

# Breaking Borders

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Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent disappearance of the Cold War mentality in Europe, people worldwide are witnessing a global process of change caused by new diplomacy, communications and commerce. It seems as if the period of political change since the late 1980s has been paralleled by economic and social change that has called the fundamentals of modern industrial societies into question. Of course, as a German and as a student of modern and contemporary history my way of thinking and acting has been influenced by these changes differently than the lives of my friends in Japan. But although Germans often perceive these changes as specific problems of German society, it is not very difficult to realize that all these changes are based on worldwide change. Experts often see these changes as the result of the rise of network societies, especially the Internet, as the medium of communication in the next century. What have all these contemporary problems to do with Japanese railways? And why did I come to Japan to deepen my knowledge of the country and its technology? Well, let me paraphrase the Bible—in the beginning there was *no* railway network. When I began studying history at Humboldt University, in Berlin I was very interested in literature, politics, and cultural history. As a minor subject, I chose Japanese studies because I had been learning judo since I was 8 and this sport has constantly brought me closer to Japanese traditions. Early in my studies, I was convinced that there were two different cultures: Western, and Japanese. In the West, I supposed people were characterized by a materialistic and western-centric mentality, while Japanese values were founded on Confucian principles like harmony and group-oriented thinking. But I soon learned that the reality is more complex. And the cultural as well as the

technological transfer between West and East has been so intensive that historians usually hesitate to speak of two separate cultures or societies.

## End of the Territorial Age?

With the breakdown of Cold War borders, the historian and Harvard University professor, Charles S. Maier speaks of the 'passing of the territorial age.' According to his argument, the specific congruency between 'decision space' and 'identity space' is disappearing—the Internet and the communications revolution it has spawned do not obey the rules and laws of the nation state. While national politicians are making decisions in a national framework, the Internet community is ignoring and surpassing these borders. Global players are coming to dominate economic competition and the nation state is losing its ability to control and regulate this competition. But Professor Maier also argues that the competencies now being lost by nation states were only obtained after the second half of the 19th century. Despite taking territoriality as a given for so long, it has not been a timeless attribute of society, but has instead provided an anchored structure for politics and economics only from about 1860 to the 1980s. Early railways in the 19th century created territoriality when it became possible to travel further and faster by rail than on foot or horse. Railways fascinated politicians, economists and writers and the steam locomotive became a symbol of the new age. During the early modern period, water was the main means of transport, especially between continents, but railways and the commerce they generated created new national borders. Management of railways required timetables and a disciplined administration with resultant loss of individual freedom.

It is this ambivalence that I want to compare between Japanese and German railway policy and construction.

## Railway Policy in Historical Perspective

On 6 April 1906, the *Japan Daily Mail* commented on the proposed railway nationalization saying, 'There is a great deal to be said against State ownership of railways. But there is also much to be said in favour of it, and Europe offers at least one example of the system's eminent success. In Japan's case, we do not see what other course (is) offered.' Indeed, at the end of the 19th century and during the first decade of the 20th century, the idea of railway nationalization was a central subject of political discussion in many European countries like Germany, Belgium, Denmark, and Switzerland. In the opinion of Tomofusa Sasa, the discussions on railway nationalization indicate that Japan was participating in a worldwide trend. The Japanese government justified the nationalization as a necessary prerequisite for economic expansion of the nation. The Railway Nationalization Law came into effect in 1906 and all 17 major private lines, including those of the Big Five companies were purchased within 2 years. Masaru Inoue, the Head of the Railway Directorate said in 1909, 'If this state of improved communications be compared with that existing in the days when we passed over the hills in *kago* (palanquin) and waded across rivers sitting on *rendai* (litter), what a contrast it presents! It is almost beyond conception.' But railways were not built in the Meiji period (1868–1912) just to improve communications—a further role was centralization of power, national unification, promotion of commerce, and suppression of domestic rebellions. The two models frequently invoked by



Yokohama Landmark Tower near Sakuragicho Station was the original site of the Yokohama terminus of Japan's first railway line between Shimbashi (Tokyo) and Yokohama opened in 1872.

politicians like Shigenobu Okuma or Hirobumi Ito to legitimize specific decisions were England and Germany. In the late Meiji period, the Prussian model of state railways and their positive effects on the budget attracted the interest of Japanese leaders. During preparation of the 1892 Railway Construction Law, the Japanese government drew on the Prussian railway Nationalization Law of 1879 translated by Kowashi Inoue, a student and admirer of the Prussian School of Constitutionalism. Even the Meiji Constitution promulgated in 1890 was based largely on the principles of Prussian Constitutionalism. But the railway policy of those years can only partially be described as a policy *à la prusse*. Although the 1892 Railway Construction Law tried to regulate construction of new railway lines and to connect branch and trunk lines in order to unify the network, it avoided monopolizing railway construction and discouraging private investment in new railway companies. As a result, even after

the passage of the 1906 Railway Nationalization Law, there were still many private local railway companies. On one hand, one may say that in railway construction, the English traditions of individualism (that were dominant in the early Meiji period) survived and influenced the establishment of new lines during the Taisho period (1912–26). But, on the other hand, if one compares the Japanese case with Germany's railway policy, one can see that the aspirations for unification and building of a new nation were much more successful in Japan than attempts by German politicians and entrepreneurs to unify the nation by building a nationwide railway network. Indeed, the attempt to create a German Railway Network (Eisenbahngemeinschaft) failed in 1904 and the German states of Württemberg, Baden, Bayern and Prussia kept their own state-owned lines. Even railways weren't able to dissolve the political borders between German states. World War I unified and destroyed Imperial Germany as Japan extended its influence in East Asia as an ally of England while starting the Taisho democratic experience. At that time, Japanese politicians often evoked the German example as an ideal, but I guess this aspiration was a political metaphor. But for which political intentions? That is another story. ■

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## Further Reading

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