans’. Although this was never more than a rumour, the ambiguous racialisation of the Japanese historically seemingly legitimised demands by Japanese Germans that the regime should recognise their rights as members of the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft* (national community). This article traces how the Japanese Germans were able to negotiate concessions enabling them to function as a protected minority, albeit in contingent and arbitrarily defined ways. In effect, the Japanese Germans were able to exploit the ambiguities of Nazi racial thinking in order to carve out a place for themselves within the margins of the racial state.

On 20 April 1934, the German–Japanese Society (*Deutsch–Japanische Gesellschaft*, DJG) received a letter from the Countess Hanna Hatzfeldt-Aoki on what may have initially seemed a trivial matter. The Countess and her daughter Hissa, also married into the German aristocracy, had encountered difficulties in their attempts to join the kinds of charitable organisations typically patronised by women of their class. The problem was Hanna’s racial background. The daughter of Viscount Shūzō Aoki (1844–1914), the former Japanese Foreign Minister and Ambassador to the United States and the United Kingdom, Hatzfeldt-Aoki was officially a non-Aryan, and thus ineligible for membership in such groups. She had heard rumours, however, of an official ruling requiring all Japanese and their offspring to be treated as ‘honorary Aryans’, exempting them from any discriminatory laws or policies. Confident in the plausibility of this legal loophole, Hatzfeldt-Aoki requested that the DJG send her and her daughter copies of this policy in order to resolve the matter as quickly as possible.<sup>1</sup> The DJG, for its part, informed the Countess that it was unaware of any official decision regarding the status of Japanese Germans under the ‘Aryan paragraph’ and promised to refer her case to the Foreign Ministry for clarification.<sup>2</sup>

Even with the assistance of the DJG, the Hatzfeldt-Aoki family remained in legal limbo. Part of the problem, at least initially, was a lack of clarity over responsibility in adjudicating such cases.<sup>3</sup> The creation of the Office of Racial Policy (*Rassenpolitisches Amt*, ORP) later that year may have resolved that question somewhat, but a far more substantive issue remained: the fundamental lack of consensus regarding the racial status of the Japanese and, by extension, Japanese–German *Mischlinge*. A 1936 letter sent to the Foreign Ministry by Ambassador Herbert von Dirksen mentioned the extended family’s precarious position and recommended that – given their connections to the Japanese aristocracy – they be ‘treated as exceptions’, but it is unclear whether this recommendation

<sup>1</sup> Hanna Hatzfeldt-Aoki to DJG, 20.4.34. Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde (hereafter BArch) R 64IV/31, 101, emphasis in the original.

<sup>2</sup> DJG to Hanna Hatzfeldt-Aoki, 21 Apr. 1934, BArch R 64IV/31, 106.

<sup>3</sup> Solf to Hatzfeldt-Aoki, 9 May 1934, BArch NL Solf/93, 113–14.

was adopted.<sup>4</sup> In the interim, a number of other Japanese Germans had also contacted the DJG hoping to resolve their status within the regime's rapidly expanding racial bureaucracy. Throughout this correspondence, the Japanese Germans, confident in their self-identification as German, interpreted discriminatory treatment as a mistake or misinterpretation of Nazi race-thinking. Regime officials, on the other hand, adopted a posture of strategic delay and avoided making any decision that could be interpreted as defining state policy.

This evasiveness gave rise to the rumour, both in Germany and abroad, that the Japanese had been granted special privileges as 'honorary Aryans'. Hanna Hatzfeldt-Aoki, who wanted to believe that her identity as both Japanese and German could be accommodated within Germany's new political climate, was not alone in perceiving the honorary Aryan myth as plausible. In May 1934, *The New York Times* reported that: 'Finally Nazi Germany has broken, in favour of Japan, her proudest principle: namely, that of racial exclusiveness. The Japanese government, as well as the Chinese, has been notified officially that German laws against "non-Aryans" applied only to Jews and Negroes, not to the yellow race.'<sup>5</sup> Although this was never more than a rumour, the ambiguous racialisation of the Japanese made such claims sufficiently plausible that individuals like Hatzfeldt-Aoki felt justified in demanding that the regime recognise their rights, not just as German citizens but as members of the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft*. The reluctance by the regime, on the other hand, to neither confirm nor deny an official position on the Japanese Germans emerged out of an internal debate over how to define the effective boundaries of concepts like Aryan and German. In the absence of any clear ideological or political consensus, Japanese Germans were able to negotiate concessions from regime officials which enabled them to function as a protected minority group, albeit in ways which were contingent and arbitrarily defined. Even if they were never formally recognised as exempt from racial legislation to the extent implied by the honorary Aryan myth, the Japanese Germans were able to exploit the ambiguities of Nazi race-thinking in order to carve out a place for themselves within the margins of the racial state.<sup>6</sup>

Even as Hans-Joachim Bieber, Christian Goeschel and Daniel Hedinger, among others, have offered important re-evaluations of the German–Japanese alliance, either in isolation or as a piece of the Axis alliance system, race remains the 'black box' at the centre of this relationship.<sup>7</sup> Given the centrality of race to both states' respective political agendas, one could be forgiven for scepticism regarding the viability of the alliance.<sup>8</sup> This was the position previously adopted by many scholars, with Johanna Meskill memorably describing the alliance as less a 'marriage of convenience' and more 'a long and uneasy engagement, maintained long past the hope of eventual union'.<sup>9</sup> Other authors have historically sidestepped the problem of race entirely, focusing instead on diplomatic agreements and domestic political pressures, and concluding that Hitler's much-cited dismissal of the Japanese in *Mein Kampf* as merely a 'culture-bearing' people was cynically superseded by

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Dirksen, 4 Mar. 1936. Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts (hereafter PA AA) R99182.

<sup>5</sup> 'Japan Seen to Seek Support of Reich', *New York Times* (21 May 1934), 6. Quoted in Harumi Shidehara Furuya, 'Nazi Racism Toward the Japanese: Ideology vs. Realpolitik', in *Nachrichten der Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens/Hamburg*, 65, 1/2 (1995), 42.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wippermann, *The Racial State: Germany 1933–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). See also Devin O. Pendas, Mark Roseman and Richard F. Wetzell, eds., *Beyond the Racial State: Rethinking Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Hans-Joachim Bieber, *SS und Samurai: Deutsch-japanische Kulturbeziehungen, 1933–1945* (Munich: Iudicium Verlag, 2014); Christian Goeschel, 'Performing the New Order: The Tripartite Pact, 1940–1945', *Contemporary European History* (2022), 1–17; Daniel Hedinger, *Die Achse: Berlin – Rome – Tokyo, 1919–1946* (Munich: C. H. Beck Verlag, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> As in Germany, there was not a single Japanese discourse on race in the twentieth century, but rather multiple, often contradictory, forms of race-thinking, although Japanese theories of race tended to favour inclusionary/assimilationist policies, in contrast to the Nazis' exclusionary/eliminationist administrative regime. See Takashi Fujitani, *Race for Empire: Koreans as Japanese and Japanese as Americans during World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Tessa Morris-Suzuki, *Re-inventing Japan: Time, Space, Nation* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1998); Eiji Oguma, *A Genealogy of 'Japanese' Self-Images*, David Askew, trans. (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> Johanna Meskill, *Hitler and Japan: The Hollow Alliance* (New York, NY: Atherton, 1966), 3.

geopolitical expediency.<sup>10</sup> Even scholars making a good-faith effort to engage with German race-thinking vis-à-vis the Japanese have been constrained by their willingness to take the internal consistency of Nazi racism at face value.<sup>11</sup> In this reading, the Japanese alliance represented ‘a problem for Berlin’s policy and propaganda’, which had to be reconciled with Nazi race-thinking.<sup>12</sup> More recently, Ricky Law, whose book examining German–Japanese interwar rapprochement productively complicates our understanding of the alliance’s origins, concludes that distance was a necessary prerequisite for the relationship and that the Japanese alliance could only be reconciled with Nazi race-thinking when the Japanese themselves were safely ‘elsewhere’.<sup>13</sup> Setting aside the very real historiographic debates surrounding the geopolitical context and ideological connections of the German–Japanese alliance, which I address elsewhere in greater detail, much of this existing scholarship is premised on the assumption that Nazi race-thinking did not evolve over time, nor did it respond to external and alternative worldviews.<sup>14</sup>

In truth, the Nazi racial state was never more than a ‘work in progress’.<sup>15</sup> Far from the monolith of ‘ideological zealotism and unbending determination’ depicted in older scholarship, Nazi race-thinking was subject to an ‘intricate and inconsistent . . . interaction between *ideological and practical* considerations’ which could not help but generate numerous inconsistencies in policy-making.<sup>16</sup> Acknowledging this fact also requires that we account for a much greater degree of dissension, debate and compromise in creating and administering racial policy than was previously assumed. The experience of Japanese German *Mischlinge* is uniquely instructive in this regard, given the regime’s particular preoccupation with the dangers of racial miscegenation.<sup>17</sup> The 1935 Nuremberg Laws were an attempt to define the status of German Jews, but the lack of any scientific standard for evaluating those of ‘mixed race’ status quantitatively forced the regime to default back to culture, in this case religious identity. As Richard Steigmann-Gall observed, that ‘the Nuremberg Laws measured race in the first instance by the *religion* of the grandparents’ is ‘something we know but do not know what to do with’.<sup>18</sup> The Japanese Germans were never subjected to the same scrutiny, partly out of strategic considerations related to a future German–Japanese alliance and partly because there were so few of them. Nevertheless, their experience of navigating Nazi Germany in its early years is instructive in what it reveals about the inconsistencies of Nazi race-thinking when confronted with a plausible counter-narrative of what it meant to be German. Although the Japanese Germans subscribed to Nazi race-thinking in principle, they and their allies forced the regime to justify itself and its policies. In so doing, they were able to negotiate small yet meaningful concessions which reveal not just the unique contours of the German–Japanese relationship historically, but also the essential mutability of Nazi race-thinking.

<sup>10</sup> Ernst L. Presseisen, *Germany and Japan: A Study in Totalitarian Diplomacy, 1933–1941* (New York, NY: Howard Fertig, 1969), 1–13.

<sup>11</sup> Furuya, ‘Nazi Racism Toward the Japanese’, 17–75.

<sup>12</sup> Gerhard Krebs, ‘Racism under Negotiation: The Japanese Race in the Nazi-German Perspective’, in Rotem Kowner and Walter Demel, eds., *Race and Racism in Modern East Asia. Vol. II: Interactions, Nationalism, Gender, and Lineage* (London: Brill, 2015), 217–41.

<sup>13</sup> Ricky Law, *Transnational Nazism: Ideology and Culture in German–Japanese Relations, 1919–1936* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 296.

<sup>14</sup> Sarah Panzer, ‘Death-Defying: Voluntary Death as Honorable Ideal in the German–Japanese Alliance’, *Central European History*, 55, 2 (June 2022), 205–22; Sarah Panzer, ‘Prussians of the East: Samurai, Bushido, and Japanese Honor in the German Imagination, 1905–1945’, *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 58 (Spring 2016), 47–69.

<sup>15</sup> Eve Rosenhaft, ‘Blacks and Gypsies in Nazi Germany: The Limits of the “Racial State”’, *History Workshop Journal*, 72 (2011), 162.

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle A. Kallis, ‘Race, “Value” and the Hierarchy of Human Life: Ideological and Structural Determinants of National Socialist Policy-Making’, *Journal of Genocide Research* 7, 1 (2005), 6, emphasis in original.

<sup>17</sup> Johann Chapoutot, *The Law of Blood: Thinking and Acting as a Nazi*, trans. Miranda Richmond Mouillot (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

<sup>18</sup> Richard Steigmann-Gall, ‘Neither Aryan nor Semite: Reflections on the Meanings of Race in Nazi Germany’, in Pendas et al., eds., *Beyond the Racial State*, 275, emphasis in original.

The Japanese had long been the object of scrutiny by German scientists. The naturalist Philip Franz von Siebold (1796–1866) was among the first to speculate on the racial composition of the Japanese. Significantly, he claimed to have observed individuals with hair colours and complexions different from what he assumed to be typical for the ‘Mongolian race’, which caused him to speculate that the Japanese were not related racially to the Chinese, despite their obvious cultural affinities, but instead were descended from Tatar migrants.<sup>19</sup> Some fifty years later, the physician Erwin Baelz (1849–1913) compiled his own thoughts on the racial qualities of the Japanese people. He concluded that the Japanese were descended from multiple successive migrations from various parts of the Asia-Pacific region, and that the variability of facial features, complexions and physical proportions among the Japanese revealed the continued influence of those different bloodlines.<sup>20</sup> Although Baelz’s work mirrored contemporaneous studies methodologically, he did make two claims worth highlighting: he echoed Siebold’s earlier claim that he had seen individuals of ‘undoubted Japanese descent’ with blonde hair – and even with blue eyes – and he posited a racial link between the indigenous Ainu and Europeans.<sup>21</sup> Practically, both of these claims destabilised the presumption of Japanese racial alterity, which in turn later legitimised more explicitly polemical scholarship.

These studies by Siebold and Baelz provided the basis for much of the later debate surrounding the racial composition of the Japanese, both in Europe and in Japan.<sup>22</sup> Most immediately, they echoed older European associations between the Japanese and ‘whiteness’ predating modern theories of race. Early modern Japan’s military strength, as well as its political and cultural sophistication, had sufficiently impressed European observers that they were – along with the other ‘civilised’ peoples of northeast Asia – exempted from early attempts to schematise racial difference on the basis of complexion.<sup>23</sup> The invention of ‘yellow’ as an intermediary skin colour between white and black came later, as growing European colonial interest in Asia inverted older narratives of Asia as the birthplace of great empires (and great fortunes) into cautionary tales of ‘oriental despotism’ and cultural stagnation.<sup>24</sup>

Another significant parallel between Siebold and Baelz was their personal and familial connections to the Japanese people. Like numerous other Western men who spent time in Japan, both ‘married’ Japanese women and started families while in Japan. Although Siebold’s marriage was, by all indications, a contracted concubinage arrangement of the sort often brokered by the Tokugawa Shogunate to satisfy the needs of Western men, he did develop genuine affection for his wife, even naming a species of hydrangea after her.<sup>25</sup> Siebold was banished from Japan in 1829 on suspicion of spying for Russia, but his daughter Ine Kusumoto became the first Japanese woman to receive Western medical training and later served as a court physician for the Meiji emperor.<sup>26</sup> Erwin Baelz was able to bring his family with him when he returned to Germany in 1905 and his son Erwin Toku Baelz became a key figure in

<sup>19</sup> Philip Franz von Siebold, *Nippon: Archiv zur Beschreibung von Japan und dessen Neben- und Schutzländern Jez omit den südlichen Kurilen, Sachalin, Korea und den Liukiu-Inseln*, Vol. 1. Reissue of 2nd edn (Osnabrück: Biblio Verlag, 1969), 283–92.

<sup>20</sup> Erwin Baelz, *Die körperlichen Eigenschaften der Japaner: Eine anthropologische Studie*, Part One (Yokohoma: Buchdruckerei des ‘Echo du Japon’, 1883), 172.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 6, 15.

<sup>22</sup> Hoi-Eun Kim, *Doctors of Empire: Medical and Cultural Encounters between Imperial Germany and Meiji Japan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 112–22; Oguma, *A Genealogy of ‘Japanese’ Self-Images*, 3–7.

<sup>23</sup> Rotem Kowner, *From White to Yellow: The Japanese in European Racial Thought, 1300–1735* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014).

<sup>24</sup> Jürgen Osterhammel, *Unfabling the East: The Enlightenment’s Encounter with Asia*, trans. Robert Savage (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

<sup>25</sup> Siebold later married a German woman and had several more children; his sons Alexander (1846–1911) and Heinrich Philip (1852–1908) also became important contributors to the Western production of knowledge about Japan. For more, see Gary Leupp, *Interracial Intimacy in Japan: Western Men and Japanese Women, 1543–1900* (London: Continuum Press, 2003), 124–5.

<sup>26</sup> Ellen Nakamura, ‘Working the Siebold Network: Kusumoto Ine and Western Learning in Nineteenth-Century Japan’, *Japanese Studies*, 28, 2 (2008), 197–211.

promoting Japanese arts and culture on behalf of the DJG during the 1930s.<sup>27</sup> Families which overlapped racial boundaries were not unheard of in nineteenth-century Germany, although they were more commonly associated with more explicitly colonial contexts.<sup>28</sup> What made the Japanese German community distinct was the extent to which the ambiguous racialisation of the Japanese enabled these individuals – such as Erwin Toku Baelz or Hanna Hatzfeldt-Aoki – to be unproblematically accepted as German, at least until 1933.

Public opinion in Japan was initially optimistic about the new regime, although there was concern about its geopolitical ambitions and what they meant for the European continent.<sup>29</sup> The preeminent consideration, from Japan's perspective, was Nazi Germany's recognition of Japan's puppet state Manchukuo.<sup>30</sup> A secondary, but by no means trivial, factor was the racial question, especially considering the rapid introduction of new racial legislation, including the 'Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service' (7 April 1933) and the 'Law against the Overcrowding of German Schools and Universities' (25 April 1933). Although these laws principally targeted German Jews, their wording was so ambiguous, especially in the case of so-called racial *Mischlinge*, that their enforcement by over-zealous officials and citizens alike posed a significant potential problem, not only vis-à-vis Japanese Germans, but also toward other racialised groups.

Individuals hoping for clarification in the press would have been disappointed. An article published on 5 September 1933 defined 'race defilement' (*Rassenschande*) as not simply a matter of 'sexual intercourse with Jews', but also pertinent to 'all cases where friendly relations with a racial foreigner, in particular a Jew, can be established'.<sup>31</sup> Interpreted literally, this definition marked all relationships with non-Germans as potentially suspect, but the lack of specificity regarding how the boundaries between Germans and 'racial foreigners' were to be delineated meant that there was considerable latitude for interpretation in enforcing this new policy. Just a few days earlier, Alfred Rosenberg had declared, during a speech at the 1933 Party Rally in Nuremberg on the 'struggle of the white race against the coloured races', the party's opposition to any 'mixing of races'. Rosenberg's speech had sparked outrage in Japan, as did the affirmative reply of a Dr. Gercke, an expert on the 'racial question' at the Ministry of the Interior, to Japanese journalists asking whether he considered the Japanese a 'coloured race'.<sup>32</sup> For many Japanese, this rhetoric evoked discomfiting associations with the older discourse of the 'yellow peril' (*gelbe Gefahr*), infamously promoted in Germany by Wilhelm II, as well as more recent systems of legal discrimination against Japanese immigrants enacted by the United States.<sup>33</sup>

Tellingly, it was Japanese diplomats who took the initiative in attempting to navigate this potential minefield. Ambassador Matsuzō Nagai met with the Assistant Secretary of the German Foreign Ministry Bernhard Wilhelm von Bülow on 11 October, demanding clarification on the regime's understanding of the term 'coloured' (*farbig*). Bülow attempted to placate Nagai by affirming that such language would be henceforth avoided, at least in connection with the Japanese.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>27</sup> 'Tätigkeit des Erwin Toku Baelz'. BArch R 64IV/158–9.

<sup>28</sup> Robbie Aitkin and Even Rosenhaft, *Black Germany: The Making and Unmaking of a Diaspora Community, 1884–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Tina M. Camp, *Other Germans: Black Germans and the Politics of Race, Gender, and Memory in the Third Reich* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> Japanischer Verein in Deutschland (Berlin, 2.2.33) PA AA R85972.

<sup>30</sup> Simon Preker, 'Illegitimate Representatives: Manchukuo–German Relations and Diplomatic Struggles in Nazi Germany', in Joanne Miyang Cho, ed., *Sino-German Encounters and Entanglements: Transnational Politics and Culture, 1890–1950* (Chichester: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 289–317.

<sup>31</sup> 'Was ist Rassenschande? Auch jeder freundschaftlicher Verkehr fällt darunter', *Berliner Illustrierte. Nachtausgabe* no. 207 (5 Sept. 1933). BArch R 64IV/31, 6.

<sup>32</sup> 'Besprechung mit Botschaftsrat Fujii', 21.11.33, BArch R 64IV/31, 44–5.

<sup>33</sup> Heinz Gollwitzer, *Die gelbe Gefahr: Geschichte eines Schlagworts: Studien zum imperialistischen Denken* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962); Iikura Akira, 'The "Yellow Peril" and its Influence on Japanese German Relations', in Christian W. Spang and Rolf-Harald Wippich, eds., *Japanese German Relations, 1895–1945: War, Diplomacy, and Public Opinion* (London: Routledge, 2006), 80–97.

<sup>34</sup> Memorandum by Bernhard Wilhelm von Bülow, 11.10.33. PA AA R29452.

Unconvinced, Nagai next visited Foreign Minister Konstantin von Neurath to confirm Von Bülow's pledge. Von Neurath promised Nagai that the regime did not consider the Japanese to be a 'coloured people' and that they would be exempt from all future measures restricting Germans' ability to marry.<sup>35</sup>

Despite these official reassurances, specific instances of discrimination – including a physical assault on the nine-year-old daughter of a Japanese businessman by German children – prompted Embassy Counsellor Keinosuke Fujii's visit to the DJG, where he warned the organisation's German director Friedrich Wilhelm Hack that the 'friendly relations' between the two countries could be 'severely disrupted' if the regime did not unambiguously condemn racially motivated discrimination against the Japanese.<sup>36</sup> What is perhaps most interesting here is Fujii's recognition that German racial policies were neither immutable nor impervious to external pressure, and thus could be shaped and directed to serve a particular agenda or demographic. The DJG, as the organisation principally responsible for advocacy on behalf of Japan, thus became the chief mediator between the Nazi state and Japanese Germans in positioning themselves within the *Volksgemeinschaft*.

In attempting to clarify the racial status of the Japanese Germans, the DJG brought its case directly to the regime. A memorandum signed on the group's behalf by its president, Admiral Paul Behncke, was sent to the Minister of the Interior Wilhelm Frick, Foreign Minister Konstantin von Neurath and Deputy Führer Rudolf Hess on 25 October 1934; it was forwarded to the ORP a few days later.<sup>37</sup> The accompanying cover letter, also signed by Behncke, explained that the document was intended to ensure that Japanese Germans did not unduly suffer discrimination, either by officials or by improperly informed German citizens.<sup>38</sup> As an attempt to redirect existing racial discourse on behalf of the Japanese Germans and to establish their exemption from legislation targeting racial *Mischlinge*, this memorandum could very well – if successful – have resulted in their effective recognition as honorary Aryans.

Although signed by Behncke, the memorandum was actually written by Johann von Leers, a prolific propagandist whose efforts would later be rewarded with a professorship at the University of Jena. Leers shared the antisemitism of his colleagues, but was comparatively open-minded with respect to non-European cultures.<sup>39</sup> Fluent in the rhetoric and ideological conventions of Nazism, yet sympathetic to the Japanese, Leers was an ideal candidate to advocate on behalf of the Japanese Germans. Speaking directly to the difficulties faced by individuals due to the regime's unwillingness to take a public position, Leers observed that the resulting confusion had been particularly unfortunate because 'The only obstacle between Japan and us is this unfortunate racial question, which if not solved or solved unsatisfactorily, threatens to destroy these good relations.'<sup>40</sup> The fundamental problem, Leers suggested, was that the German state failed to understand why the Japanese were offended by the use of terms like 'coloured' or 'yellow' and that it should therefore try to explain its racial principles to the Japanese, principles that Leers did not find in any way antithetical to a German–Japanese alliance or to the preferential treatment of Japanese Germans.

Leers thus sought to negotiate an alternative system of racial categorisation; in a fascinating passage engaging directly with one of the central problems of Nazi race-thinking, he unpacked the slippage between Aryan as a linguistic term and Aryan as an identifiable racial group. Deploying both biological and linguistic theories of race, Leers concluded that, if the Hungarians, Turks and Finns

<sup>35</sup> Furuya, 'Nazi Racism toward the Japanese', 27–8.

<sup>36</sup> 'Besprechung mit Botschaftsrat Fujii', 21.11.33, BArch R 64IV/31, 44–6.

<sup>37</sup> Günther Haasch, *Die Deutsch-Japanischen Gesellschaften von 1888 bis 1996* (Berlin: Edition Colloquium, 1996), 215.

<sup>38</sup> Paul Behncke to Wilhelm Frick, 26.10.34, BArch R 64IV/31, 38–42.

<sup>39</sup> In 1945, Leers escaped to Italy and from there to Argentina. He moved to Egypt in the mid-1950s, where he converted to Islam and adopted the name Omar Amin von Leers. His unrepentant antisemitism and enthusiasm for Arab nationalism earned him a position as a propagandist in Gamel Abdel Nasser's government, which he held until his death in 1965. Robert S. Wistrich, *Who's Who in Nazi Germany*, 3rd edn (Hoboken, NJ: Routledge, 2013), 126.

<sup>40</sup> 'Denkschrift der Deutsch-Japanischen Gesellschaft zur Frage der Anwendung der Rassen-Gesetzgebung auf die Abkömmlinge aus deutsch-japanischen Mischehen', signed by Admiral Paul Behncke, 24.10.34, BArch R 64IV/31, 28.

could be classified as Aryan, then logically the Japanese should also be included.<sup>41</sup> Arguing that terms like ‘white’, ‘yellow’ and ‘coloured’ were not scientifically valid terms, Leers instead offered several older studies, including those by Siebold and Baelz, as evidence that the Japanese should be considered Aryan.

Another work cited extensively by Leers was Hans F. K. Günther’s *The Nordic Race among the Indo-Germanic Peoples of Asia* (1934). Günther, one of the more popular racial anthropologists of the Third Reich, believed that racial identity represented the composite of both physical and mental or psychological attributes.<sup>42</sup> In this work and others, Günther argued that traces of the Indo-Germanic race could be clearly identified among the cultural and social elites of Asia, and particularly among the Japanese:

When one looks at photos of Japanese statesmen, generals, and admirals, there is a conspicuously large majority of those depicted, comparatively speaking, that have an ‘un-Japanese appearance’, which always suggests instead an approximation of European features. Out of the photos of Japanese with doctorates listed in Iseki’s ‘Who’s Who in Great Japan’, the comparatively common narrow face and nose, the high nasal bridge, the frequent beardedness, and the general lack of the ‘Mongol fold’ of the eyes is striking.<sup>43</sup>

These physical features led Günther to conclude that there must have been an historic Nordic presence on the Japanese archipelago. Günther never claimed that the Japanese were unique in this regard; indeed, his efforts to excavate what he claimed was evidence of Nordic racial ancestry throughout Asia were, more frequently than not, successful, even to the point of absurdity.

Although Leers cited Günther, he was primarily interested instead in an altogether different interpretation of race, one based on the expression of cultural and symbolic markers rather than on physical features. He claimed to have discovered traces of Nordic culture in Japanese heraldry and funerary rites, concluding that not only should the Japanese be understood as an authentically ‘Nordic Volk’, but that they represented, ‘despite multiple subsequent mixings’, one of the few remnants of ‘the same racial strength as us’.<sup>44</sup> In identifying the Japanese as Nordic, Leers intended to have them officially recognised as a kindred Volk; in hindsight, however, his elaborate theories speak to the fact that racial discourse within Nazi Germany was quite often as much a matter of myth as of science.<sup>45</sup>

The regime’s official answer to Leers and the DJG was composed by none other than the head of the ORP, Walter Gross.<sup>46</sup> Gross unilaterally rejected Leers’ claim that the Japanese could be considered Aryan or Nordic based on shared genetic ancestry. He rebutted this theory not by challenging its accuracy, however, but rather by questioning its political implications, speculating that even the ‘lowliest African tribes’ could also claim Aryan descent from some unknown mythical progenitor if that indeed became the benchmark. The repercussions of any official acknowledgement of the Japanese as a Nordic or Aryan Volk would dilute the potency of Nazi racial thought, Gross argued, because it opened the door to hypothetical scenarios in which all manner of peoples could leverage their own ‘great history and culture’ in asserting their equality with the Germans.<sup>47</sup> Although this was certainly not his intent, Gross thus tacitly acknowledged that he and Leers were articulating two very different

<sup>41</sup> ‘Denkschrift der DJG’, BArch R 64IV/31, 31.

<sup>42</sup> Christopher Hutton, *Race and the Third Reich: Linguistics, Racial Anthropology and Genetics in the Dialectic of Volk* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 35–8.

<sup>43</sup> Hans F. K. Günther, *Die nordische Rasse bei den Indogermanen Asiens: Zugleich ein Beitrag zur Frage nach der Urheimat und Rassenherkunft der Indogermanen* (Munich: J. F. Lehmanns Verlag, 1934), 200–1.

<sup>44</sup> ‘Denkschrift der DJG’, BArch R 64IV/31, 35.

<sup>45</sup> Dan Stone, ‘Race Science, Race Mysticism, and the Racial State’, in Pendas et al., eds., *Beyond the Racial State*, 176–96.

<sup>46</sup> For more on Gross and the ORP, see Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 105–30.

<sup>47</sup> Walter Gross, ‘Antwort auf die im Dezember erschiene Denkschrift der Deutsch-Japanischen Gesellschaft’, 30.1.35. BArch R 64IV/31, 16.

ways of understanding and mobilising race. Rather than engaging with the substance of Leers' claims, fantastic as they may have been, he focused instead on their potential impact in undermining the regime's public messaging regarding the dangers of 'race defilement'.

Despite his rejection of the DJG's memorandum, Gross was nevertheless willing to circumvent state policy under certain conditions, in the interest of maintaining a balance between ideological fidelity and political practicality. He remained opposed in principle to any intermarriage between races, but suggested that the relatively small number of Japanese Germans currently living in Germany could potentially be exempted from certain policies, similar in effect to the status of Jewish war veterans.<sup>48</sup> This concession, however, did little to assuage the concerns of the Japanese Germans, who continued to be subjected to discriminatory treatment, both by state institutions and by their fellow Germans.

As the regime dithered, the small yet vocal Japanese German community – frequently in coordination with the DJG – actively lobbied the regime to be recognised as German. Like Hanna Hatzfeldt-Aoki, these individuals were uniformly convinced that any discrimination they experienced was the result of a misinterpretation of racial policy and that redress was just a matter of petitioning the proper authorities. As Sheila Fitzpatrick previously observed in the context of the Soviet Union, 'those who write letters to the authorities are involved in a sort of performance', meaning that they draw upon and exploit 'established social stereotypes and rhetorical conventions' in order to make their case.<sup>49</sup> The individuals who wrote to the DJG deployed rhetorical strategies similar to those used by German Jews in attempting to establish their *bona fides* as 'good Germans', alternatively mobilising legal precedent and emphasising their personal contributions to society or the German nation.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, just as Jewish petitioners frequently 'did not contest the logic or implementation of antisemitic measures . . . only the fairness of the antisemitic regulations as they applied to them in particular', the Japanese Germans appropriated Nazi race-thinking in rhetorically aligning themselves with the regime.<sup>51</sup> They encountered, however, far less resistance from officials in doing so. This distinction reaffirms the unique position of Jews within the Nazi racial imagination at the same time that it reveals the degree to which other, more ambiguously racialised groups could strategically intervene in the ongoing construction of the racial state.

The Japanese Germans were an exceedingly small minority. Leers estimated that there were only fifty of them living in Germany, although he may have deliberately under-counted in order to preempt objections by racial hard-liners.<sup>52</sup> They did not fit a single mould demographically: some had been born abroad while others had lived their entire lives in Germany and, although several came from wealthy, well-connected families, many others did not. There were, however, several noteworthy commonalities across this group. First, a significant number of them were either medical doctors themselves or had doctors in their immediate family. This demographic quirk was a legacy of older patterns of German–Japanese engagement, in which medical students and instructors – going back to Ine Kusumoto and Erwin Baelz – functioned as an important bridge between the two countries.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, many Japanese Germans had been active supporters of Nazism prior to 1933, either electorally or through membership of the party and/or one of its auxiliary groups such as the SA (*Sturmabteilung*); indeed, several individuals wrote the DJG specifically to protest their expulsion from the party as membership restrictions became more strictly enforced after Hitler's appointment as

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 18–19.

<sup>49</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, 'Suplicants and Citizens: Public Letter-Writing in Soviet Russia in the 1930s', *Slavic Review*, 55, 1 (Spring 1996), 95.

<sup>50</sup> Wolf Gruner, 'To Not "Live as a Pariah": Jewish Petitions as Individual and Collective Protest in the Greater German Reich', in Thomas Pegelow Kaplan and Wolf Gruner, eds., *Resisting Persecution: Jews and their Petitions during the Holocaust* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2020), 34.

<sup>51</sup> Benjamin Frommer, 'Honorary Czechs and Germans: Petitions for Aryan Status in the Nazi Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia', in Kaplan and Gruner, eds., *Resisting Persecution*, 87.

<sup>52</sup> 'Denkschrift der DJG', BArch R 64IV/31, 29.

<sup>53</sup> Kim, *Doctors of Empire*, 88–101.



Chancellor. Although it is understandable why individuals would have foregrounded their political allegiances in their petitions for assistance and why Japanese German families who did not support the new regime may have simply resigned themselves to the new status quo, it is nevertheless interesting that so many members of this community voluntarily aligned themselves with a movement hostile to themselves and their families. Unless, that is, they did not anticipate that the regime's racial policies would impact them personally. Indeed, that seems to have been the case. For many Japanese Germans, their sense of self as good Germans and loyal members of the *Volksgemeinschaft* was not incompatible with their racial background. Rather, they firmly believed that the Japanese were already *de facto* honorary Aryans, even if the regime had not yet formally recognised them as such.

Wilhelm Hillenbrand, for example, contacted the DJG in April 1934 after reading a magazine article declaring that party members could only be of 'pure Aryan ancestry', and that they could not be 'members of a mixed-race [*Mischrasse*]'. Hillenbrand wanted to clarify whether this restriction applied to him, identifying himself as 'indeed of pure Aryan ancestry, however my father is Japanese'. Hillenbrand had a long history of service to Germany and to the Nazi Party. Raised in Munich by a single mother, he had joined an artillery regiment of the Bavarian Army in 1916 and served until the end of the war. In February 1921, he joined the Freikorps Oberland and soon thereafter the SA. Hillenbrand, by his own account, chose to disengage from politics after 1925, but by May 1933 his career as a merchant had made party membership 'essential' and he therefore applied to join the NSDAP.<sup>54</sup> Hillenbrand did not see any contradiction between his identity as a veteran and *Alter Kämpfer* and his ancestry. The Foreign Ministry, on the other hand, refused to even consider Hillenbrand's case, declaring that no exceptions would be made with respect to party membership.<sup>55</sup>

Although the Foreign Ministry took a firm position that party membership was the exclusive prerogative of 'pure Aryans', many of the other cases involving Japanese Germans were less clear-cut. Dr. Ninoske Wierl, like Hillenbrand, was born and raised in Munich. He enlisted on 18 August 1914 and served as a medic for the war's duration. Following his demobilisation in April 1919, he completed his medical training and opened a local practice as a doctor. Like Hillenbrand, Wierl was a committed National Socialist, having gone so far as to apply to the SS, although his membership was blocked by local officials. The specific pretext for his first letter to the DJG, however, was that his application to serve as a reserve medical officer had been denied, on the grounds that questions had been raised whether it was appropriate for a 'non-Aryan' to participate in military exercises. Indignant at the failure of local officials to recognise his service record, Wierl attempted to appeal his case directly to Hitler but, after failing to receive a response, contacted the DJG in order to inquire whether any similar cases could serve as precedent.<sup>56</sup>

Wierl identified himself as 'German-Japanese', later elaborating that his father 'was a Shibusawa, from a well-known family in Tokyo and Yokohama, and my mother is a pure Aryan'.<sup>57</sup> In his estimation, the fact that his Aryan parent had been his mother was especially meaningful, because it meant that his life had, 'from its first seconds', been imprinted by the 'effects of the Aryan bloodstream'. The medical doctor Wierl thus mobilised the pseudo-medical rhetoric of the Nazi 'community of blood', but also – perhaps recognising the fragility of that argument – offered more substantive evidence in the form of a recent article published through the ORP 'proving that the Ainu, the indigenous people of Japan, are European or even Aryan'.<sup>58</sup> Wierl may indeed have been a true believer, but he was not above identifying and exploiting the internal contradictions of the regime's race-thinking, or – for that matter – the polycratic structure of its bureaucracy.

<sup>54</sup> Wilhelm Hillenbrand to Reichsleitung der NSDAP, 28.4.34, BArch R 64IV/31, 181.

<sup>55</sup> Auswärtiges Amt (hereafter AA) to DJG, 31.12.35, BArch R 64IV/31, 171.

<sup>56</sup> N. A. Wierl to DJG, 13.11.35, BArch R 64IV/31, 270.

<sup>57</sup> N. A. Wierl to DJG, 18.11.35, BArch R 64IV/31, 268.

<sup>58</sup> N. A. Wierl to Reichsministerium des Innern, 27.12.35, BArch R 64IV/31, 262.

Ultimately, Wierl pinned his hopes on a personal intervention by Hitler. In a letter from May 1936, he referred to ‘rumours that 60 cases regarding party membership (all German–Japanese?) were waiting on a decision by the Führer, and that the ‘final determination hinged on political momentum’.<sup>59</sup> There are a few points here that are worth unpacking. Most immediately, Wierl acknowledged that the outcome of his case was more likely to be a politically motivated decision than a definitive ruling on the racial status of the Japanese. Secondly, his reference to rumours reflects the ambiguity that persisted because of the contradictory information emanating from different authorities, as well as the often arbitrary way in which individual cases were handled. Wierl was lucky that, as personally insulted as he may have been by the judgements against him, his livelihood was not at stake, as it was for other Japanese Germans.

It would stand to reason that the regime would be least likely to grant exemptions in the case of marriages contracted between ‘Aryan’ Germans and Japanese Germans, and yet here too decisions were often arbitrary. The medical student Heinz Schoeler, for one, was eventually allowed to complete his internship and receive his medical licence, despite his marriage to Else Bern, the half-Japanese daughter of a retired German diplomat. Protesting against his treatment, as well as that of his wife and her brother – both of whom were also medical students – Schoeler explained to the DJG that Else ‘was raised, not as a foreigner, but rather completely as a German . . . in her speech, character, and sentiments’. Moreover, he was deeply offended that he and his wife were being handled in the same manner as Jews, even as the German media emphasised the importance of the German–Japanese relationship.<sup>60</sup>

Although Schoeler was allowed to practise medicine, he remained alert to the evolving political climate and its potential impact on his career and family, writing again to the DJG in November 1935 to inquire whether the Nuremberg Laws would have any ‘practical implications’ for us, despite the laws not explicitly referring to ‘Aryans and non-Aryans’.<sup>61</sup> As sensitive as he was to nuances of racial policy, Schoeler does seem to have existed in a privileged space relative to other Japanese German families. Indeed, his expulsion from the party in December 1935 is less surprising than the fact that he was allowed to remain a member for nearly two years after marrying a non-Aryan. A memo from the Office of the Führer to the DJG offers an intriguing glimpse into these internal debates. Although the document is explicit that Schoeler’s marriage was unacceptable, even more so because it had occurred after the Nazis had come to power, it acknowledges that a public excuse for the ruling might be necessary in order to avoid any offence among ‘our Japanese friends’. It was therefore suggested that if any questions were raised, it could be explained that Schoeler’s decision to marry ‘a Japanese was . . . less decisive’ than his failure to ‘secure the consent of the party to such a marriage beforehand’. After all, members of the SS were required to have all potential marriages approved, ‘even in completely normal cases’, and the party also had its own rules, which no member could simply ignore.<sup>62</sup>

Dr. Ludwig Domnick, on the other hand, was initially barred from medical practice due to his marriage to a half-Japanese woman. After bringing his case to the Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of the Interior, the Japanese Embassy and the Labour Ministry, he was finally referred to Johann von Leers as someone who might advocate on his behalf. Clearly exasperated by his inability to secure a definite decision on his case and likely anticipating that Leers would be a sympathetic audience, Domnick adopted a tone of righteous indignation: ‘It is wholly incomprehensible to me how it is possible that, on one side, such a clear message was made, and on the other, I hear that everything is still pending [*in der Schwebe*]’.<sup>63</sup> Compounding Domnick’s frustration were the regime’s attempts to placate Japanese public opinion with statements claiming that the regime’s racial policies did not apply to

<sup>59</sup> N. A. Wierl to DJG, 11.5.36, BArch R 64IV/31, 256.

<sup>60</sup> Heinz Schoeler to DJG, 25.3.35, BArch R 64IV/31, 239–42.

<sup>61</sup> Heinz Schoeler to DJG, 10.11.35, BArch R 64IV/31, 229.

<sup>62</sup> Dienststeller des Beauftragten für außenpolitischen Fragen der NSDAP im Stabe des Stellvertreters des Führers to Foerster (DJG), 13.5.38, BArch R 64IV/31, 213–14.

<sup>63</sup> Ludwig Domnick to Johann von Leers, 24.2.35, BArch R 64IV/31, 141.

Japanese Germans or their families. In his letter to Leers, Domnick included excerpts from a recent talk given in Tokyo by a Dr. Hans Kolb, forwarded to him from his father-in-law, in which Kolb affirmed that the 'racial question in Germany is limited in practical effect to the Jewish Problem'. Furthermore, Kolb claimed that in certain cases racial mixing could actually have a 'stimulating' effect and that the Nazi state sanctioned party members to marry 'members of the East Asian race'.<sup>64</sup> Simply put, this was patently untrue, and yet this mixed-messaging reveals the regime as torn between contradictory impulses. Ultimately, Domnick's stubbornness in pressing his case prevailed; in April 1935, the DJG received notice from the Foreign Ministry that the Labour Ministry had cleared Domnick to resume his medical practice.<sup>65</sup>

Beyond Domnick's ability to manoeuvre within the regime's bureaucracy, his other major advantage in advocating for himself and his family was access to information, via his father-in-law in Tokyo as well as a figure who might seem an unlikely ally for the Japanese German community: Wilhelm Solf (1862–1936). Solf, the first Governor of German Samoa, is perhaps best remembered today for his uncompromising position on mixed-marriages in the German colonies.<sup>66</sup> Following the First World War, however, Solf was instrumental in re-establishing diplomatic relations between Germany and Japan, ultimately serving as the German ambassador to Tokyo until his retirement in 1928. Solf exercised his still considerable influence in the 1930s on behalf of several Japanese German families, including the Hatzfeldt-Aokis. Either Domnick or his father-in-law contacted Solf to see if he could lend his assistance, suggesting that the Japanese German community broadly recognised Solf as a useful ally. Solf confirmed as much in his reply to Domnick, in which he mentioned that he had recently attempted to intercede in three other cases similar to Domnick's, unfortunately to no avail.<sup>67</sup> In any event, Solf's continued advocacy on behalf of these families – which may or may not have played a role in the favourable outcome for Dr. Domnick – reveals the extent to which Japanese Germans were implicitly understood as occupying a privileged or exceptional space vis-à-vis other *Mischlinge*, although the precise nature of that privilege was never formally resolved.

Another case centred around the legal implications of mixed-marriage was that of Ernst Thiele, who had married the Japanese German Josefina Oprey in 1922 and was subsequently expelled from the Nazi Party. According to Thiele, his father-in-law had met and married his wife while working in Sumatra; the pair had later returned to Germany, where they had given their three children a 'German upbringing'. Beyond requesting clarification regarding his own rights, Thiele was eager to resolve the racial status of his wife and their twelve-year-old daughter, who was already a 'keen' member of the League of German Girls (*Bund deutscher Mädel*, BDM).<sup>68</sup> In its initial response, the DJG advised Thiele that it was unable to provide a definite answer to his query 'because the question of the German–Japanese blood-mixing [*Blutmischung*] and its possible recognition as Aryan . . . is still pending'.<sup>69</sup> In a series of letters sent by the DJG to the Foreign Ministry on Thiele's behalf, his daughter was described as having 'German', 'Nordic' and 'Aryan racial features'.<sup>70</sup> Despite their best efforts, the DJG was informed that Thiele could not be a member of the party on account of his being 'related by marriage to non-Aryans' and that his daughter was thus also officially considered a 'non-Aryan'.<sup>71</sup> The DJG attempted to soften the blow of this disappointing news by speculating that his daughter's children would probably be able to claim Aryan

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> AA to DJG, 4.5.35, BArch R 64IV/31, 137.

<sup>66</sup> See George Steinmetz, *The Devil's Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), Chapter 5.

<sup>67</sup> Solf to Ludwig Domnick, 30.11.34, BArch NL Solf/93, 136.

<sup>68</sup> Ernst Thiele to AA, 17.10.35, BArch R 64IV/31, 125–7.

<sup>69</sup> DJG to Ernst Thiele, 4.3.35, BArch R 64IV/31, 131.

<sup>70</sup> DJG to H. W. Rohde (AA), 26.2.35, BArch R 64IV/31, 132; DJG to H. W. Rohde (AA), 6.3.35, BArch R 64IV/31, 130; DJG to H. W. Rohde (AA), 19.10.35, BArch R 64IV/31, 124.

<sup>71</sup> Reichsleitung der NSDAP to DJG, 15.3.35, BArch R 64IV/31, 129.

status, because they would only have a single Japanese great-grandparent.<sup>72</sup> Needless to say, this was probably meagre consolation.

Beyond the various avenues of legal discrimination that Japanese Germans were forced to navigate in the new Germany, efforts by the Nazi state in educating Germans how to properly perceive race also opened the door for more mundane forms of harassment by individuals who took it upon themselves to police the boundaries of racial propriety. Ernst Thiele's sister-in-law Hilde Opry reported a pattern of verbal abuse directed against her and her Japanese mother in their small town, in particular by a retired civil servant and his wife. In addition to publicly abusing the two women with derogatory language, the couple had also spread the rumour that any kind of friendly interaction with them constituted 'race defilement'. The situation had deteriorated to the point that not only had former friends and acquaintances now adopted a similar attitude – leaving Opry and her mother socially isolated – but Opry despaired of finding a job or being able to marry her fiancé. In her letter to the DJG, she asked that they provide her with an identity card or certificate affirming that she was German and that she was legally eligible to marry.<sup>73</sup>

Like many other Japanese Germans, Opry considered herself both a 'proud German' and a committed Nazi, even if her neighbours refused to acknowledge her as such. By her account, her mother had 'raised us as good Germans, moreover she only taught us children how to speak German. My brother immediately enlisted as a volunteer in August 1914 and participated in the entire war as a front-line soldier.'<sup>74</sup> Like Hillenbrand and Wierl, Opry thus invoked military service as proof that her family was German, a strategy also common among Jewish veterans.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, she claimed that both she and her mother had consistently voted for the NSDAP since 1925 and that in 1930 they had been the only household in their district to display the party flag during a SA procession. Indignant that 'people, who once did not even know what it meant to be German' could now 'insult and despise us . . . as non-Germans', Opry felt herself cast out from the *Volksgemeinschaft* she had previously hoped to help build.<sup>76</sup> Opry never claimed to be an Aryan, explaining that she had always heard that the Nazis would 'fight the Jews', but never that this fight would also extend to non-Aryans.<sup>77</sup> From her perspective, however, her technical status as non-Aryan was superseded by her self-identification as German.

The social standing of another young Japanese German woman was at stake in the case of Hatsuko Fischer, who had been publicly embarrassed while out dancing with friends. By her account, a lieutenant had approached Fischer and ordered her partner – an air-force cadet – to leave the dance hall immediately because it was not appropriate for a man in uniform to be seen dancing with a Japanese woman. Whereas most of the other individuals who wrote to the DJG sought some form of official redress, Fischer simply asked for an explanation. Moreover, in contrast to the other cases discussed, Fischer acknowledged that her physical appearance marked her as racially Other: 'my mother was Japanese, and so naturally I look Japanese'.<sup>78</sup> Fischer's German stepmother, who also wrote to the DJG on Hatsuko's behalf, similarly noted that her 'Japanese appearance' had made her life more difficult, but affirmed that her daughter's association with the cadet was simply an innocent childhood friendship and that 'any other assumption or interpretation would be an outrageous slander'.<sup>79</sup> Significantly, the elder Fischer seemed more concerned with denying the possibility of any romantic impropriety between the two young people than in defending her daughter's Germanness,

<sup>72</sup> DJG to Ernst Thiele, 18.3.35, BArch R 64IV/31, 128.

<sup>73</sup> Heide Opry to DJG, 5.1.36, BArch R 64IV/31, 112–14.

<sup>74</sup> Heide Opry to DJG, 5.1.36, BArch R 64IV/31, 112.

<sup>75</sup> Michael Geheran, *Comrades Betrayed: Jewish German World War I Veterans under Hitler* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020). See also Sebastian Huebel, *Fighter, Worker, and Family Man: German-Jewish Men and their Gendered Experiences in Nazi Germany, 1933–1941* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022), esp. Chapter 1.

<sup>76</sup> Heide Opry to DJG, 5.1.36, BArch R 64IV/31, 113.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> Hatsuko Fischer to Foerster (DJG). Undated, BArch R 64IV/31, 305.

<sup>79</sup> G. Fischer to Foerster (DJG), 2.7.37, BArch R 64IV/31, 303.

suggesting that there may have been some ambivalence in the household related to Hatsuko's race, especially after her father's death five years earlier.

A second account of the incident at the dance hall, however, reveals that the situation may have been more complicated. A response from the War Ministry to an inquiry from the DJG reported that the lieutenant in question had objected to the way that Fischer and her partner had been dancing, not to the fact that they were dancing together. Specifically, the couple had reportedly been doing 'a cross of the Charleston, swing, and a fantasy dance [*Phantasietanz*], and singing along to the music'. The lieutenant insisted that he had never denigrated Hatsuko's appearance nor her racial identity in confronting the pair, but had simply reprimanded the cadet for his unseemly conduct in public.<sup>80</sup> Obviously it would be dangerous to accept this alternative narrative at face value, especially because it was Hatsuko Fischer who brought this incident to the attention of the authorities, and yet it is nevertheless interesting that a lieutenant in the German army – who evidently shared the regime's belief that swing music was incompatible with respectable social comportment – would deny that race had been a factor in his decision to intervene.<sup>81</sup> After all, under a strict reading of the regime's policies, Fischer and her dance partner could have been credibly accused of 'race defilement' – that was clearly the charge that her stepmother was trying to pre-emptively address – and so the lieutenant's claim that race had not played a role in his actions reveals the extent to which Nazi race-thinking overlapped with other ideological positions in complicated, sometimes contradictory, ways.

The most consistent form of discrimination encountered by Japanese Germans throughout the 1930s unsurprisingly revolved around the question of marriage.<sup>82</sup> In 1937, Karl Glatzer wrote several letters – to the DJG, the Ministry of the Interior and to Johann von Leers – attempting to have his marriage approved.<sup>83</sup> Like other Japanese Germans, Glatzer specifically referenced his political membership in nationalist and National Socialist organisations as evidence of his racial fitness, as well as the regime's own propaganda regarding the special relationship between Germany and Japan. He also mentioned having been evaluated at the Institute for Racial Science and Ethnology in Leipzig, whereupon it had been determined that he physically favoured his German father.<sup>84</sup> Regardless of how all this other evidence might have been evaluated, the tipping-point in Glatzer's favour was likely a simple matter of precedent – his three sisters had all already successfully married German men, one of whom was a captain in the German army.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, one of Glatzer's brothers-in-law was Ludwig Domnick, whose encounter with the Nazi state was discussed above.

Glatzer's successful self-advocacy was in turn cited by Hans-Eckart von Koslowski in 1939, subsequent to his own efforts to marry. Moreover, Koslowski reported that he had heard from Erwin Toku Baelz that six Japanese–German marriages had taken place in 1937 and that – according to his Japanese uncle – the 'German racial laws did *not* apply to the Japanese'.<sup>86</sup> Beyond his ability to leverage his personal connections, Koslowski also demonstrated a familiarity with the regime's racial legislation. Citing §7 of the 'First Regulations on the Execution of the Blood Protection Law', Koslowski argued that the only cases in which marriages were explicitly prohibited or required written permission were those involving 'negroes and gypsies'. Imposing the same restrictions on Japanese Germans would, by his logic, imply that the Japanese 'were on the same level' as those other groups, which would be 'discriminatory against the Japanese nation'.<sup>87</sup> Like other Japanese Germans, Koslowski's personal difficulties did not make him more sympathetic to other discriminated groups; it offended

<sup>80</sup> Reichskriegsministerium to Foerster (DJG), 31.8.37, BArch R 64IV/31, 299.

<sup>81</sup> See Michael Kater, *Different Drummers: Jazz in the Culture of Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>82</sup> A law prohibiting marriage between Germans and 'non-Aryans' was drafted but never codified. The regime did, however, devise a number of unofficial ways of discouraging such matches. See Furuya, 'Nazi Racism Toward the Japanese', 36–41.

<sup>83</sup> Karl Glatzer to Johann von Leers, 7.9.37, BArch R 64IV/31, 294.

<sup>84</sup> Karl Glatzer to Minister des Innern, 12.5.37, BArch R 64IV/31, 295–6.

<sup>85</sup> Rudolf v. Strobl, BArch R 64IV/31, 289.

<sup>86</sup> Hans-Eckart von Koslowski to Werner (DJG), 10.7.39, BArch R 64IV/31, 279, emphasis in original.

<sup>87</sup> Hans-Eckart von Koslowski to DJG, 26.6.39, BArch R 64IV/31, 281.

him on a visceral level that he should be subject to the same laws as those he clearly perceived as inferior. In a subsequent letter, Koslowski clarified his position: if his marriage was not approved, he would leave Germany ‘because to live as a third-class citizen in my own fatherland is a violation of my sense of honour. Even though I am a so-called Japanese *Mischling* of the first degree, I believe I possess more honour and better qualities than do many “pure Aryans”.’<sup>88</sup> This, of course, was the fundamental point of much of this correspondence, that Japanese Germans self-identified as members of the German *Volksgemeinschaft* and could not understand – or accept – the regime’s ambivalence in recognising them as such.

Wilhelm Hillenbrand, the former Freikorps and SA member who identified himself as ‘of pure Aryan ancestry’, wrote to the DJG a second time in May 1941 after being notified that his application for a marriage licence had been denied. Mentioning that he had recently served a fourth tour of duty, Hillenbrand appealed to the DJG to explain why he continued to be ‘treated as a second-class German’.<sup>89</sup> It bears highlighting here once again that Hillenbrand did not feel the need to justify himself as German, an identity he understood as self-evident; his sense of aggrievement stemmed rather from what he perceived to be a violation of the classless *Volksgemeinschaft* ideal at the core of the Nazi worldview.

Hillenbrand could not have known this, but his rejected petition to marry was probably fallout from the regime’s increasingly intransigent position on mixed marriages after the start of the war. Around this time correspondence between Japanese Germans and the DJG also slowed, although the reason for this is unclear. It does occasionally reappear elsewhere in the archives; for example, the summary of a meeting between Hans Lammers (1879–1962) and Hitler in September 1940 details a debate between the two men regarding Hatsuko Fischer’s application to marry an ‘Aryan’ man. Lammers persuaded Hitler to approve Fischer’s marriage – notwithstanding the Führer’s strong objections to the match – out of consideration for past precedent, but reassured him that any future applications would be postponed before being ultimately denied.<sup>90</sup> This document has been frequently cited as proof of the supremacy of race-thinking in the German–Japanese alliance, but just as significant is the fact that Hatsuko Fischer – an ordinary woman of modest means and no political connections – was, ultimately, allowed to marry.<sup>91</sup> That small victory may not have meant much outside her small social circle, but that does not mean that it did not mean everything to her.

In February 1943, a marriage application between a German man and a Japanese German woman was rejected outright on the grounds that ‘marriage between Aryans and half-Japanese *Mischlinge* are, in terms of racial politics, fundamentally undesirable’.<sup>92</sup> On the one hand, this statement explicitly rejected the theory that the Japanese were Aryan; on the other, it might come as a shock that the regime took an entire decade to come to this conclusion, especially after the formal German–Japanese alliance. Yet even here, when we look closer, there are shades of ambiguity. For instance, it was noted that the woman was apparently not in close contact with her Japanese relatives and so this decision was unlikely to trigger political controversy. Moreover, the woman was described as more ‘Malaysian’ in appearance than Japanese, which suggests that the older associations between the Japanese and ‘whiteness’ were also a factor in this particular case. Even here, then, race was a ‘moving target’, triangulated between not just geopolitical considerations but also wildly divergent models for evaluating degrees of racial difference. It only makes sense that, in the absence of anything approaching a political or ideological consensus, alternative assessments regarding the status of the Japanese Germans would proliferate. Less expected, perhaps, is the persistence and political savvy of the Japanese Germans in demanding that the regime recognise them as exempt from racial

<sup>88</sup> Hans-Eckart von Koslowski to DJG, 12.7.39, BArch R 64IV/31, 278.

<sup>89</sup> Wilhelm Hillenbrand to DJG, 26.5.41, BArch R 64IV/31, 161.

<sup>90</sup> Hans Lammers Abschrift, 21.9.40, BArch R 43II/1456a.

<sup>91</sup> Law, *Transnational Nazism*, 284.

<sup>92</sup> ‘Durchdruck als Konzept’, Referat D III, signed Von Hahn, 26.2.43. ‘Eheschließung zwischen Deutschen und fremdrassigen Ausländern’, PA AA R99176.

legislation, or the fact that they were so frequently successful in extracting concessions which enabled them to exist as *de facto* honorary members of the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft*.

Like other dimensions of the German–Japanese alliance, the racial question has hitherto lingered in popular discourse principally as a topic of wild speculation and rumour. A Google search for ‘honorary Aryan + Japan’ currently yields more than 442,000 results, beginning with a Wikipedia page dedicated to the term and followed by an endless stream of forum debates over the term and its historical validity.<sup>93</sup> Variations on this myth have also found acceptance – alongside US racist tropes such as the Asian ‘model minority’ – among members of the contemporary alt-right and white nationalist movements, and so it is more important than ever to establish a historical baseline of fact.<sup>94</sup> The Nazi regime may never have moved beyond grudging ambivalence vis-à-vis its Japanese German citizens, but it did acknowledge their importance, both historically and strategically. The rights they negotiated for themselves and their families were neither inevitable nor illusory. Rather, they were made possible by the Japanese Germans’ stubborn insistence that they were legitimate members of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, as well as by the very real theoretical and political fissures within the Nazi racial state that made such claims plausible in the first place.

<sup>93</sup> ‘Honorary Aryan’, *Wikipedia*. Available at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honorary\\_Aryan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honorary_Aryan) (last accessed 11 May 2023). The Wikipedia Talk thread on the term is a fascinating microcosm of this debate in miniature. ‘Talk: Honorary Aryan’, *Wikipedia*. Available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk%3AHonorary\\_Aryan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk%3AHonorary_Aryan) (last accessed 30 Nov. 2022).

<sup>94</sup> Audrea Lim, ‘The Alt-Right’s Asian Fetish’, *The New York Times* (6 Jan. 2018).