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Honorary Status of Non-Whites: An Analysis of the Cognitive Dissonance of the Third Reich and Apartheid South Africa

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I. Introduction and Theoretical Perspective

In recent history, two of the most racially oppressive regimes were Hitler’s Third Reich and Apartheid South Africa. The infamous governments suppressed millions of alleged ‘racial subordinates’ and proclaimed the superiority of the white race. However, one group to which they gave an exception was Japanese nationals despite their “deviation” from a white classification. These inconsistencies raise the peculiar question of the logic behind the racial laws given their malleable form. What was the rationale for granting this exception of “honorary Whites?” This paper analyzes the logic behind these laws and calls to attention the malleability of the racist ideologies that upheld these oppressive regimes. Doing so sheds light upon the construction of race as a category.

Part I of this paper summarizes theories of race and how political elites construct these baseless identities to advance their goals. Part II examines the Third Reich’s conceptualization of race and how Nazi political elites and citizens viewed the designation granted to Japanese nationals. Part III discusses Apartheid South Africa’s conceptualization of race and its related policies, as well as how Japanese natives fit into the categorizations. Lastly, Part IV analyzes the Japanese conceptualization of the inconsistent racial policies privileging them by the Third Reich and Apartheid South Africa.

This paper draws on the literature that conceptualizes race as a social construct rather than a biological given. Conventional theories surrounding race based on the notion of primordialism were limited to explaining racial differences and characteristics in purely biological terms. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, biological realism was the dominant view, with race seen as having biologically objective categories that existed independent of “human classifying activities” and which scientists worked to substantiate. The middle of the twentieth century marked a turning point in the views of race in purely biological terms. Theorists like Pierre van den Berghe argued that there were no human subspecies. Evidence for this theory was highlighted by a group of evolutionary geneticists and neurobiologists who conducted detailed experiments and research in human genetics proving that there exists as much genetic variation within racial groups as between them.[[1]](#footnote-1) Thus, humans are genetically too similar to each other to be categorized into further “subspecific taxa,” or races, and that societal forces must be asserting this human division.

According to political scientist Errol Henderson, “racism is the belief, practice and policy of domination based on the specious concepts of race. It is not simply bigotry or prejudice, but beliefs, practices, and policies reflective of and supported by institutional power, primarily state power.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Based on loose biological evidence and eugenic studies, social Darwinists created a hierarchy of race dominated by white Europeans at the top, with nonwhites occupying subordinate positions and the black race at the lowest rung. The racial construction created by political elites also helped Western states rationalize their policies of racial suppression through slavery, imperial conquest, colonization, and genocide. Non-white races were assumed to not only be biologically inferior to the white race but also in perpetual conflict, giving a rationalization for “civilization missions” in which the “white man’s burden” was forcefully imposed.[[3]](#footnote-3) Moreover, according to Pierre van den Berghe, who was a leading authority on ethnic relations, “Social race typically seizes on biologically trivial phenotypes, and equally typically, corresponds only very imperfectly with genetically isolated populations. Thus, it has no intrinsic biological significance, as indicated by the fact that only a few of the world’s societies use primarily morphological phenotypes to define themselves and to differentiate outsiders.” **[[4]](#footnote-4)**

The culmination of racial theories and their combination with nation building during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would lead to deadly consequences, most notably with the atrocities committed during Hitler’s Third Reich and Apartheid South Africa. According to sociologists John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, “For several historians and political scientists, the injection of racism brought nationalism to its mid-twentieth-century apogee. They have tended to see in fascism and especially in Nazism the logical culmination of nationalist ideas and practices (…) Though they had nationalist harbingers and historical links with specific nationalisms, fascist movements and Nazism owed more to social Darwinian ideas of racial struggle and eugenics.” Moreover, the “chameleon-like character” of nationalism and racism could be appropriated by autocrats, bureaucrats, and capitalists in order to advance their ideological policies.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Elites used the emerging field of eugenics and racial classifications in order to consolidate their powerbase to the harm of racial and ethnic minorities in countries, as well as to create stronger nationalist sentiments by accentuating the differences of the people within the state to those outside the state. However, political elites from historically racially oppressive regimes were not able to follow their own racial laws to their full extent to dictate the relations of their people, evident with the special status granted to Japanese nationals in Nazi Germany and Apartheid South Africa. In retrospect, these inconsistent laws and their stretching of racial interpretation simply did not hold together and were purely political. I now turn to the rationale behind these certain exceptions.

II. Racial Conceptualization and Inconsistencies in the Third Reich

One of the most racially oppressive regimes of the 20th century was Adolf Hitler’s Third Reich. The Nazi regime was notorious in its efforts to create a racial hierarchy and to privilege a “master race” made up of Nordic and Aryan descents. However, one non-Indo-Aryan group that was granted the special exception of “Honorary Aryans” were the Japanese. According to Ricky W. Law, historian of interwar Germany and Japan, “the enduring power and flexibility of Nazism as an ideology (…) is like a virus with different strains.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

How did the Third Reich government conceptualize race in advancing its goals of nation building and hegemonic expansion? How did the Nazi regime’s citizens accept such inconsistencies in their bound racial doctrine? By looking at these two perspectives, the malleability of racial constructs and how it played a role during the Third Reich are elucidated.

A. Perspective of the Third Reich Leadership

At an annual party rally in 1935, Adolf Hitler and his government announced the new Nuremberg Race Laws that institutionalized the racial theories promoted by Nazism. The laws were made up of two pieces of legislation: The Reich Citizenship Law and the Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor. These laws provided the legal framework for the systematic persecution of European Jews and led to the identification of the group as someone with three or four Jewish grandparents.[[7]](#footnote-7) Later that year, the Nuremberg Laws were extended to other racial groups, specifically Roma and black individuals, in order to prohibit their marriage or sexual relations with Germans to prevent “racially suspect” offspring.[[8]](#footnote-8) However, one group that was left out was the Japanese.

In order to conceptualize the race laws of the Third Reich, we must first analyze the ideological views of its leader: Adolf Hitler. The führer’s contempt for the Jewish people and his policy of *Rassenschande*, which seeks to prevent interracial relations, are well documented. In *Mein Kamf,* his autobiographical manifesto, Hitler explains, “The Jews were responsible for bringing negroes into the Rhineland, with the ultimate idea of bastardizing the white race which they hate and thus lowering its cultural and political level so that the Jew might dominate. For as long as a people remain racially pure and are conscious of the treasure of their blood, they can never be overcome by the Jew.” [[9]](#footnote-9)

Many modern observers view Hitler as a blatant racist who viewed all non-Aryans as inferior and wanted to create a future population made up of Nordic and Aryan descents. However, one non-white group for which Hitler had little animosity were East Asians, specifically the Japanese. In *Mein Kampf,* Hitler explains, “I have never regarded the Chinese or the Japanese as being inferior to ourselves. They belong to ancient civilizations, and I admit freely that their past history is superior to our own (…) Indeed, I believe the more steadfast the Chinese and the Japanese remain in their pride of race, the easier I shall find it to get on with them.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Moreover, according to historian Gerhard Krebs, “He [Hitler] admired the military spirit, their victory over ‘Slavic’ Russia in 1905 and their alleged racial purity.” [[11]](#footnote-11)

Although Hitler had great admiration for Japan, most political elites of the Third Reich viewed the country in terms of its ability to borrow from and adapt to the West. The German propaganda machine made efforts to demonstrate that the Japanese were not an ordinary-colored race but must have had Aryan heritage.[[12]](#footnote-12) Biologically, theories posited the Japanese as being descendants of Aryan Europeans. The Ainu, Japan’s native race who gradually became integrated with the Japanese, were considered by Germans to be European (although Japanese officials disliked this theory given their systematic suppression of the ethnic group).[[13]](#footnote-13) Moreover, the alleged blond hair and red skin of Japanese babies, the “noble appearance” of the samurai class, and the paleness of women’s faces and rosy cheeks were further evidence supporting the theory of Japan’s European ancestry, according to prominent Nazi propogandist Johann von Leers.[[14]](#footnote-14) The great lengths went in trying to prove Japan’s biological linkage to the white race demonstrates the fragility of the racial laws to begin with and the desperate attempts of the political elites to rationalize such exceptions.

Culturally, other proof supporting the theory of the Aryan origin of Japan was seen in the “heroism, martial spirit, and code of honor” which could have only originated among the Aryan people,[[15]](#footnote-15) as well as the land inheritance laws that were strikingly similar to the Indo-Germanic system.[[16]](#footnote-16) Moreover, sports provided an important cultural arena of exchange between Japan and Germany. In fact, two prominent newspapers, *Rote Fahne* and *Völkischer Beobachter,* shared the view that “sports were not merely games but imbued with political significance.”[[17]](#footnote-17) With Japanese athletes competing on the global stage against its European counterparts, their national reputation as a country able to progress, not only politically and economically, but also athletically provided a powerful propaganda tool. According to Ricky Law, “the paper generously carried photographs of Japanese athletes, so the Japanese often appeared visually as fit, young, and male bodies on Nazi newsprint.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

In accordance with the policy of *Rassenschande*, the Nazi propaganda machine praised the Japanese by emphasizing their racial “purity” given the relative homogeneity of the country with the overwhelming majority being of *Yamato* descent. Despite German admiration and respect for the Japanese people, the question of their intermarriage to Aryans remained hotly contested among party officials and was never resolved. Due to the low number of people of Japanese descent actually residing in Germany, the issue was only limited to a few high-profile marriages between German and Japanese elites. Examples included the marriage of Japanese Ambassador Togo Shigenori to a German woman, Mikimoto pearling heir Nishikawa Shinkichi to an Austrian figure skater, opera singer Tanaka Michiko to famous movie star Victor de Kowa, and other high-profile “scandals.” Publication of these marriages in newspapers, journalists, and broadcasts were strictly forbidden by the Nazi Party.[[19]](#footnote-19) Having such relations between different races would have gone against the Nazi regime’s main message of *Rassenschande,* the purity of racial groups. Thus, the state had to balance the interests of appeasing the Japanese government and maintaining one its core ideologies by granting exceptions only in certain cases.

B. Views of Third Reich Citizens:

Given the rationale behind Adolf Hitler and Nazi Party leaders granting Japanese persons the status of honorary Aryans, what were the views of the followers living under the Third Reich given all the racial propaganda imposed upon them?

During the pre-war era and the rise in Japanese nationals living abroad in Germany, instances of anti-Asian harassment and discrimination were a major issue. There were significant flows of Japanese citizens to Germany, especially with Japan’s Ministry of Education’s efforts to expand study-abroad programs in Germany. More than 80 percent of those studying abroad lived in Germany.[[20]](#footnote-20) Instances of discrimination led to strains in Japanese-German relations during the early periods. For example, in 1933, the *Sturmabteilung* (SA), a para-military branch of the Nazi Party, took to brutally attacking Japanese and Chinese students at German universities. These events led Japan to issue warnings against its nationals not to visit Germany given the unsafe environment for Asians.[[21]](#footnote-21) Discrimination against Japanese nationals by German citizens would persist throughout the period. After the announcement of the Nuremberg Laws, the Japanese Embassy complained of German women being met with insults and affronts when accompanying Japanese men to restaurants and cafes or walking together in German streets.[[22]](#footnote-22) The hostile environment to Japanese people during the pre-war era, when Japan was of lesser strategic importance, highlights the power that the Nazi propaganda machine had on the general public in being able to control their views on race.

In order to shape public opinion in favor of Japan, the Nazi Propaganda machine went to great lengths to portray the Japanese people in a positive light. Historian Ricky Law explains, “the Japanese were almost never lumped in with other Asians under the label ‘Asiatics.’ The exception was the set phrase ‘Asia for the Asians,’ but even in this context the *Völkischer Beobachter* distinguished Japan, ‘the Asian colonial power,’ from its subjects, “Asiatics.” [[23]](#footnote-23) More directly, German propaganda also stressed the virtues of the Japanese race, such as their “fighting spirit, loyalty, and self-sacrificing devotion,” all in an effort to sway public opinion towards having a positive view of Japan.[[24]](#footnote-24) Overall, despite efforts to portray Japan as an important German ally, the view that everyday German citizens held towards the Japanese could be best described as exoticized and distant, with the German creative imagination filled with images of Geishas, cherry blossoms, temples, and samurais*.*[[25]](#footnote-25)

Once Japanese successes during the wartime era became apparent, new opinions of Japan began to form among Germans. According to sources from the secret police, *Geheime Staatspolizei,* the German public initially admired Japanese military achievements. However, they soon began to develop an inferiority complex, thereby promoting the yellow peril trope again.[[26]](#footnote-26) These fears would reach new heights with the British humiliation during the fall of Singapore, which was largely seen as a defeat of the white race in the hands of the Japanese. After the event, Propaganda Minister Goebbels stressed the disastrous effects of “yellow peril” gossip and banned all discussions of the subject in the media, considering the topic treasonous.[[27]](#footnote-27)

C. Racial Constructs to Advance National Goals:

Paradoxically, Germany and Japan were enemies during World War I with Japan having formally declared war in 1914. During the battles of World War I, Japan sided with Britain, France, and Russia and fought alongside the Allied Powers in seizing German-held colonies in the Pacific, such as the Caroline, Marshall, and Mariana Islands, which were granted to Japan post-war with the South Sea Mandate.[[28]](#footnote-28) Moreover, Japan was a signatory of the Treaty of Versailles, which imposed harsh repercussions on Germany. However, during the interwar period, the two countries were able to find a common strategic goal, united by their distrust of the United States, Soviet Union, and the League of Nations, but more importantly united by their vision for the future. These strategic interests would trump the race laws created by the Third Reich, allowing for the morphing of the Nazi race laws to accommodate the Japanese.

In the wake of Japan’s annexation of Manchukuo, the League of Nations strongly condemned the action and refused to recognize the legitimacy of the new acquisition of territory. Pointing to the hypocrisy of such actions given European colonial activities in East Asia, the Japanese delegation famously walked out of the Assembly with the government withdrawing officially shortly after in 1933.[[29]](#footnote-29) Germany similarly withdrew from the intergovernmental organization given the refusal of Western powers to accept Germany’s demands for military parity in 1933.[[30]](#footnote-30) Legally, the signing of the Anti-Comintern Pact to resist both Soviet communism and the existing Anglo-American-led world order would cement the Berlin-Tokyo strategic alliance. Shortly after the signing, the Nazi government announced the inclusion of the Japanese people in their “honorary Aryan” concept.[[31]](#footnote-31) Most importantly, what solidified the unlikely alliance was the shared future vision of a post-war order coined the “New Order.” The Third Reich had strategic interests in the Far East, a region historically fought over by Western colonial powers. Thus, having a steadfast ally in the region was of great importance.[[32]](#footnote-32)

The conflict of interests of the Third Reich in balancing its national agenda of racial purification and advancing its foreign policy goals coincided with the number of diplomatic spats between the two countries. These diplomatic crises were rooted to the sensitivity of the Japanese about their identity, given the great discrimination faced in the United States. After complaints by the Japanese Embassy of the numerous cases of discrimination directed against its citizens, “in an effort to prevent similar incidents, the Foreign Ministry advised the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Justice, and the Nazi Party Propaganda Division reassured the ‘main street’ that the race laws tolerated their association with Japanese.” [[33]](#footnote-33)

All things considered, Nazi officials viewed Japan generally with great respect and viewed the country as a model for social and racial homogeneity. When tensions emerged around questions such as the intermarriage of Japanese and German people, the Japanese government intervened in protest of their treatment, and the Nazi party accommodated such inconsistent policies, with great efforts to keep the news from the general public. Few interactions between Germans and Japanese citizens actually occurred given the great distances between the two countries. Instead, the alliance was built upon the envisioned future of the “New Order” in which the Axis powers would hold their respective domains. Overall, the inconsistent racial laws towards the Japanese were able to work due to the help of the Nazi propaganda machine, as well due to the fact that in reality there was very little transnational interaction of citizens between the two countries. The Nazi government went to great lengths to create ulterior explanations for why Japanese nationals were granted the same privileges as Aryans, while other racial minorities were being heavily persecuted against. The nonsensical theories surrounding the biological and cultural characteristic of Japan point to how groundless claims were spun purely with the intention of not undermining their very own racial theories.

III. Apartheid South Africa

According to British historical sociologists Hutchinson and Smith, “The horrors of Nazism and the world wars were thought to have rendered ethnic ties to national ideas obsolete, largely because of their associations with discredited racist ideas.” [[34]](#footnote-34) World War II marked a turning point in showcasing the horrors of racism and encouraged states to turn away from race-based policies. These sentiments were evident with the Civil Rights Moment in the United States and the global move toward decolonization. However, during the same period, South Africa would buck the trend and pursue a society divided by rigid racial classifications. These actions would make the African nation a pariah on the global stage.[[35]](#footnote-35) However, once again, one group in which the regime granted an exception for was Japanese nationals with their status classified as “honorary whites,” similar to the “honorary Aryan” terminology used in the Third Reich. The Apartheid government decided to grant this status, which deviated from their strict racial ideology, given the importance of Japan as a trading partner. Thus, economic considerations trumped national ideologies regarding race, in allowing for the flexible alteration in the regime’s policy.

In order to explain the inconsistent policy, I examine the institutional framework behind Apartheid and where Japan fit within the legal codes. Next, I study the bilateral economic relations between South Africa and Japan and the importance of this trading relationship. Lastly, I discuss how other Asian groups, such as South Koreans, Taiwanese, and Chinese, fit into the racial laws, as well as the complications faced by Apartheid followers in dealing with the illogical legal framework. By investigating the issue from different sides, the flexibility and purposefulness of defining race in South Africa’s case becomes clear.

A. Perspective of Apartheid Political Elites

Translated from the Afrikaans meaning of “apartness,” the ideology introduced by the National Party (NP) institutionalized divisions within South African society based on the artificial classifications of race. In contrast to the Third Reich, Apartheid South Africa was ruled by the nation’s minority white population, which dominated politically, economically, and socially over the nation’s predominately black population and other ethnic groups. The Afrikaner ethnic nationalist party, the National Party created a strict hierarchy with the white population dominating at the top, the colored population in the middle, and blacks and Indians at the bottom.[[36]](#footnote-36) While the United States created a system based on racial absolutism, the idea that a single drop of colored blood could taint the purity of a white person, South Africa conceptualized race on a graduated scale. According to Isabel Wilkerson, “South Africa granted privileges on a graded scale based on how much European blood was thought to be coursing through one’s veins, seeing ‘white’ blood as a cleansing antiseptic to that of lowlier groups in the purity-pollution paradigm.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

In the pre-Apartheid era, anti-Japanese sentiments were strongly held by the country’s white minority. These attitudes were largely related to the trade surplus enjoyed by the Japanese, which according to Payne, “triggered strong anti-Japanese sentiments among white South Africans, especially the Afrikaners who were determined to rid the country of all Asians, including Japanese.” These xenophobic sentiments were legalized with the Immigration Act of 1913, which excluded Asians immigrants and prevented Japanese nationals from expanding trade and commerce in the country.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Although there was little bilateral trade during the interwar era, and South Africa would formally declare war on Japan during WWII, early political leaders who would rule the nation in the coming decades had an early fondness for the Japanese and felt the need of granting them special status in anticipation of future cooperation. D.F. Malan served as Prime Minister between 1948 and 1954, the formative years of the Apartheid era, and had a large influence in the creation of the repressive laws. The Immigration Act of 1913 categorized Japanese and other Asians as “prohibited immigrants,” thereby preventing them from entering the country. However, then Minister of the Interior D.F. Malan, lobbied the government to exclude the Japanese from this category using the logic of Japan as a long-term ally, especially in combating Communist influences in the Far East and the African continent.[[39]](#footnote-39) Moreover, Malan insisted that Japanese residents be excluded from the Liquor Bill, prohibiting Asians from drinking in the country stating, “we can never stop the Japanese from having a drink in this country as they are our friends.”[[40]](#footnote-40)

South African laws were crafted to prevent all intermarriage and social interactions between different racial groups through two monumental laws: The Population Registration Act and the Group Areas Act, both created in 1950. The Population Registration Act divided South African society into four distinct groups: Whites (Europeans), Natives (Bantu), Colored, and Asiatics.[[41]](#footnote-41) Under this act, the Japanese did not fall under the White group but under the group “other Asiatics,” a position above both Colored and Natives.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Under the Group Areas Act, interracial property transactions and property occupation throughout South Africa were restricted. The act created the legal framework for the government to establish neighbors designated as group areas where only certain races were able to reside, physically dividing the country by racial lines. Although Japanese nationals were not granted the status of whites under the Population Registration Act, the Minister of Interior in 1962 decided that the Japanese would be treated in the same way as whites under the Group Areas Act.[[43]](#footnote-43)

These early inconsistent racial laws set the foundation for the following decades where relations between South Africa and Japan deepened, and the racially inconsistent laws broadened. Looking back at the early twentieth century, Japan’s efforts to obtain preferential treatment for its citizens were aided by South Africa’s economic troubles during the Great Depression, particularly in the wool industry. Japan, a major global consumer of wool, decided to import wool from South Africa over Australia in large quantities. Shortly after, the South African government lifted prohibitions against Japanese immigrants highlighted in the Immigration Act of 1913, and Japanese citizens were granted greater benefits.[[44]](#footnote-44)

The Sharpeville Massacre in 1960, in which the South African police force opened fire on a crowd of protestors, led to mass international condemnation and capital flight by foreign governments and investors. In order to limit the subsequent economic damage, the South African government sought new international trading partners and expanded its trading relations with Japan given its policy of *Seikei Bunri,* or the separation of politics and business.[[45]](#footnote-45) After the Sharpeville Massacre and the subsequent capital flight, the value of Japanese-South African trade jumped from approximately $178,974,000 to $551,591,000 between 1962 and 1968. By 1980, this figure had risen to $3,593,738,000, twenty times the amount in 1960.[[46]](#footnote-46)

The event that finally led the Apartheid government to grant full honorary status to Japanese citizens was in 1962 when Japan’s Yawata Iron & Steel Co. offered to purchase 5,000,000 tons of South African pig iron over a ten-year period in a deal worth over $250 million.[[47]](#footnote-47) Then Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd determined that it would harm trade agreements to subject Japanese people to the same restrictions as other ethnicities, especially with trade delegations from Japan expected to regularly visit South Africa for business. Shortly after, in a debate on the Population Registration Amendment Bill in the House of Assembly, W.V. Raw of the United Party challenged the Minister of Interior: “I ask the Minister to tell this House very clearly where the Japanese come into this picture, whether they are to be tested by the pig iron in their purse or the pigment in their skin? What is to be the test for people of Japanese origin?”[[48]](#footnote-48)

Shortly after the $250 million deal with Yawata Iron & Steel Co., Pretoria’s Group Areas Board announced that all Japanese would be considered white for the purpose of residence, and Johannesburg’s city fathers decided they would open the municipal swimming pools to Japanese guests “in view of the trade agreements.’[[49]](#footnote-49) Thus, with the granting of the of the status of “honorary whites,” Japanese nationals were granted access to all white areas, housing, and cultural activities, as well as the privilege to engage freely in business.[[50]](#footnote-50)

South Africa and Japan had an invaluable trading relationship that trumped all other geopolitical and reputational concerns. Japan’s rapidly growing economy depended on imports of minerals, such as platinum, chromium, manganese, cobalt, and vanadium, all of which were abundant in South Africa and not readily available elsewhere.[[51]](#footnote-51) Moreover, South Africa had a reputation as a reliable trading partner with its export body having maintained tight quality controls and honored contracts.[[52]](#footnote-52) The reliability of supply chain was essential for Japan given its limited resources and its booming economy based on the export of electronic products.

B. Views of White Apartheid Followers:

In light of the expansion of privileges based on race to a non-white group, how did white South African citizens interpret the “honorary white” status granted to a racial group which they have been ingrained to see as inferior?

Much like the Third Reich, there were very few Japanese nationals residing in South Africa during the Apartheid Era. In a speech to the House of Assembly, then Senator de Klerk, proclaimed that there were at the moment 50 Japanese in the country and that they are “not a permanent or a numerous group,” given their temporary resident status and that they were “spread all over the country.” Other Asian minority groups were much more prevalent with the Chinese numbering 4,000 and the Indians 365,000.[[53]](#footnote-53) Thus, given the small number of Japanese expatriates in the country for business matters, there were few actual instances of outcry with Japanese individuals using white facilities and privileges.

The inconsistent laws were met with ridicule and confusion over the inconsistency of classifying other Asian groups as “colored.” In Johannesburg, the Health and Amenities Committee Chairman admitted, “it would be extremely difficult for our gatekeepers to distinguish between Chinese and Japanese.”[[54]](#footnote-54) In fact, the more numerous Chinese communities, frustrated with these illogical laws, took advantage of the confusion between distinguishing between the two Asian groups, as was explained by one Chinese immigrant: “the Chinese and Japanese look alike; so you know, if you walk into the cinema and they say, ‘No Chinese allowed’ you would say, ‘I am not Chinese. I am Japanese,’ and they would let you in.”[[55]](#footnote-55) Practically, it was near impossible for bureaucrats, hotel managers, restraint owners, and others to distinguish between the two Asian groups. Thus, there was a gradual acceptance of Chinese into white areas in the following decades.

Given the Apartheid regime’s flexible categorization of race determined by which groups were important enough to be considered white, those from other Asian countries were gradually granted the status of honorary whites. First, in 1961, South Korean citizens were granted the status and removed from the “prohibited immigrants” category when the two countries negotiated diplomatic relations.[[56]](#footnote-56) However, shortly after, diplomatic ties would be severed in protest of Apartheid racial policies. In the mid 1970s, diplomatic relations between Taiwan and South Africa strengthened, as both were increasingly isolated from the international community. The two nations increased bilateral trade, exchanged visits of cabinet ministers, and raised their diplomatic relations to ambassadorial level. With the diplomatic ties strengthened, Taiwanese immigrants in South Africa eventually gained the status of honorary whites, two decades after the Japanese.[[57]](#footnote-57) On numerous occasions in the Apartheid period, China’s consul-general requested that Chinese, especially those who had been residing in South Africa for a long time, be granted the same privileges as Japanese. However, this request was consistently denied, much to the frustration of the thousands of Chinese residing in the country.[[58]](#footnote-58) However, the warming diplomatic ties with Taiwan, as well as the difficulties in differentiating Chinese nationals from Japanese, would lead to the South African government finally making concessions in 1985 by granting Chinese nationals the right to acquire, hold, or occupy property in white areas without permits.[[59]](#footnote-59)

C. Racial Constructs to Advance National Goals:

Overall, the inconsistent policies regarding the status of Japanese residents and the evolving laws with other minority groups provided a powerful case study for how the South African Apartheid government exploited artificial racial lines to consolidate their power in a country in which they constituted a small minority. Ostracized by the international community, both diplomatically and economically, important trade relations with other non-Western countries put them in a position in which they were willing to bypass the racial hierarchy system that they created. According to Isabel Wilkerson, “South Africa’s white minority had an incentive to grow its power and numbers by granting honorary whiteness to those deemed close enough.”[[60]](#footnote-60)

Towards the end of the Apartheid era, the racial laws weakened the overall legitimacy of the regime and ideas of racial hierarchies. State exceptions and exemptions carried high political costs for the National Party. The differences between official policies regarding Japanese and Chinese became the focus of many liberal and opposition jibes against Apartheid, especially in the 1960s and 1970s.[[61]](#footnote-61) Moreover, the shifting and contradictory policies regarding race also reinforced the argument that the Apartheid was not a single, monolithic “grand plan.”[[62]](#footnote-62) The Apartheid government stubbornly held onto outdated theories of race as viewed in biological terms. Meanwhile, this biological racial framework was dismantled on the world stage, giving way to constructivist views of race, discussed in Part I of this paper. Outcast as an international pariah in a progressive era that moved to dismantling racial status quos, the South African Apartheid government’s political experiment ultimately failed.

IV. The Flip Side: Japan’s Perspective

In the previous two sections, the construction of race was analyzed with the caste studies of the Third Reich and Apartheid South Africa that granted Japanese nationals the status of “honorary Aryans” or “honorary whites.” This section considers the flip side of the story. I will study the influence that Japan had on the categorizations and how its citizens perceived the privileges in greater detail. Overall, the Japanese government had an influence in the classification of racial hierarchies of the Third Reich and Apartheid South Africa given its geostrategic and economic influence. The ability of this foreign force to construe racial categorizations further underscores the literature of race as a social and political construct, not a biological given.

Third Reich:

In the early 1900s, Japan was not taken seriously as a global power due to racist sentiments help by Western powers. Moreover, Japanese nationals faced rampant discrimination across the globe, especially in the United States. During World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, establishing internment camps for approximately 120,000 Japanese Americans; no such policies were enacted for Americans of German descent.[[63]](#footnote-63) Given these discriminatory practices, Japanese political leaders were very sensitive when it came to the issue of race and sought to interfere with the Third Reich’s racial laws to grant their citizens the same benefits and privileges as white Germans. Moreover, during the Meiji era Japan sought to become a Western-like power. The country exemplified this with the ability to stand toe to toe with European militaries during its victory in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905. Many in Japan felt that international recognition of Japan as a global power was muted, partially due to sentiments of racial inferiority of the non-white nation.

Given these instances of racial discrimination, Japanese political leaders extensively lobbied the Third Reich to grant Japanese nationals the same benefits and privileges exclusive to white Germans. According to Krebs, “On 11 October 1933, the Japanese Ambassador to Berlin, Nagai Matsuzō, visited State Secretary of the Foreign Ministry (deputy minister), Bernhard Wilhelm von Bülow, demanding clarification and stressing that the Japanese public could become hostile to Germany judging from their bad experience with racism in America.”[[64]](#footnote-64)

Interestingly enough, despite Japan’s close alliance with the racially oppressive Third Reich, Japanese political leaders did not hold similar beliefs of racial hierarchies and superiority. One of the defining features of the Third Reich was its persecution of European Jews, which led to the state-sponsored mass murder of over six million victims.[[65]](#footnote-65) However, Japan pursued no such discriminatory policies against Jews and even counteracted Hitler’s requests to do so. During World War II, Japan was regarded as a safe haven for Jewish refugees despite being a part of the Axis. In 1938, the Five Ministers Council, the highest decision-making council, prohibited the expulsion of Jews in Japan.[[66]](#footnote-66) Throughout the war, the Japanese government also rejected continuous requests from the Third Reich to devise a plan to exterminate the 30,000 Jews under Japanese authority.[[67]](#footnote-67)

Thus, efforts by the Japanese governments to be granted the status of “honorary Aryan” were done not out of widespread beliefs about the superiority of certain races but more so for the desire for global recognition.

Apartheid South Africa:

Following the atrocities of World War II promoted by theories of racial hierarchies, many states cut diplomatic and economic ties with South Africa during the Apartheid era. However, despite its transformation to a liberal democracy, Japan continued to invest heavily in the state.

Officially, the Japanese government prohibited its citizens from directly investing in South Africa in 1974, and Japanese banks announced they would halt loans to the South African government as well as to individual investors seeking investments in the country. However, Japanese companies, especially those within the automotive industry, circumvented the ban by financing through their overseas subsidiary companies given restrictions against investments were extremely porous. The most common practice, allowed by the Japanese government, was for firms to build their factories in South Africa using local capital. Japanese companies would then transfer patents, technology, management, and engineering skills to the locally franchised partners without making direct investments.[[68]](#footnote-68) Thus, it was more the influence of Japanese multinational corporations, rather than the government itself, that influenced the categorization of Japanese as white.

While anti-Apartheid movements swept across the globe and universities across the United States demanded divestment, the Japanese general public remained inattentive to the racial injustice in South Africa. According to Richard Payne, unlike the United States or Britain, Japan did not have to pay attention to public opinion on the issues of minority rule in South Africa since the vast majority of Japanese citizens were uninformed about, and indifferent to, the racial injustice happening in Apartheid South Africa. Consequently, the government did not have to clarify its policies toward South Africa or implement stronger sanctions to meet the demands of interest groups. Moreover, Payne also explains, “Most Japanese share the myth that racial discrimination is nonexistent in Japan, despite obvious problems with Koreans and the Ainu, Japan’s aboriginals. Afraid to acknowledge their own racial problems, few Japanese are interested in racial discrimination elsewhere.”[[69]](#footnote-69)

V. Conclusion:

All things considered, the Japanese experience in the Third Reich and Apartheid South Africa underscore the malleability of race as a social construct crafted by political elites in order to advance their strategic and/or economic goals.

In the Third Reich, despite the regime’s highly discriminatory policies against racial minorities, Japanese nationals were granted the status of honorary Aryans for purely strategic purposes. In the pre-war era leading up to World War II, Japanese nationals in Germany faced rampant discrimination and harassment. However, the Nazi government and propaganda machine were able to publicly enshrine the Japan as being worthy of being classified among its white counterparts, despite the racial hierarchies engrained into the minds of Third Reich citizens. The ability of political interests, and other factors such as Hitler’s personal views, call us to question the motivation and logic behind the Nazi racial laws.

Shortly after the fall of the Nazi regime, another racially oppressive government would come to power in South Africa. Like its predecessor, the Apartheid government created a strict racial hierarchy to divide every aspect of society. However, the government allowed for the exception of Japanese nationals to be granted white status given the important economic ties between the two countries. These inconsistencies highlight how race laws were constructed solely for the purpose of strategic and/or economic gains and call us to question their logicality.

In the contemporary era, globalization and technological advances have made the world increasingly small, allowing for greater interactions between individuals of different “races.” However, the scars of racial oppression of past centuries continue to divide society by artificial lines, despite biological theories surrounding race being disproven. Looking into the decades ahead, political entrepreneurs may possibly rewrite racial classifications further to advance their goals.

In explaining the flexibility of racial lines and how they may be construed in the future, Isabel Wilkerson states, “The definition of whiteness could well expand to confer honorary whiteness to those on the border – the lightest skinned people of Asian or Latino descent or biracial people with a white parent, for instance – to increase the ranks of the dominant caste.”[[70]](#footnote-70) In the coming decades, political elites may find it advantageous to strengthen the power of the dominant group by expanding what defines the racial group in power, as was the case with Apartheid South Africa. This hybrid expansion of racial categorization would allow for political elites to maintain their hold onto their powerbase and advance their political aims. The case studies of the Third Reich and Apartheid South Africa provide a cautionary tale for the great atrocities able to be committed by such constructions and the unfeasibility of upholding regimes based on these imaginative color lines.

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