

When Parallel Lines Converge



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*This year Germany and Japan are celebrating the 150th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Amity and Commerce. The Japan Journal's Alex Hendy asked Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany in Japan **Dr. Volker Stanzel** about the nature of Germany-Japan relations today.*

Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany in Japan Dr. Volker Stanzel

What has been the reaction in Germany to the Great East Japan Earthquake?

Dr. Volker Stanzel: Germany has followed the events after the triple catastrophe of earthquake, tsunami and Fukushima I with shock and consternation. They triggered a host of reactions of grief and sympathy, such as personal condolence visits of Federal President Wulff and Federal Chancellor Merkel to the Japanese Embassy in Berlin and bilateral meetings between the two Foreign Ministers of which we have already had two. My government immediately dispatched a rescue team of forty-three members in total and pledged a sum of five million Euros to assist the scientific institutions in Tohoku cope with the situation. But above all, the willingness to help from within civil society in Germany was overwhelming. Within two weeks' time, private donations rose to 17 million Euros, with an almost equal match from German companies, some of which made contributions of several million Euros, bringing the total to more than 50 million Euros.

Psychological support is at least as important. Despite the disaster, the German-Japanese associations in Germany decided not to cancel a big meeting they had planned before the earthquake in Nara at the end of April. I participated myself and I

feel by their participation the German participants sent a very important signal to their Japanese partners that in this difficult situation the Germans stand by their friends.

There is a steady flow of charity events in Germany, such as concerts, soccer friendlies, joint exhibitions and others, the proceeds of which all go to the 3/11 victims. Offers for help abound. Many German families even offered shelter for the refugees in the evacuation centers!

With the dynamism and the goodwill that we have experienced, we feel all the more that we should acknowledge this spirit of German-Japanese togetherness, and that therefore the best thing is to reinforce our 150 years events' series. In the aftermath of the earthquake, some events had to be canceled. However, it is exactly because we have received such an overwhelming response of solidarity and sympathy that we feel it is not only our duty to carry on but that it will be an even more rewarding experience. Therefore, please have a look if you want to join us and make sure to check our website [www.dj150.jp]!

How did Germany come to formalize relations with Japan in 1861?

One hundred and fifty years ago there was not a

Japan as there is now or a Germany as it is now. The German Federation of the time was made up of 40 or so states, with Prussia being one of the largest. Prussia regarded itself as a kind of protector of the northern German states, which did a lot of intercontinental shipping business at that time, so there was a tangible interest in Japan. The second interest was purely political. Prussia was vying with the Habsburg Empire for the support of the minor German states. When Count Eulenburg returned to Prussia having successfully [and with great difficulty] concluded the trade agreement with Japan, he faced a lot of criticism, because the agreement, which Japan had stressed would be the last of its kind with foreign nations, was with Prussia only [and thus excluded the minor states]. The Japanese for their part had the notion that Germany was a militarily strong country from which they could acquire guns and canons and so forth.

After the agreement, however, trade was slow, including trade in military hardware. Japan realized that buying guns wasn't enough; they also had to learn how to use the new technologies. So they sent teachers abroad. And they became intrigued by the way that Germany was unified by Bismarck. Even today Japanese schoolchildren learn about the comment Bismarck made to the Iwakura Mission [1872] to the effect that "both our countries have gone through the same pains of unification; in the end we have to rely on military strength and economic growth." That observation helped form the Japanese understanding of not only their own country and of Germany, but also of their relationship with Germany.

So Japanese and Germans had a sense of a shared identity as newly unified countries...

By the late-nineteenth century there were more Japanese students in Germany than anywhere else and more German experts in Japan than from anywhere else, with the spectrum of common interests ranging from military science to law, medicine, philosophy, literature and music. So in the nineteenth century Japan and Germany had a very special kind of relationship; one much less trade oriented than with other countries and one instead more focused on academic exchange. This still forms the basis of how Japanese see Germany today.

At the same time, a second parallel widely understood by Japanese is the two countries' rapid rise after World War II. In this, trade and investment played an important role for both countries, both for finding their way back into the international community and for the reconstruction of their bilateral relations. But the experience shared by Germany and Japan after 1945 is a much more comprehensive one, as in both countries it meant nothing less than rebuilding their entire nations in every respect—economically, sociologically, politically and philosophically. This intensified tremendously the sentiment of the two nations being close to each other. Just take the bilateral associations linking our countries. There are some fifty-nine of them in Japan, the largest number of any country with Japan, and a similar number in Germany. They are of two types: civil society bodies and government-based institutions.

Whereas even twenty years ago Japan-Germany exchange was usually conducted on the individual level, these days it is structured, with student exchange or scientific exchange and so on taking place through these institutions.

So we have a more civil society-based relationship on the one hand and a more institutionalized relationship on the other. 