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Summer 6-1-2017

### Review: Oleg Benesch, *Inventing the Way of the Samurai: Nationalism, Internationalism, and Bushidō in Modern Japan*

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#### Recommended Citation

Shields, James Mark, "Review: Oleg Benesch, *Inventing the Way of the Samurai: Nationalism, Internationalism, and Bushidō in Modern Japan*" (2017). *Other Faculty Research and Publications*. 167. [https://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/fac\\_pubs/167](https://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/fac_pubs/167)

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*Inventing the Way of the Samurai: Nationalism, Internationalism, and Bushidō in Modern Japan.* By Oleg Benesch. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014. viii, 284 pages. \$99.00, cloth; \$40.00, paper.

*Reviewed by*

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This is a solid, well-written, and immensely informative piece of scholarship. It is also a work that can be frustrating at times, though this is less because of any limitations on the part of the author or his method than due to the inherent complexity and multivalence of the primary theme: *bushidō*, the so-called “way of the samurai” (or “way of the warrior”). A line in the conclusion sums this up well: “[T]he reasons behind the adoption of *bushidō* by most people in Japan as a genetic ideology—an ideology that is adopted by a social group in spite of apparent conflict with their objective interests—are as varied as its definitions and applications” (p. 242). If the reader comes to this book seeking “closure” on *bushidō*, she will be disappointed. But then closure on anything related to modern Japanese intellectual history is always a delusion.

The book’s title is apt, in that it can be placed among the recent scholarly trend toward constructing the “genealogy” of a modern concept (such as the nation-state, Hinduism, race, or homosexuality). Such works generally begin with the premise that the concept or term at stake is lacking in deep historical roots—despite, in most cases, what its proponents and even many critics may suggest. And that is where the author of *Inventing the Way of the Samurai* begins, citing the dearth of references to *bushidō* or equivalents prior to the Meiji period. From here, the book traces, in great detail and with ample nuance, the evolution of *bushidō* in its many variations and subsets over the succeeding periods. The book’s subtitle is somewhat less accurate; while the book is clearly about *bushidō* in the context of Japanese modernity, nationalism—and, especially, internationalism—are not given the same analytical treatment.

The notion of “invented traditions” has roots in the work of Eric Hobsbawm, whose arguments have been immensely influential in historical and religious studies since their publication in the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> It is possible to criticize this idea, on the grounds that *every* tradition is, to some degree, “invented” and that communities often (consciously or unconsciously) partake

1. See, especially, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

in the invention or re-appropriation of the past for various ends. Indeed, one might see this “invention” as the very essence of religious development and “reform” throughout the ages. At the same time, as Benesch shows, *bushidō* was and remains a concept that seems perfectly suited for knowing, ideological appropriation by elites: “Modern theorists often carefully selected aspects of earlier history, philosophy, and legend to support their specific *bushidō* interpretations” (p. 15). It was, he argues, a decidedly “modern” invention, not just because of the period in which the discourse flourished but also because it was self-consciously constructed to provide a framework for self and national (re)construction in the context of modernity.

The book’s introduction sets up the reader by posing a number of questions, such as: “if *bushidō* is a modern invention, who invented it?” (p. 5), “is *bushidō* uniquely Japanese?” (p. 6), and “[h]ow did it become widely accepted as a traditional ethic, and how was it revived repeatedly after falling out of fashion when other ideological constructs were not?” (p. 6). It is this last question that is the most difficult—but also the most intriguing. Benesch’s answer, in short, is that the origins of *bushidō* discourse lie in the work of progressive, internationalist writers of the mid-Meiji period, and their ideals, while downplayed during the decades leading up to 1945, resonated strongly—and continue to do so—with Japanese of the postwar period.

Benesch’s chronicle of the ebbs and flows of *bushidō* discourse makes for fascinating reading, in particular when it comes to the problems associated with the various attempts to appropriate *bushidō* in support of the modern, imperialist, Japanese state. The first of these was the fact that, for much the Edo period and extending into the early Meiji period, the samurai class generally had a terrible reputation among most Japanese, to the extent that reviving an ideal based on their “ways” was almost doomed from the outset. This helps explain why *bushidō* discourse did not really take off until the early twentieth century, when historical memories of the samurai began to fade. In short, the “mythology” *required* a measure of historical distance. A second problem, and one less easily resolved by the passage of time, was the historiographical fact that the eras of Japanese history when the “warriors” held power were also ones in which the power of the imperial household was at an ebb. Thus, invoking the way of the warrior in support of the emperor required some astute manipulation of historical realities.

This tension—coupled with the variability of *bushidō* discourse at certain periods in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—made for interesting and occasionally counterintuitive arguments. For instance, Benesch notes the disdain for the samurai held by Kamo no Mabuchi (1697–1769), one of the revered triad of national learning (*kokugaku*) scholars, for whom the assumed connection between martial valor and social status was

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nothing short of ridiculous (p. 20). This critique of the martial aspect of *bushidō* was carried on by at least some of the heirs of Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801), providing a solidly nationalist and ethno-particularist foundation for the rejection of *bushidō* as non-Japanese. And yet, as Benesch shows, *bushidō* proved astonishingly resilient to critique. As a reader interested in resistance and counterdiscourse in modern Japan, I find it remarkable that only a very few scholars and writers from the 1890s through the twenty-first century have dared to reject the relevance of *bushidō* entirely.

This book will appeal to scholars and students of modern Japan, as well as to those interested in Japanese religion, politics, and intellectual culture. My concerns are minor. As a scholar of modern Japan (roughly 1850s–present) who frequently finds himself compelled to argue for the necessity of complicating our understanding of Japanese ideologies of the period from the *bakumatsu* through postwar years, I can hardly complain that Oleg Benesch has done this in spades. And yet, I do wish the fascinating reflections in the rather abbreviated final chapter, “Conclusions and Considerations,” had been expanded. It is here that we catch a glimpse of the possibility that *bushidō* is, perhaps as no other single Japanese term has been, a term that is so ambiguous and malleable that it is, ultimately, meaningless—an empty signifier.

Early on, Benesch provides a list of terms associated with *bushidō* in “the popular imagination”: courage, benevolence, politeness, selflessness, sincerity, honor, loyalty, self-control, and justice (p. 1). These are all, one might argue, qualities or values that are esteemed in most, if not all, cultures and civilizations, but their very breadth and universality also makes them prone to value-conflict—at least, if an attempt is made to hold most or all of them simultaneously. This problem becomes readily apparent when one reads of the way that proponents of various forms of *bushidō* would use one or several of these tenets to lambaste their opponents for grasping onto false or deficient *bushidō*. It also appears in the author’s citation of wartime and postwar Western usages of the term to mean something akin to blind and rapacious warmongering—miles away from *all* the above, save, perhaps, loyalty. In particular, what we seem to see in the development of *bushidō* is a general trend away from the more “Confucian” ethical aspects, or at least an erasure of these elements under the twin values of honor and loyalty.

Finally, for all the impressive breadth of scholarship on display here, I would have liked to see a little more engagement with scholarship on the development of religious nationalism in modern Japan. While Benesch does briefly cite the work of Brian Victoria and Christopher Ives on “imperial way Zen,” there is no mention of the provocative arguments of Walter Skya (*Japan’s Holy War*) and other works on Japanese “fascism,” such as the

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450

edited volume by Alan Tansman on *The Culture of Japanese Fascism*.<sup>2</sup> A more direct conversation with these works would help add further context to the emergence and development of *bushidō* discourse, particularly in relation to other heavily loaded but less “successful” catchwords of the late Meiji through Showa periods.

2. Walter Skya, *Japan's Holy War: The Ideology of Radical Shintō Ultrationalism* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Alan Tansman, ed., *The Culture of Japanese Fascism* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

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451