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Meiji-Japan in den Augen des Schweizer Konsuls und Gesandten Paul Ritter: Eine Globalgeschichte der Schweizer Diplomatie

Meiji Japan in the Eyes of Swiss Consul and Envoy Paul Ritter: A Global History of Swiss Diplomacy

This dissertation is a cultural history of diplomacy making use of the theoretical groundwork laid predominantly by Global History and Postcolonialism. As such, it aims to analyze the life of Dr. Paul Ritter from 1892 to 1909, when he acted as the first official representative of the Swiss government in Japan, from two separate, but in fact closely intertwined perspectives.

First, like other Western states, Switzerland had been granted broad extraterritorial privileges, in particular consular jurisdiction, through an unequal treaty concluded with the (Tokugawa) Japanese government. Since this was tantamount to (partial) informal dominance or “regime colonialism”, Switzerland's relations with Japan at least until 1899 represent an interesting case of “colonialism without colonies”. In turn, this raises a number of questions concerning the ways Swiss colonialism differed from that of other powers; how it was executed by Ritter, the Confederation's man on the spot; how the diplomat (and his superiors) reacted to the sweeping changes taking place in Japan and to the Japanese demands for treaty revision; and how he in general attempted to justify an imperialist policy that blatantly contradicted cornerstones of Swiss national identity such as self-determination, neutrality and democracy.

Second, Ritter's long stay in his Asian host country as well as the overall transformation of Japan in the second half of the Meiji period might have changed his perceptions of Japan or even the non-Western world as a whole. Although not possessing any colonies itself, Switzerland was closely integrated into European intellectual networks, which during the 19th century increasingly stressed the superiority of Western culture or race over others and established a comprehensive, but nevertheless arbitrary “standard of civilization” in order to legitimize the subjugation of overseas territories. It's therefore safe to assume that Ritter shared many of these prejudices when at the age of 27 he left Switzerland for Japan, but did he manage to overcome them and shift his perceptions? What practical consequences resulted from such a development? Did he change his policy recommendations or indulge in “going native” to a certain degree? And how did this influence his self-identity of being Swiss?