

**SELECTIONS FROM THE KOKUTAI NO HONGI (FUNDAMENTALS OF  
OUR NATIONAL POLITY), 1937**

**Introduction**

*Kokutai* is a notoriously slippery term, sometimes translated into English as “national polity” and often as “national essence.” *Kokutai*, which was hotly debated in Japan starting in the late Tokugawa period, might be best understood as those qualities that make the Japanese “Japanese.” In the mid-1930s, a time of social ferment and rising nationalistic thought, the Ministry of Education commissioned a group of prominent academics to write a treatise on *kokutai* that would establish an orthodox interpretation of the “national essence” for the Japanese people. The resulting 156-page pamphlet, *Kokutai no hongii*, was published in March 1937 with an initial print run of 300,000 copies, although more than two million were eventually distributed in Japan and the empire. *Kokutai no hongii* was the most important of a series of documents produced by the Japanese government that sought to articulate an official ideology for a nation on the brink of total war.

**Document Excerpts with Questions** (Longer selection follows this section)

From *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, edited by Wm. Theodore de Bary, Carol Gluck, and Arthur L. Tiedemann, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 968-969, 975. © 2005 Columbia University Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

*Selections from the Kokutai no hongii*  
**(Fundamentals of our National Polity), 1937**

*Introduction*

The various ideological and social evils of present-day Japan are the result of ignoring the fundamental and running after the trivial, of the lack of judgment and the failure to digest things thoroughly. This is because since the days of Meiji, so many aspects of European and American culture, systems, and learning have been imported and too rapidly. As a matter of fact, the foreign ideologies imported into our country are mainly ideologies of the Enlightenment that have come down from the eighteenth century, or extensions of them. The views of the world and of life that form the basis of these ideologies are rationalism and positivism, lacking in historical views, which, on the one hand, place the highest value on, and assert the liberty and equality of, individuals and, on the other hand, place value on a world by nature abstract, transcending nations and races. Consequently, importance is given to human beings and their groupings, who have become isolated from historical entanglements, abstract and independent of one another. ...

**Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on  
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Paradoxical and extreme conceptions, such as socialism, anarchism, and communism, all are based, in the final analysis, on individualism, which is the root of modern Occidental ideologies and of which they are no more than varied manifestations. Yet even in the Occident, where individualism has formed the basis of their ideas, when it has come to Communism, they have found it unacceptable; so that now they are about to do away with their traditional individualism, and this has led to the rise of totalitarianism and nationalism and to the appearance of Fascism and Nazism. That is, it can be said that in both the Occident and our country, the deadlock of individualism has led alike to a season of ideological and social confusion and crisis.... This means that the present conflict in our people's ideas, the unrest of their modes of life, the confused state of their civilization, can be put right only by a thorough investigation by us of the intrinsic nature of Occidental ideologies and by an understanding of the true meaning of our national polity. Then, too, this should be done for the sake not only of our nation but also of the entire human race, which is struggling to find a way out of the deadlock with which individualism is faced.

...

***Our Mission***

Our present mission as a people is to construct a new Japanese culture by adopting and sublimating Western cultures with our national polity as the basis and to contribute spontaneously to the advancement of world culture. Our nation early saw the introduction of Chinese and Indian cultures and even succeeded in evolving original creations and developments. This was made possible, indeed, by the profound and boundless nature of our national polity, so that the mission of the people to whom it is bequeathed is truly great in its historical significance.

**Questions:**

1. What do you think this document means by "the various ideological and social evils of present-day Japan"?
2. What does *Kokutai no hongii* suggest are the problems facing Japan, and what is the recommended solution?
3. Why would the Japanese government have supported ideas like these, especially in the historical context of the late 1930s?
4. What is the writer referring to when he says "Our nation early saw the introduction of Chinese and Indian cultures and even succeeded in evolving original creations and developments."?
5. Does the United States have a *kokutai*? If so, what do you think it is?

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*Loyalty and Patriotism*

Our country is established with the emperor, who is a descendant of Amaterasu Ōmikami, as its center, as our ancestors as well as we ourselves constantly have beheld in the emperor the fountainhead of her life and activities. For this reason, to serve the emperor and to

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receive the emperor's great august will as our own is the rationale of making our historical "life" live in the present; and on this is based the morality of the people

Loyalty means to revere the emperor as [our] pivot and to follow him implicitly. By implicit obedience is meant casting ourselves aside and serving the emperor intently. To walk this Way of loyalty is the sole Way in which we subjects may "live" and the fountainhead of all energy. Hence, offering our lives for the sake of the emperor does not mean so-called self-sacrifice but the casting aside of our little selves to live under his august grace and the enhancing of the genuine life of the people of a state. ...

...

### *Harmony*

When we trace the marks of the facts of the founding of our country and the progress of our history, what we always find there is the spirit of harmony. Harmony is a product of the great achievements of the founding of the nation and is the power behind our historical growth. It also is a humanitarian Way inseparable from our daily lives. The spirit of harmony is built on the concord of all things. When people determinedly count themselves as masters and assert their egos, there is nothing but contradiction and the setting of one against the other; and harmony is not created. In individualism it is possible to have cooperation, sacrifice, and the like, so as to regulate and mitigate this contradiction and the setting of one against the other; but in the end there is no true harmony. That is, a society of individualism is one of clashes between [masses of] people...and all history may be regarded as one of class wars. Social structure and political systems in such a society, and the theories of sociology, political science, statecraft, and so on, which are their logical manifestations, are essentially different from those of our country, which makes harmony its fundamental Way. ...

...

### **Conclusion**

Every type of foreign ideology that has been imported into our country may have been quite natural in China, India, Europe, or America, in that it sprang from their racial or historical characteristics; but in our country, which has a unique national polity, it is necessary as a preliminary step to expose these types to rigid judgment and scrutiny so as to see whether they are suitable to our national traits. ...

To put it in a nutshell, while the strong points of Occidental learning and concepts are their analytical and intellectual qualities, the characteristics of Oriental learning and concepts are their intuitive and aesthetic qualities. These are natural tendencies that arise through racial and historical differences; and when we compare them with our national spirit, concepts, or mode of living, we cannot help recognizing further great and fundamental differences. Our nation has in the past imported, assimilated, and sublimated Chinese and Indian ideologies and

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has thereby supported the imperial way, making possible the establishment of an original culture based on its national polity. ...

...

The beginnings of modern Western free economy are seen in the expectation of bringing about national prosperity as a result of free, individual, lucrative activities. In introducing into our country modern industrial organizations that had developed in the West, as long as the spirit of striving for national profit and the people's welfare governed the people's minds, the lively and free individual activities went very far toward contributing to the nation's wealth. But later, with the dissemination of individualistic and liberal ideas, there gradually arose a tendency openly to justify egoism in economic management and operations. This tendency created a chasm between rich and poor and finally gave rise to ideas of class warfare. Later, the introduction of Communism brought about the erroneous idea that economics was being the basis of politics, morality, and all other cultures and considered that by means of class warfare alone an ideal society could be realized. The fact that egoism and class warfare are opposed to our national polity needs no explanation. Only where people one and all put heart and soul into their respective occupations, and there is coherence or order in each of their activities, with their minds set on guarding and maintaining the prosperity of the imperial throne, is it possible to see a healthy development in the people's economic life.

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