

POPULIST NATIONALISM IN PREWAR JAPAN

A biography of Nakano Seigo-

LESLIE RUSSELL OATES



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Preface

This book is the outcome of studies and reflections going back to my own experiences in the Pacific War and its aftermath and maintained in the course of subsequent academic activities. More immediately it is based on a thesis submitted to the University of Melbourne. For help leading to its present form, I feel most fundamentally indebted to Mr Charles Bavier, a scholar and gentleman adventurer under whom I studied during the war and who was a long-term resident and devoted student of Japan, latterly in the *Kyōto Shimbum* in the years before his death in 1976. More immediately I would like to express appreciation to Professor Harold Bolitho of Monash University for fruitful discussion; to Professor Hayashi Shigeru, formerly of Tokyo University, for general guidance and help in obtaining source materials; and to Professor Nakano Yasuo of the Aijia University, both for help in studies on his father and for subsequent illuminating contacts on various themes.

The number of brief unacknowledged quotations appearing in the text are all drawn from works listed in the bibliography, chiefly standard works and biographies.

Introduction

Since the Second World War, revulsion against the extreme nationalism which animated the Axis nations has tended, both within and outside them, to overshadow attempts to understand all the underlying factors. This particularly applies in the case of Japan where, although the basic forces propelling the nation towards war resembled those operating in Europe, the developments they triggered were very different.

It is true that broad similarities occur in the stresses to the social order precipitated by the First World War and culminating in the Great Depression. There was also a comparable reaction against the Marxist type of solution and a consequent search for salvation on the basis of traditional ideals, some supra-national when involving religious or broad cultural systems but in the main national when the state's survival or autonomy was felt to be threatened. As the prospect or appeal of an international reconstruction on Marxist lines faded, national goals remained the only viable framework for action, even though plans for national salvation in the name of traditional values needed to be strengthened by drawing on elements of Marxist strategy.

Yet the detailed course of events was strikingly different between Japan and Europe. Whereas the European movements usually grouped as fascist successfully mobilised mass followings to establish single-party dictatorships, the parallel groundswell in Japan for national salvation and 'renovation' failed to achieve anything like this, so that the common use of the term 'fascism' to describe both the renovationist movement and the adjustments made by the ruling Establishment stretch the term beyond any descriptive utility. The indigenous term 'renovationist right' (*kakushin uyoku*) has some justification in that the basic appeal was to national values and interests, though it leads to a confusing overlap with elements described as 'right wing' which essentially supported the existing social order.

The reasons for the overall failure of the Japanese renovationist movement lie both in the nature of the Establishment and in that of the movement itself. The former, despite its complex divisions, succeeded in maintaining a politically viable degree of consensus, even if this was at the cost of finally diverting conflict to the international arena. The latter, despite a fairly wide spectrum of support including elements in the Establishment, utterly failed to produce any effective unification on the basis of either leadership or program comparable with European fascism. The most it achieved, apart from some reshaping of the Establishment, was some spectacular violence and an atmosphere of intrigue and agitation, while its constantly fissioning structure steadily removed it from political effectiveness.

In this setting the figure of Nakano Seigō is quite distinctive. As a long term Diet member and a collaborator with some prominent financiers and military men, he probably wielded more influence in the Establishment than any other figure in the renovationist movement, but clearly belongs to it with his boldly innovative proposals and his unusually successful attempts to mobilise mass support by popular oratory and journalism. His career therefore

illuminates the complex situation in Japan leading up to the war as well as various facets of Japanese society.

The Establishment that he and the renovationist movement sought to challenge or manipulate centred on the career civil service to which access was gained by passing the Higher Examinations, for which a training in the Imperial University system (chiefly Tokyo University) was in practice necessary. Its status was guaranteed by the authority of the Privy Council and it enjoyed considerable independence from cabinet control. Though extremely clique-ridden, it had some sort of centre in the Imperial Court system, which was the fount of civil honours and gave final approval for cabinet formation. The office of prime minister could be awarded to any subject whom the court's advisers accepted as most politically viable at the time. Parallel with the civil service were the professional armed services also staffed on the basis of academic performance.

These government organs had in turn fostered the development of highly concentrated industrial and financial combines in which recruitment and organisation were based on family ties and patronage and whose political influence steadily expanded with the modernisation of Japanese society. The formal political process centred on the bicameral Diet, in which access to the House of Peers was determined by birth or bureaucratic favour; while in the elected House of Representatives it depended mainly on affiliation to two or three major political parties. These functioned as agencies for complex bargaining and competition between elements of the bureaucracy, big business and the armed services.

Turning to the renovationist forces confronting the Establishment, we find an equally complex situation. One classification of the Right in the broadest sense distinguishes three streams: the strongly traditionalist right of the 'Imperial Way' or 'Pure Japanists', the centre or primitive agrarianist movement and a 'non-Marxist left', advocating various forms of state socialism. A further classification of the two latter elements, according to social origins, traces the resentment of petty entrepreneurs and farmers against bureaucracy and privileged capital as being channelled through four types of right-wing protesters: professional strong-arm men (*sōshi*), malcontents resenting their failure to obtain advancement through the examination system, dissatisfied (or socially aware) young military officers and recanting left wing intellectuals. Regionally, there is a marked concentration of right wing activism between the southwest, mainly Kyushu, and the northeast, the scenes of the most serious disorders surrounding the inauguration of the modern state from the Meiji Restoration of 1868.

The ideological strands figuring most prominently are the official 'family-state' doctrine, rural community ideals and Pan-Asianism—a theme, going beyond pure nationalism, which was sometimes sentimental and sometimes more calculating. General traits in action were a leaning towards terrorism or putchism, a heroic elitist self-image, a mystical or poetic irrationalism and, at least in theory, a moralistic perfectionism whose relationship to the 'Imperial Way' elements in the Establishment is analogous to that seen on the left between Trotskyist idealists and hard-headed Stalinist power holders.

Nakano shared enough of these features, on the surface, to explain his usual inclusion under 'fascism' or the 'renovationist right'. He originated from Kyushu and from the class of small entrepreneurs whose position has always been insecure. He maintained lifelong hostility to the career civil service recruited only through examination, while his next most consistent theme was the crusade to liberate Asia from western imperialism. He also made

frequent use of traditionalist rhetoric in patriotic or samurai terms, as well as collaborating at times with reformist elements in the armed services.

However, he differed from the right wing image in more significant ways. Although his heated oratory and his final confrontation with the Tōjō regime has made him an almost legendary figure of revolt, he rejected terrorism as futile. He was also temperamentally alien to purely sentimental or mystical patriotism, always showing great political resourcefulness and staking his hopes on mobilising mass support, first in the cause of liberalism and latterly in the service of aggressive nationalism. Consistently with this, his nationalism was not centred on the Emperor in accordance with the current orthodoxy but was directed to the nation as a whole, though more particularly to the masses whose plebeian soundness and Japaneseness he contrasted with the ‘decadence’ of the westernised intelligentsia. His patriotism, however, was not narrow, as he readily welcomed ideas from abroad when they served his purposes.

Nakano did not challenge the existing Constitution as directly as many in the renovationist right did, preferring more realistically to try to manipulate it through popular pressure and any other available means. He was chiefly sustained by a perennial conviction that the system as it stood was doomed to early collapse under the stress of unparalleled crisis and that the key to success was to build up alternative organisations and programs as the situation demanded—‘setting in order a national posture which, when a situation is encountered that we will be the only ones capable of handling, will enable us to perform that duty fully.’

The Establishment’s apprehensions of him are indicated by the recurrent censoring of his publications as well as close police surveillance of his later activities. In the end the Establishment’s resistance and ‘counter-renovation’ proved intractable to either the popular support or the covert intrigues he was able to pit against it and, facing checkmate, he died by his own hand. His tragedy reflects that of Japan itself in that the course of events could only have been materially changed by some major alteration to the power structure, which Japanese society proved unable to achieve.

Note on sources

Nakano has received very little attention in works in English on the relevant period, as his approaches to effective power were limited, while his career also lacks the violent drama associated with movements resorting to terrorism. The only study in English of any consequence is that by Tetsuo Najita, ‘Nakano Seigō and the Spirit of the Meiji Restoration in Twentieth-Century Japan’, in J.W.Morley (ed.), *Dilemmas of Growth in Prewar Japan* (1971), which concentrates on his ideological position.

Even in Japan he has not been made the subject of much academic enquiry. Though remaining a fairly well-known figure and in certain quarters rather admired for his celebrated oratory and intense commitment, he is more generally consigned to the mixed class of ‘ultranationalists’ who are blamed for the disaster of Japan’s defeat and whom it is not desired to commemorate. General histories of modern Japan note the highlights in his career, especially his dramatic end, but there is little reference to him in the biographies of one-time associates who achieved greater conventional success, especially those published after the war.

The main source for details on Nakano's career is a group of biographical studies by less prominent associates who to some degree remained loyal to his memory. Their quality naturally varies. Two studies by his former energetic aide in the Diet, Mitamura Takeo, *Why Did Nakano Seigō End His Life?* (1950) and *Record of Warnings* (1953), chiefly give a graphic account of Nakano's last phases, highlighting the writer's own role and sketching all earlier episodes in Nakano's life which could be adduced to portray him as a lifelong opponent of militarism.

The most widely read and vividly written biography is that by his lifelong friend Ogata Taketora, who had a distinguished career in journalism and postwar conservative politics. Having been himself a fairly consistent liberal throughout, Ogata in his *Nakano Seigō the Man* (1951) concentrates on Nakano's earlier liberalistic phase, when the two were close together, and his last 'redeeming' phase of opposition to the Tōjō regime. These phases are illustrated with a selection of notable writings by Nakano, the intervening 'fascist' period being almost ignored.

Nakano's former publicity aide and youth activist, Inomata Keitarō, first wrote two short sketches entitled *Nakano Seigō and the Japanese Militarists* (1951) and *The Tragedy of Nakano Seigō* (1951), also portraying him as a consistent enemy of militarism. However, he later followed these up with an attempt at a definitive biography on behalf of the Seigō Society, *The Life of Nakano Seigō* (1964), which is very full and indeed quite scholarly. He draws widely on members' recollections and on ample documentation but stops short of any attempt at justification and admits finding much that in retrospect is inexplicable, at least in the context of postwar liberalistic attitudes and hindsight in which he was writing.

The one account which is both unrepentant and unrevisionist is that by Nakano's former youth leader Satō Morio, *Nakano Seigō* (1951). He however limits himself to brief introductory notes to an anthology of Nakano's speeches and writings from his 'right wing' period, so complementing Ogata's study which avoids this.

By far the most impressive study by any standard is the massive two-volume biography by Nakano's youngest son Yasuo, who was just old enough to join in his father's last activities, entitled *Nakano Seigō the Statesman* (1971). This does make an impressive attempt to render Nakano at least intelligible. In what amounts to a political, social and economic history of Japan from the Restoration to his father's death, the author thoroughly castigates the governing 'pseudo-elite' and commends his father to the extent that he challenged them in the interests of the nation as a whole. But he concedes that, through impetuosity and a certain shallow activism, his father so misread the situation that in practice he largely came to serve as a demagogue for the military and their allies.

In this book material from these biographies has been used in conjunction with some short sketches of Nakano by others, biographies of associates and official publications covering his and related political activities. Primary sources include a representative range of Nakano's own publications, including key books and pamphlets and his regular writings in his periodicals, as well as speeches in the Diet. Interviews with Nakano's two surviving sons and other close associates also proved useful. They confirm that Nakano left virtually no personal papers.