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Zen and the Art of Ending Taishō Democracy

A virtual *u:japan* lecture by Brian A. Victoria

Thursday
2021-06-10
18:30~20:00
online



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In the case of Germany, the manner in which the Nazi's rose to power has been carefully researched and documented. With the notable exception of the role the Nazis may have played in the Reichstag fire of February 27, 1933, there remains little to be discovered. However, in the case of Japan, the same cannot be said. That is to say, the debate continues as to what led to, and who was responsible for, the demise of democratic governance in Japan, a period popularly known as "Taishō democracy" (1926-1933).

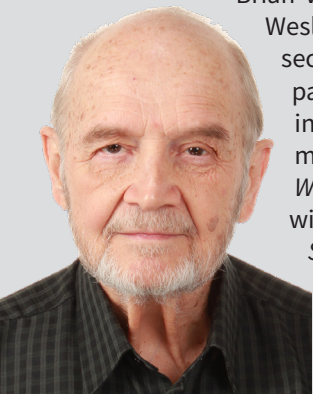
resulted in the death of Japan's prime minister, Inukai Tsuyoshi. Taken together, the death of these three men brought an end to political party-based cabinets reflecting the will of the voters. From then on, through the end of WW II, Emperor Hirohito and his advisors appointed and removed successive prime ministers.

Until the recent publication of my book, *Zen Terror in Prewar Japan: Portrait of an Assassin*, the role

the Zen school of Buddhism played in the incidents described above has remained completely unknown. That said, the claim is not made that the Zen faith of Inoue Nisshō, leader of the terrorist band, was the cause of the killings that took place. Instead, Zen is identified as what may be called an "enabling mechanism" whose doctrines, as well as praxis, served to make the killings possible, i.e., by providing

both the ethical justification and the spiritual/mental strength required for the band's terrorist acts.

This presentation will begin with an introduction to the political and historical dimensions of the two incidents described above. Thereafter, the focus will shift to an examination of the nature of Zen in prewar Japan that enabled it to serve as an enabling mechanism for terrorist acts and, concurrently, the demise of democracy in prewar Japan.



Brian Victoria is a native of Omaha, Nebraska and graduate of Nebraska Wesleyan University. He holds a M.A. in Buddhist Studies from Sōtō Zen sect-affiliated Komazawa University in Tokyo, and a Ph.D. from the Department of Religious Studies at Temple University. Brian's major writings include *Zen Terror in Prewar Japan: Portrait of an Assassin* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), *Zen At War* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); *Zen War Stories* (RoutledgeCurzon, 2003); *Zen Master Dōgen*, coauthored with Yokoi Yūhō (Weatherhill, 1976); and a translation of *The Zen Life by Sato Koji* (Weatherhill, 1972). In addition, many of Brian's journal articles may be found on thezenseite here: <http://www.thezenseite.com> Brian is currently a non-resident Senior Research Fellow at the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies and a fully ordained Buddhist priest in the Sōtō Zen sect.

There can be little doubt that the Blood Oath Corps Incident (*Ketsumeidan Jiken*) of spring 1932 played an important role in Japan's gradual slide into totalitarianism. The importance of this incident is further strengthened by the May 15th Incident of 1932, for in reality it was but the second stage of the Blood Oath Corps Incident. While the first incident resulted in the deaths of only two Japanese leaders, a politician and a businessman, the second stage

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