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The Rise and Fall of the Postwar Japanese Student Movement: Political, Economic, and Global Factors

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Abstract. The Japanese student movement revived soon after World War II, became more radical in the 1950s and 1960s, and collapsed in the early 1970s without ever regaining its former scale. This paper examines that trajectory and argues that shifting political atmospheres, economic situations, and global environments caused both the rise and the fall of the postwar movement. The study is a qualitative historical analysis of secondary scholarship and published election results. On the side of the rise, it identifies three groups of factors, namely occupation reforms that allowed left-wing and Marxist ideas to circulate among students again; the mass death, destruction and defeat that led many Japanese to question the nationalist ideology behind the war; and Cold War influences from the Soviet Union and the United States, which formed the background to the 1960 struggle against the revised Japan-U.S. Security Treaty, as well as the wider international setting in which the campus occupations of 1968–1969 took place. On the side of the fall, the electoral decline of the Japanese Communist Party after 1979 is read as an indirect sign of a broader decline of the left. The prosperity of the late 1980s, the ebb of revolutionary movements worldwide, and left-wing violence and terrorism, which cost radical students their public support, help explain why the movement never revived. The Japanese case suggests that a national history of student protest is also part of a global history.

Keywords: student movement, postwar Japan, Zengakuren, Japanese Communist Party, global 1968

1. Introduction

Student movements were not uncommon in pre-war Japan [1]. The Meiji Restoration witnessed the establishment and expansion of Japan's higher education system [1]. Meanwhile, the economic depression of the 1920s produced, by the late 1920s, "intellectual unemployment," and the social success and respectable status promised by higher education remained unfulfilled [1]. Under these circumstances, many students started embracing left-wing thoughts, especially Marxism [1, 2]. Consequently, by the 1920s, the student movement had already moved to pursue social and political changes including universal suffrage, labor rights, and university autonomy [1, 2]. With Japan's sharp rightward turn and militarization in the 1930s, however, the wartime regime tightened its control of society, making it extremely difficult for organizing student movements [1, 2].

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After World War II (1945), the student movement revived in a more organized and radicalized manner [3]. This paper examines the postwar revival and radicalization of the Japanese student movement and its subsequent decline from the early 1970s and seeks to analyze the reasons behind this trajectory. It argues that shifting political atmospheres, economic situations, and global environments caused the rising and falling of Japanese student movements. Drawing on existing studies, it brings political, economic, and global factors into a single account of both the rise and the fall of the movement. The analysis is a qualitative historical study based on secondary scholarship on postwar Japanese politics, society and protest, together with published election results. Section 2 reviews the relevant scholarship, Section 3 traces the revival and radicalization of the movement between 1945 and 1970, Section 4 examines its decline, and Section 5 concludes with the limitations of the study.

2. Literature review

Scholarship on student activism in modern Japan can be grouped into three broad strands. The first explains student radicalism mainly through domestic and generational conditions. Smith's study of the Shinjinkai and the first generation of student radicals in prewar Japan relates their radicalism to the structure of the imperial universities and to state control, and it identifies government control as the single most critical factor in shaping the forms that student radicalism took before the war [1]. It also shows how the depression of the 1920s left the economy unable to absorb university graduates, creating a problem of intellectual unemployment [1]. For the postwar period, Krauss provides a longitudinal case study of student activists who had taken part, to varying degrees, in the 1960 demonstrations against the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty, tracing the political socialization that led them into activism and their experiences after graduation [4]. Oguma interprets Japan's 1968 within the context of a rapidly Westernizing Asian nation in the midst of unprecedented high-speed growth, and he attributes the movement's failure to win the support of later generations partly to the fact that those generations were raised in a wealthy society [5].

A second strand focuses on the 1960 struggle against the revision of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty, known as the Anpo struggle, and on political mobilization. Packard offers a closely documented account of the political struggle of May and June 1960 and of the split between the national student federation and the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) [6]. Sasaki-Uemura examines the significance of the protests for citizens' efforts to transform Japanese society rather than for international diplomacy, showing that the movement comprised diverse, at times conflicting, groups of politically conscious actors [7]. Kapur argues that the protests, the largest popular backlash in the nation's modern history, changed the evolution of Japan's politics and culture as well as its global role, releasing long-buried liberal tensions while also bolstering the conservative status quo [8].

A third strand places Japanese protest in a transnational frame and examines the violence of the New Left. Suri argues that the dissident impulses of the early 1960s and public outrage against the Vietnam War contributed to a "global disruption" in 1968, while treating events in China as a distinct case [9]. Oguma, too, observes that Japan's student uprisings coincided with the "Global Revolutions of 1968," which included civil rights and anti-Vietnam War protests in the United States, the Cultural Revolution in China, and uprisings of students and workers in France and Germany, although he argues for an explanation specific to Japan [5]. Steinhoff studies the contending collective memories of the protest cycle of the late 1960s and early 1970s and finds that a heavily negative public memory, which reduces the protests to images of senseless violence, reinforces the dominant values of social order while suppressing the issues that sparked the protests

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[10]. Katzenstein and Tsujinaka describe the structures and norms of Japan's internal security policy and the state's responses to terrorism and violent social protest in the 1970s and 1980s [11].

These studies tend to examine either the rise of student activism or its decline, or to emphasize one kind of factor, whether domestic conditions, a single episode of mobilization, or the transnational setting.

3. Revival and radicalization, 1945–1970

3.1. Occupation reforms and a new intellectual environment

Shortly after Japan's defeat, the U.S. occupation authorities reshaped the Japanese education system, creating a new liberal intellectual environment [12]. The Allies held that those who had "deceived and misled the people of Japan" were responsible for the outbreak of the War [3], a view that the occupation authorities applied to right-wing and ultra-militarist educators [12]. They dismissed large numbers of right-wing teachers and reinstated liberal intellectuals at colleges and in secondary and elementary schools [12]. Occupation directives of October 1945 ordered the removal of militarist elements from the schools and specified the methods for investigating teachers and purging undesirable elements [12]. For example, Ōuchi Hyōe was a Marxist economist at Tokyo Imperial University who had been removed from the university after his arrest in 1938 and was reinstated in November 1945, shortly after the occupation's directive to restore liberal educators [2, 12]. His return illustrated the broader reentry of left-wing intellectuals into Japanese academia [2]. Additionally, first the Japanese government and then the occupation authorities required schools to remove nationalist and ultra militarist content in textbooks [3, 12]. These reform policies allowed left-wing ideas, including Marxism, to circulate publicly among students again [3]. At the University of Tokyo, for instance, the economics faculty gave students an eclectic education in Marxism [3]. In May 1947, the new Constitution of Japan, in whose drafting the occupation authorities strongly intervened, came into effect and guaranteed the freedom of speech [3, 12]. Together, these changes contributed to an intellectual environment in which left-wing thoughts, especially Marxism, could reach students.

3.2. War devastation and the turn to the left

These institutional and legal changes, however, were only part of the story. The devastating consequences of the war further encouraged intellectuals and students to reflect on nationalist thoughts and then embrace left-wing ideas [3]. Japanese people suffered from the devastating consequence of the War. They experienced the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the firebombing of Tokyo and dozens of other cities, and a war that resulted in the deaths of approximately three million Japanese [3]. Sixty-six major cities had been heavily bombed, and around 30 percent of their populations were left homeless [3]. Also, the collapse of industry and the resulting severe food shortages and inflation and black markets became their daily life [3]. Together with the costly repatriation of millions of soldiers and civilians from Asia and the Pacific, these imposed a large amount of pressure on the post-war Japanese economy [3]. At the time of defeat, approximately 6.5 million Japanese were stranded in Asia, Siberia and the Pacific [3].

Such experiences of mass death, urban destruction, economic hardship and national defeat led many Japanese to question the war and the nationalist ideology that had justified it [3]. They came to believe that the path their country had taken was fundamentally wrong. Among progressive intellectuals, the resulting commitment to progressive and radical politics reflected what the political

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scientist Maruyama Masao later characterized as the formation of a "community of remorse" [3]. Many Japanese intellectuals and students started embracing left-wing ideas, especially, Marxism [3], as they regarded it as a progressive symbol. For example, Hiromatsu Wataru, a philosopher later associated with Japan's New Left, became involved in student movements in 1947, at the age of fourteen, and later turned toward Marxism [13]. He took part in Communist-led political activities from his school days and later became one of postwar Japan's most influential Marxist philosophers [14]. Hiromatsu's choice reflects how the consequences of the War encouraged many students like him to pursue a new intellectual path, which laid the foundation for the revival of the student movement.

3.3. Cold War influences and the wider international setting

At the same time, global contexts also contributed to the revival of the student movements in postwar Japan. With the onset of the Cold War in the late 1940s [12], both the socialist bloc, particularly the Soviet Union, and the capitalist bloc, especially the United States, influenced student movements in Japan, although in different ways and to different degrees. First of all, the rise of the Japanese Communist Party was not only fueled by the left-leaning intellectual environment, but also reportedly supported by the Soviet Union. According to Soviet party documents examined by Nagoshi [15], the JCP secretly received funding from the Soviet Union between 1951 and 1963 through a fund established in Bucharest in 1950 under the leadership of the Soviet Communist Party; the JCP has denied that the party itself received this money. In fact, the JCP closely worked with the All-Japan Federation of Student Self-Government Associations (Zengakuren), which was founded in 1948, one of the most important driving forces for student activism in the following years [6, 12]. In its early years the federation was dominated by the JCP, and by May 1949 about 350 universities and roughly 60 percent of the student population belonged to it [12]. By the time of the 1960 struggle, however, the prevailing faction in the leadership of Zengakuren belonged to the Communist League, a group formed in December 1958 by students who had rebelled against the JCP [6].

Second, what the Japanese left denounced as American "imperialism" [6] also fueled student activism in Japan. The U.S. hydrogen bomb test (March 1, 1954) and the revision of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty (signed January 19, 1960) generated widespread public outrage in Japan [6, 12, 16]. After the 1954 test irradiated the crew of a Japanese fishing vessel, a national signature campaign launched by a women's group in Tokyo gathered more than 20 million signatures by the end of the year, with housewives at the center of the protest [12, 16]. It was in this context that the 1960 Anpo struggle erupted, with Zengakuren playing a central role, alongside a broad range of citizens' groups, in the massive protests against the revision of the Security Treaty [6, 7, 8]. Zengakuren played a major part in preventing President Eisenhower's visit to Japan and in toppling Prime Minister Kishi from power [6]. The Anpo struggle can thus be seen as the intersection of Soviet and American influences in Japan. It was organized and mobilized by left-wing forces with the intellectual environment created by the American-drafted Constitution [3], and had a trigger ignited by American "imperialism." Kishi himself later expressed the belief that international Communism had played a major part in fomenting the crisis [6].

Finally, the Cultural Revolution in China formed part of the international setting of the late 1960s. Oguma lists it among the "Global Revolutions of 1968" with which Japan's student uprisings more or less coincided, while explaining Japan's 1968 itself as a collective reaction to rapid economic growth [5]. In Japan, Maoist language appeared in campus protest: at the University of Tokyo, where students occupied Yasuda Auditorium during the broader Zenkyōtō movement (1968–

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1969), graffiti on the main gate read "Rebellion is rational," after Mao Zedong [5]. The occupation of Yasuda Auditorium, however, had a domestic origin: it had begun in June 1968 over a disciplinary dispute in the medical school, and riot police cleared the building on January 18–19, 1969 [10]. From mid-1968 through early 1969, campus occupations spread to hundreds of universities and thousands of high schools across Japan [5].

4. Decline from the early 1970s

4.1. The electoral decline of the Japanese Communist Party

The JCP's influence reached high points in the 1949 general election, when it won 35 seats in the House of Representatives, and in 1979, when it won 39 seats (41 including allied Progressive Unity candidates) [17]. After that, however, the JCP quickly declined and only won 16 seats in 1990 [17], suggesting, if only indirectly, a broad fall of the left-wing movements, especially, student movements. The student movement itself had already collapsed in the early 1970s [5, 10]. The Security Treaty was renewed without incident in June 1970, and most students returned to a state of political apathy [5]. Japan has never again organized a student movement on the same scale as that in the 1960s because of the economic boom of the late 1980s, the ebb of the global revolutions, and left-wing terrorism.

4.2. Economic prosperity

In the late 1980s (1987–1990), the Japanese economy entered a period of prosperity known as the "bubble economy" [18]. This period brought rapid economic growth, as real gross domestic product grew at an average annual rate of 5.5 percent during the expansion that lasted until February 1991 [18]. Many university students of later generations had grown up in a wealthy society and did not share the discomfort with prosperity felt by the earlier generation of activists, discouraging them from participating in radical movements [5]. The economic base was gone for the Left-wing thoughts. Coming after the collapse of the early 1970s, this prosperity helped to prevent a revival of the movement rather than causing its decline.

4.3. The ebb of global revolutionary movements

Moreover, the overall decline of the globally revolutionary movement after the 1970s had a direct impact on Japan, weakening the ideological momentum that had sustained student activism. From the 1980s onwards, the Soviet Union entered a period of protracted decline [19]. In addition, China's agenda in the early 1980s centered on socialist modernization [20]. In 1982, Hu Yaobang's report to the Twelfth National Congress of the Communist Party of China stated that "revolution cannot be exported but can occur only by the choice of the people of the country concerned," presenting this understanding as the basis on which China had always abided by the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence [20]. The Soviet collapse in 1991 and the fall of Eastern European (1989) communist regimes [19] further reduced Marxism's global influence, marking an end of massive radical movements.

4.4. Left-wing terrorism and the loss of public support

Finally, the Japanese Red Army's terrorist attacks—the 1972 Lod Airport massacre, the 1974 French embassy takeover in The Hague, and the 1977 Dhaka hijacking [11]—are likely to have reinforced

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the association of the left as a whole with terrorism and violence. At home, the United Red Army incident of February 1972, which combined a siege at Asama-Sansō, broadcast live on television, with the revelation of a purge that had cost fourteen members their lives, drew an overwhelmingly negative reaction, and according to Steinhoff that negativity attached to the groups involved and more broadly to the New Left [10, 11]. Public sympathy for radical student movements, which had begun to weaken as the protests became more violent in 1968, collapsed, a negative view of the New Left set in, and government crackdowns, which opinion surveys showed the public would tolerate from December 1968 onwards, became widely acceptable [10, 11]. The police had delayed a crackdown on radical students until 1969, when they sensed that public opinion had swung away from the students and toward the police [11]. Radical student activism lost its public support [5].

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Japanese student movement was not an isolated national phenomenon but a part of a global wave of student radicalism that swept across the world after World War II. Student movements also occurred in France (May 1968 uprising), the United States (anti-Vietnam War protest), and elsewhere, while the Cultural Revolution in China formed part of the same international setting. After the 1970s, student movements lost their historical relevance amid the economic prosperity of the late 1980s and shifting political contexts. In brief, a national history is always a global history; and vice versa. This study has three limitations. It relies mainly on English-language secondary literature, and it uses the seats of a single party, the JCP, as an indirect indicator of student activism, although the JCP and the New Left student groups were often at odds after 1958. It also draws on no archival or interview evidence, so the motives of individual activists are inferred from secondary accounts rather than from their own testimony.

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