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YOSHIDA SHŌIN MARTYRED PROPHET OF JAPANESE EXPANSIONISM

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IN STUDYING the background of Japan's expansionist policy it is necessary to take into account the part played by Yoshida Shōin, one of the most picturesque and colorful personalities in modern Japanese history. Yoshida was one of the outstanding figures of the movement which in 1868 overthrew the Shogunate and restored the Imperial authority. "If we are going to speak of the Restoration," Mr. Iichiro Tokutomi points out in his biographical study, "we must necessarily speak of Yoshida Shōin. Just as a mother may die in giving birth to her child, but the child lives and grows to manhood, so we may say he was the mother and child of the Restoration."¹

Yoshida and his associates, who were already active by the time of Commodore Perry's arrival in 1853, advocated for Japan a program of foreign conquest including the seizure of Formosa, Korea, Manchuria, Saghalien, Kamchatka, and the Philippines. A brilliant pupil of Sakuma Shōzan, one of the earliest advocates of the opening of Japan to foreign intercourse, he was himself a teacher. Although fanatically anti-foreign, he belonged to the group which, recognizing the impossibility of ignoring Western culture, sought to master Western science and apply it in Japan so as to be able to meet the foreign intruders with their own weapons. "Just now," Yoshida is quoted as having declared, "all foreigners are inquiring into our weak points. It is my greatest wish at this time that we may unite the hearts of the people of our sixty states into one body as strong as stone, and chastise the small and ugly-minded foreigners, and quiet all our troubles."²

YOSHIDA'S APPEARANCE AND PERSONALITY

A brief description of this remarkable man is to be found in *Makers of modern Japan*.³ However, the most readable, though perhaps not the most accurate account of his life in English, is the one given in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Familiar studies of men and books*, where he is described under

¹ Iichiro Tokutomi, "Life of Shōin Yoshida," translated from the Japanese by Horace E. Coleman, *Transactions of the Asiatic society of Japan*, 14, Part 1 (1917), p. 126.

² Tokutomi, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

³ J. Morris, *Makers of modern Japan* (London: Methuen & Co., 1906).

the name of Yoshida Torajirō. Stevenson explains that he relates the story on the authority of "an intelligent Japanese gentleman, Mr. Taiso Masaki, who told it to me with an emotion that does honour to his heart."

"He was ugly," Stevenson records, "and laughably disfigured with the smallpox; and while nature had been so niggardly with him from the first, his personal habits were still more sluttish. His clothes were wretched; when he ate or washed he wiped his hands upon his sleeves, and as his hair was not tied more than once in two months, it was often disgusting to behold." But he was blessed with that single-mindedness so characteristic of the race from which he had sprung. Such was his passion for study, that he "even begrudged himself natural repose; and when he grew drowsy over his books he would, if it was summer, put mosquitoes up his sleeve; and, if it was winter, take off his shoes and run barefoot in the snow."⁴

HIS ATTEMPTS TO GO ABROAD

For two and a half centuries until the arrival of Commodore Perry's American ships in Edo Bay in 1853, the Tokugawas had succeeded in maintaining a state of comparative isolation from the outside world. With an amazing tenacity of purpose Yoshida Shōin made repeated attempts to smuggle himself out of the country aboard a foreign vessel in order to study Western civilization on the spot and to extract its essence for the benefit of his country. Finally, in company with a friend, he sought to board Commodore Perry's own ship, the steam frigate "Powhatan," which had now returned to Shimoda.

Stevenson tells how in a little temple, hard by the seashore, the two conspirators lay down to repose and then, with the dawn of what was to have been their last morning in Japan, seized a fisherman's boat and rowed to the spot where Perry's ship was lying far out to sea because of the tides.

Their very manner of boarding was significant of determination; for they had no sooner caught hold upon the ship than they kicked away their boat to make return impossible. But the Commodore was already in treaty with the Shogun's Government; it was one of the stipulations that no Japanese was to be aided in escaping from Japan; and Yoshida and his follower were handed over as prisoners to the authorities at Shimoda. That night he who had [sought] to explore the secrets of the barbarians, slept, if he might sleep at all, in a cell too short for lying down at full length, and too low for standing upright. There are some disappointments too great for commentary.⁵

⁴ R. L. Stevenson, *Familiar studies of men and books* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), p. 158.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

There are a few minor discrepancies between Stevenson's dramatic version of the episode and the more matter of fact account given by Dr. Francis L. Hawks, the official historian of the Perry Expedition. Stevenson says, for example, that Yoshida's companion was a common soldier, "a dyer by birth, who had heard vaguely of Yoshida's movements, and had become filled with wonder as to their design." Hawks states, on the other hand, that the two men who boarded the ship proved to be Japanese gentlemen of good position. "They both were entitled to wear the two swords," he writes, "and one still retained a single one, but they had left the other three in the boat which had gone adrift with them. They were educated men and wrote the mandarin Chinese with fluency and apparent elegance [Stevenson speaks of Yoshida's handwriting as having been 'exceptionally villainous'], and their manners were courteous and highly refined."⁶

On the previous day, Hawks narrates, the two adventurers had accosted a group of Perry's officers who were making an excursion ashore and had given one of them a letter in Japanese which said in part:

Two scholars from Yedo, in Japan, present this letter for the inspection of the "high officers and those who manage affairs." Our attainments are few and trifling, as we ourselves are small and unimportant, so that we are abashed in coming before you; we are neither skilled in the use of arms, nor are we able to discourse upon the rules of strategy and military discipline; in trifling pursuits and idle pastimes our years and months have slipped away.⁷ We have, however, read in books, and learned a little by hearsay, what are the customs and education in Europe and America, and we have been for many years desirous of going over the "five great continents," but the laws of our country in all maritime points are very strict; for foreigners to come into the country, and for natives to go abroad, are both immutably forbidden. Our wish to visit other regions has consequently only "gone to and fro in our breasts in continual agitation," like one's breathing being impeded or his walking cramped. Happily, the arrival of so many of your ships in these waters, and stay for so many days, which has given us opportunity to make a pleasing acquaintance and careful examination, so that we are fully assured of the kindness and liberality of your excellencies, and your regard for others, has also revived the thoughts of many years, and they are urgent for an exit.

This, then, is the time to carry the plan into execution, and we now secretly send you this private request, that you will take us on board your ships as they go out to sea; we can thus visit around in the five great continents, even if we do in this, slight the prohibitions of our own country. . . .⁸

⁶ Francis L. Hawks, *Narrative of the expedition of an American squadron to the China Seas and Japan* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1856), p. 486.

⁷ Actually this was far from the truth. Tokutomi records that at the age of 11 Yoshida gave a lecture on military history before Mōri Yoshichika, the clan Lord, who expressed astonishment at the boy's erudition.

⁸ Hawks, *op. cit.*, p. 485.

If the Commodore had felt himself at liberty to indulge his own feelings, Dr. Hawks points out, "he would have gladly given a refuge on board his ship to the poor Japanese, who apparently sought to escape from the country from the desire of gratifying a liberal curiosity, which had been stimulated by the presence of Americans in Japan. There were other considerations which, however, had higher claims than an equivocal humanity. To connive at the flight of one of the people was to disobey the laws of the Empire, and it was the only true policy to conform, in all possible regards, to the institutions of a country by which so many important concessions had already been reluctantly granted. . . ."⁹

HIS HOSTILITY TO THE SHOGUNATE

After a lengthy imprisonment Yoshida Shōin was released and took up school teaching. "As time progressed," says Charles Lanman in his *Leading men of Japan*, published in 1883, "his hostility to the Shogun's Government knew no abatement, and in his zeal to restore the Mikado to power, he went to Kioto in 1859, made an attempt upon the life of one of the Shogun's ministers, but before leaving Tokio he wrote the following letter to his father:

My dear Father:—I, Yoshida Torajirō, have been guilty of great errors, and have offended against the law of my country, yet still my life has been preserved. In looking back upon the past twenty-nine years [Yoshida was born in 1830] I find I have frequently passed through great dangers; in fact, my very existence has often been in peril, and I know that I have caused great trouble to you all, my dear father and brothers. I have been a great offender and a bad son; but if I remain silent at the present crises of our Empire, the result might be the destruction of the Imperial Government. Behold, how viciously the Bakufu authorities conduct their business! They discredit the commands of the Emperor and have entered into a treaty with a set of barbarians. . . . Therefore I arranged with a few of my friends and am going to Kioto with the object of killing Mabe Jensho [one of the Shogun's ministers]. It is our desire to cut off his head and impale it on a bamboo, and thus manifest our resolution to serve the rightful cause. But if we unfortunately are not successful in our project, and are arrested, we shall bravely declare our views without fear of keeping anything back, and shall not cause any trouble to our lord of Choshu. . . .¹⁰

HIS EXECUTION

The project did miss fire and Yoshida was executed. The closing scenes of his life are described as follows by one who is said to have known him well:

A little after, and Yoshida too must appear before the court. He seized on the opportunity of a public audience, confessed and gloried in his design, and reading

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 487.

¹⁰ Charles Lanman, *Leading men of Japan* (Boston: D. Lothrop & Co., 1882), p. 252.

his auditors a lesson in the history of their country, told at length the illegality of the Shogun's power and the crimes by which its exercise was sullied. So, having said his say for once, he was led forth and executed, . . . having acquired fame as a poet, a patriot, a schoolmaster, a friend to learning, and a martyr to reform. He was not only wise and provident in thought, but surely a hero in execution. . . . It is hard to say which is most remarkable, his capacity for command, which subdued his very jailers, his hot, unflagging zeal, or his stubborn superiority to defeat. He failed in each particular enterprise that he attempted; and yet we have only to look at his country to see how complete has been his general success. His friends and pupils made the majority of the leaders in the final revolution, and many of them are, or were, high placed among the rulers of Japan. . . .¹¹

HIS INFLUENCE ON THE MAKERS OF MODERN JAPAN

Among those who came directly under Yoshida Shōin's personal influence were Prince Ito, one of the principal architects of the Japanese Constitution, and Prince Yamagata, founder of the modern Japanese army. In his biography of Ito, Kengi Hamada writes:

The figure of a heroic soul, brilliant and passionate, shines forth from the dark and bloody pages of history. It is the figure of a Choshu prophet whose adherence to his lofty convictions was beyond the comprehension of his persecutors and whose invaluable life was snuffed out all too prematurely to enable him to realize his dreams. It is Sho-in Yoshida, than whom there is none greater among the tragic martyrs of Japan. . . .

This was the man to whom Kuruhara, Ito's *samurai* leader, himself a disciple, recommended Ito for further instruction in the classics. . . .¹² Young Ito, returning west from Miyata and equipped with a mind rich with the brilliant impressions of the eastern tumult, entered the portals of the Shoka Sonjuku and began at once to receive the fiery influence of Sho-in's astounding mind. The distinguished master and the eager pupil were quick to discover in each other a community of interests, of ideals, of aspirations. Sho-in was tremendously impressed by this young recruit, and the thought raced through his mind, like water through a mill race, that here was a budding genius gifted with those very attributes of leadership which would enable him to succeed where he himself had failed in diverting the nation's course from the terrible fate to which it was obviously headed. Ito, Sho-in decided, was Japan's man of destiny. And having so decided, he proceeded to instil into this raw youth those imperishable convictions which burned in his breast.¹³

After the execution of Yoshida, young Ito placed his own silken *obi* over the decapitated body of his revered teacher in order to complete the ceremonial robes in which he was to be buried. Later, as Hamada records, he "took occasion to weigh the fundamentals, the venerable ideals of a race dedi-

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 253–54.

¹² Kengi Hamada, *Prince Ito* (Tokyo: Sansendo Co., 1936), p. 14.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

cated to something essentially higher and nobler—the spirit of Yamato. In this he was sustained by Sho-in's immaculate example. Sho-in had disclosed during his brief but exemplary career, this higher and nobler objective, this indispensable spiritual essence of a true patriot of Dai Nippon, in all its pristine brilliance."¹⁴

Although Yamagata studied under Yoshida Shōin for only a short while, the master's moral influence seems, according to Dr. Rikitaro Fujisawa, to have made a lasting impression upon his gifted pupil. "The first idea of the formation of the modern Japanese army," Dr. Fujisawa declares, "may be traced to Yoshida Shōin."¹⁵

THE QUALITY OF HIS PATRIOTISM

One of the most fully documented studies of Yoshida Shōin to appear in any Western language is the German account by Père Heinrich Dumoulin.¹⁶ He feels that Yoshida was "perhaps the most prominent personality of the immediate pre-Meiji period" and "one of the truest embodiments of the Japanese spirit." Using a selected collection of Yoshida's letters as source material, he discusses the personality of the young reformer, his intellectual background and his influence as an educator. "Shōin's thought world," he writes, "is characteristic of the pre-Meiji period. It allows an insight into the ideas and aims of many patriots who then prepared the country for the great change. Shōin's life was dominated by but one thought: Japan. National greatness and unity were embodied in the emperor, finding expression in the slogan: 'Worship the Emperor; expel the foreigners.' Preservation of national independence and originality, [and] the idea of national Japan, were inseparable from the Imperial House. Where the Emperor was, there also was Japan. . . ."

In Shōin's writings, Père Dumoulin points out, reverence for the imperial house is frequently expressed. After forming his decision to risk a journey aboard he traveled to the coast by way of Kyōto in order to make his obeisance to the emperor. This provided the occasion for the famous poem in which Yoshida gave expression to the religio-nationalism which permeated his whole being:

Surrounded by mountains and streams
Firm fortress, Holy Miyako!

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹⁵ Rikitaro Fujisawa, *The recent aims and political development of Japan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1923), pp. 31-32.

¹⁶ Heinrich Dumoulin, "Yoshida Shōin (1830-1859)—Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis der geistigen Quellen der Meijereneuerung," *Monumenta Nipponica*, 1 (1938), pp. 58-85.

Day by day I think of you
 As I travel westward.
 Now at dawn, after my cleansing,
 I bow in reverence
 To the noble Tennō's palace: Melancholy
 Grips my heart at this holy spot.
 The palace is decayed—
 Will it ever rise again in splendor?
 Mountains and streams alone
 Have continued without change.
 An old message tells: 'Brightly
 Shines Tennō's radiant virtue.
 Worshipping Heaven and merciful to the people,
 His heart is pure.
 At cock's crow he rises,
 Performing the sacred ablutions.
 Banishing the powers of darkness,
 His prayer for peace ascends.'
 But no more shines into the world
 The Tennō's exalted wisdom.
 His followers at court, forgetting their duties
 Have not used the favorable times.
 How can the Tennō, now a prisoner,
 Again command his men?
 How can the power of his virtue
 Once more rule over Nippon?
 The love of men is unsteady
 Like the waves.
 When can I again bow in reverence
 Before Tennō's rising sun?"¹⁷

Yoshida Shōin's emphasis upon the imperial idea as the foundation of the Japanese state meant opposition to the Bakufu, Père Dumoulin points out, but in a letter written to his older brother Umetarō from prison in 1855 he opposes premature action:

"Loyalty to the Bakufu is loyalty to the Emperor. . . . During 200 years the Bakufu has been of great service. I have often thought it might be good to overthrow it now, but it would be useless to plunge the people into unrest because there is not yet a substitute."

Yoshida favored legal methods. First, he urged, the Bakufu should be warned and admonished voluntarily to surrender its power to the Emperor. Only if peaceful steps should prove in vain, and then only with the approval

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 66–67. Translated from the German by Hubert Freyn.

and upon command of the emperor, should force be employed. "During his whole life," says Dumoulin, "Yoshida Shōin remained an adherent of the legal way even when later his feeling against the Bakufu became more embittered. Especially he could not forgive the Shogunate the treaties and constant dealings with the foreigners without special permission. Not that Shōin was an absolute opponent of everything from the West, but the highhanded procedure of the Shogunate in matters of national concern could not be tolerated."

HIS PLANS FOR NATIONAL DEFENSE

In Yoshida Shōin, Dumoulin goes on to point out, geography, strategy and European science were closely interrelated. Accurate geographical knowledge, he realized, was a pre-condition of national defense, which could be accomplished only through modernization of the armed forces. Modern strategy must be learned largely from Europe and introduced. "With all his insistence upon Japanese originality, Yoshida Shōin was no extreme opponent of Western culture as were so many contemporary patriots. He himself diligently studied the fragments of European science transmitted by the Dutch in Nagasaki. . . . Shōin was mainly concerned to create and assure the basis of a powerful Japan. These were: a strong military force and internal unity of the people. He always stressed the need of army reform and actually drew up detailed plans. . . ." ¹⁸

Yoshida appears to have been strongly influenced by the writings of the *samurai* scholar Yamaga Sokō (1622–1685), whose lectures on Confucianism and military strategy gained for him a great reputation, though his main claim to fame rests upon the fact that Ōishi, the leader of the celebrated Forty-seven Ronin, was one of his pupils. Yamaga was a foremost exponent of the *samurai* spirit, which he set forth in a series of lectures entitled *Bukyō Shōgaku*, or *Primary military teaching*. "It was probably in the writings of Sokō Yamaga," says Tokutomi, "that we find the chief source of Shōin's great loyalty to the Imperial House and it was the ideas of Yamaga that ran all through his discussions about his theory of the State, and the expansion of the national power and Bushido." ¹⁹

HIS PLANS FOR NATIONAL EXPANSION

Coming at the end of a long line of scholars who had sought to establish the uniqueness of Japanese culture, Yoshida preached Japanese dominance in

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 68–71.

¹⁹ Tokutomi, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

Asia to the exclusion of Westerners—a doctrine which has come to form one of the basic principles of Japanese policy in modern times. In his *Record of a dark room prisoner*, which he penned in jail after the ignominious failure of his attempt to go abroad, he outlined a concrete program of expansion. He advocated, says Tokutomi, “the opening of the Hokkaido and establishing clan lords there, the taking of Kamchatka and the Kurile Islands and advising the Lord of Ryuku to attach them [Liu-ch’iu Islands] to Japan; to compel the Koreans to pay tribute to our country as in former times; to take a part of Manchuria and to take Formosa and the [Philippine] Islands and gradually show an aggressive tendency.”²⁰

Some of Yoshida’s associates favored an even broader imperialism. “Our great obligation today,” declared his friend and fellow-captive, Hashimoto Sanai,

is to readjust the administration of the country and by diplomacy to develop friendly relations with some of the most important foreign countries. According to the tendency of the times, I believe there should be in the future an alliance between the five great continents. The chief of this confederation will naturally be England or Russia, but I believe that it should be Russia, as England is too avaricious. Russia is strong and strict, and therefore Russia will probably make the best reputation. Japan, in order to maintain her independence, must have Korea and part of Manchuria and also should have territories in South America and India. This will be very difficult, however, as we are not strong enough yet and for this reason we should make an alliance with Russia because she is our neighbor. If we depend on Russia she will feel friendly toward us. Until this is accomplished, it would be well to seek the sympathy of America and get her help in resisting the aggression of England. In carrying out this imperial policy we must look upon America as our Eastern ally, and Russia as our brother, . . . and the first important thing is to take some territory in the nearest countries.²¹

A slightly different version of this utterance is given in the Japanese account of Hashimoto Sanai’s life translated into English by Mr. Frederick Welden. According to Mr. Welden’s translation Hashimoto wrote:²²

“Considering the present state of the world, the country which will gain supremacy over the world will, in all probability, be either England or Russia . . . England is exceedingly avaricious. She has annexed India and threatened China. On the other hand Russia seems righteous and honest. She is a good

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 161. Coleman, in his translation, wrongly identified Luzon and other Philippine islands with the “Loochoo” (Ryuku or Liu-ch’iu) islands already referred to previously. See Yoshi S. Kuno, *Japanese expansion on the Asiatic continent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1940) vol. 2, pp. 354–55.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

²² Frederick Welden, “Hashimoto Sanai: A Japanese martyr,” *The Journal of the Rutgers University Library*, 4 (December, 1940), pp. 15–21.

neighbor with much the same interests as ours, and therefore we must form a close association with her.”

Mr. Welden points out that this biographical sketch “indicated a few of the many problems confronting Japanese reformers of the mid-nineteenth century and shows how close the Japanese were to bursting the shackles of isolation even before Commodore Perry sailed into Edo Bay in 1853.” Like Yoshida Shōin, Hashimoto was executed for what the Shogunate considered to be subversive activities and thus joined the ranks of the political martyrs whose example inspired the proponents of the Meiji Restoration.

In the second volume of his *Japanese Expansion on the Asiatic continent* Professor Yoshi S. Kuno points out that Yoshida Shōin and Hashimoto Sanai “advocated national expansion on the Asiatic continent and the founding of Greater Japan, or the conclusion of an alliance with some Occidental power, thereby elevating the national and military standing of Japan and making it possible for her to rise as a world power.”²³

Yoshida insisted that Japan should first of all firmly establish her power on the islands of Ezo, now known as Hokkaidō, and Saghalin, and then undertake the conquest of Kamchatka as well as the domination of the Sea of Okhotsk. With respect to Hokkaidō, at least, he had been anticipated by several earlier scholars, including Habuto Seiyo (1730–80), Rin Shihei (Hayashi Shihei) (1738–93), Kudō Heisuke (1738–1800), Honda Toshiaki (Rimei) (1744–1821), and Hirayama Kozō (1758–1828), all of whom argued strongly in favor of the occupation and development of Hokkaidō before the Russians could add the island to their mounting toll of conquests in northeastern Asia.

In point of fact, as Professor Kuno makes clear, “the nation that surprised and awakened Japan from her long sleep was neither England nor the United States, as is generally believed, but Russia.”²⁴ From the time of the first appearance of Russian vessels off the coasts of northern Japan in 1779, Russia was regarded as a menace to Japanese security. “Thus, as early as the eighteenth century, some three-quarters of a century before Japan was forced by the United States of America to open her doors, [the scholar] Kudō foresaw that the establishment of trade relations with Russia and with other nations was not only inevitable, but that it would be the best way for Japan to learn something of the world outside, and thereby to prepare herself to meet the Russian advance from the north.”²⁵

²³ Kuno, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 231.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

YOSHIDA'S ROLE IN MAKING MODERN JAPAN

"Although they both died young," says Professor Kuno, "both Shōin and Sanai were eminent scholars and statesmen. Both, but especially Shōin, were surrounded by admirers, followers, and disciples, most of whom became the founders of the New Japan. Shōin is today deified and revered as the creator and father of Greater Japan. Shōin and Sanai were far ahead of their time. In their plans they outlined the national expansion and aggrandizement of Japan, and revealed the possible rise of Japan as a world power."²⁶

The plans of these two imperialists are set forth in detail by Professor Kuno. Yoshida should not be considered the originator of Japanese expansion, he suggests. His proposal was merely a combination of plans previously formulated by Hideyoshi (1536–98) and also by Honda Toshiaki, who in 1798 proposed that the national capital should be moved to Kamchatka, and that a second fortified capital should be established for defensive purposes on the island of Saghalien, thus making of Japan a great imperial power that might rival China and Russia. However, "the greatness of Yoshida Shōin lay in the fact that in the middle of the nineteenth century, while Japan was at a crisis, when both the government and the people centered their energy upon the solution of the problem of meeting the demand of the United States with regard to the opening of the nation, and at the same time of maintaining the time-honored seclusion policy, Shōin alone quietly studied the future possibilities and outlined a plan of expansion by means of which Japan might become a great world power."²⁷

The extent to which the dreams of Yoshida and Hashimoto have been fulfilled is a matter of common knowledge. It will suffice here to point out that by the time Commodore Perry's expedition opened up Japan to foreign intercourse the Japanese were already impregnated with an expansionist ideology. Later this indigenous chauvinism was intensified by pressure from and contact with the West, resulting in the generation of an aggressive military spirit that has profoundly affected the course of world history. In the light of events Yoshida Shōin may justly be considered a key figure in the development of modern Japan.

²⁶ Kuno, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 351 ff.