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**Disguised Issues: Reflections of IR in Contemporary Japan through  
Isayama's Attack on Titan**  
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## **Disguised Issues:**

Reflections of IR in Contemporary Japan through Isayama's

*Attack on Titan*

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## Introduction

Cold War ideology in *Star Trek*? Christian traditions and political conflict in *Harry Potter*? These might be matters that people would not expect to appear next to each other in a sentence. However, it is becoming increasingly more evident that movies, TV series and other popular media exhibit ideas and concepts from the study of International Relations (IR). Nevertheless, the importance of the study of (popular) culture in relation to IR is still not recognized by the majority of IR scholars. 'Rationality' and academic sources are considered to be the primary ways of researching IR, and emotion and popular culture sources are treated as insignificant or at least inferior matters for analysis (Ramel 2018, 365). Furthermore, when these popular culture sources *are* utilized, it seems that 'Western' sources are favored over sources from the 'Other' part of the world. There are non-Western types of popular culture that also offer reflections about our understanding of the world, such as Japanese animation (also called 'anime'). This form of entertainment is a relatively new field in the study of IR, but there are some scholars who have already concluded that it is a useful medium for analysis.

The recently completed (November 2023) anime *Attack on Titan* has received numerous critiques over the past years from popular news sites such as New Lines Magazine and The Daily Star, as well as from numerous social media users, on account of fueling fascist and Japanese imperialist ideologies (Brinkhof 2023) (Sarkar 2023). *Attack on Titan's* story revolves around a society isolated behind three high walls, protecting those that are believed to be the last of humanity against the threat of human-eating 'Titans'. In the big twist of the series, Eren Yeager and the other main characters find out there actually is a whole world outside the walls that hates their race and seeks their destruction because of their Titan-shifting abilities, and they set out to save their people which leads to the genocide on 80% of the world's population.

The critics interpret the isolated society as analogous for Japan and these interpretations are quite topical in relation to contemporary Japanese politics considering the upsurge of ultranationalism and the call for constitutional reform, primarily concerning Article 9 and its renunciation of war and militarism. Almost 80 years later, Japan is still struggling with the aftermath of post-WWII's American influence, as the constitutional revision is one of the most polarized issues of contemporary Japanese politics (the average of polls are 43.5% in favor and

37.5% against) (Harrison 2023). The Article 9 reinterpretations and the expansion of the Self Defense Forces (SDF) over the years have been characterized by critical academics as “gradual (re-)militarization” and even a “de facto denial of Article 9” (Ibid.) (Umeda 2006, 23). The critics of *Attack on Titan* claim that the anime series is deliberate nourishment for the pro-revision camp. This paper examines the portrayals of the topics mentioned above in the anime of *Attack of Titan* and answers the question: ‘In what way is fascism represented in *Attack on Titan* in the context of contemporary Japanese politics?’.

To answer the research question, Chapter 1 first discusses all the relevant scholarly works in the literature review and is otherwise dedicated to outlining the theoretical framework and methodology used for the analysis. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 examine the representations of fascism divided by topic using three pillars of fascism: fascist ideology, collective memory, and militarization. Additionally these chapters show the possible applications of these representations in the context of contemporary Japanese politics. Lastly, the findings of this paper are summarized in the Discussion and Conclusion chapter.

## Chapter 1: Literature Review and Theoretical/Methodological Framework

The following paragraphs establish an understanding of the topics relevant to this paper within academia and lay the foundation for the analysis in Chapters 2, 3 and 4.

### Popular Culture and International Relations

In the field of IR, the inclusion of multi-disciplinary analyses in contemporary times is considered to be common practice. However, as mentioned in the introduction, the significance of the field of cultural studies in this analysis is often overlooked by scholars. In the past two decades, some scholars have attempted to address this issue, such as Roland Bleiker. In his work he describes this as the “aesthetic turn” in the field of world politics, which revolves around including cultural artifacts to generate new insights (Bleiker 2009, 187/188). For example, the use of aesthetics is increasingly being used in academic courses on political theory. Ramel argues the addition of non-academic cultural sources often adds another dimension to the study of IR, which broadens the narrow-minded focus often found in these courses (Ramel 2018, 368). Nexon and Neumann also plead for the pedagogical nature of including these cultural approaches and mention the ties to the real-world events (Nexon and Neumann 2006, 9). Even though Bleiker focuses mostly on aesthetics in the form of poems, the ties between culture and politics are arguably seen most easily in visual culture, which is a large part of popular culture. Bleiker points out portrayals of the war in Vietnam in movies such as *Forrest Gump*, as this historical event cannot be seen independently from these portrayals due to their widespread popularity (Bleiker 2009, 40). Interestingly, according to Bleiker, visual culture is a very underrepresented part of IR.

In academic literature, links between popular (visual) culture and politics are plentiful. They are found in important aspects of society and its individuals, such as in the formation of (political) ideological identity (Duncombe and Bleiker 2015, 36). In Japan’s case, ‘cute’ and ‘cool’ popular culture attributed to the reformation of its (inter)national identity in the Post-WWII era (Agyeiwaah et al. 2019, 128). The formation of identity is especially important because popular culture can reinforce or challenge the ‘us vs. them’ dichotomy, as Danchev argues popular culture makes people more aware of ourselves and the world around us (Danchev 2014). This formation

of identity can be explained by popular culture as a 'representation' of reality and forms the basis for the analysis in the next chapters.

This representation is further discussed by Nexon and Neumann. Most of the knowledge people possess is something they have learned from others, without having had the personal experience of discovering this for themselves (Nexon and Neumann 2006, 6/7). The authors make a distinction between 'first-order' and 'second-order' representations, in which second-order representations are 're-presented' "through a layer of fictional representation" (Ibid., 7). They argue that these second-order representations can be seen as more important sources than the news for example, because as the name suggests: popular culture attracts more people (Ibid., 8). Moreover, these representations seem to play a larger part in influencing people's view of how the world works (and thus how IR works) than first-order representations (Ibid). Daniel and Musgrave build upon this notion and argue that this influence alone should be reason enough for academics to take an interest in studying popular culture in relation to IR (Daniel and Musgrave 2017, 512). This is because the representations are weaved into the very fabric of politics itself (Bleiker 2009, 40).

The considerable influence popular culture has means it can also be abused, which is why it is an important part of studying conflict and post-conflict events (Press-Barnathan 2011, 41). Therefore, Press-Barnathan discusses the use of culture to generate soft power, which is the power a state has that makes other states want to achieve what the initial state wants (also called "co-optive power") (Nye 1990, 166). In soft power theory, popular (visual) culture can be seen like a "tool" (Press-Barnathan 2011, 31) for state government. However, Bouissou disagrees with this notion as she argues states have no absolute oversight in the process from production to reception of soft power products (Bouissou 2011, 54). She argues soft power is a long-term process that will have an unintended outcome (Ibid., 31/32).

The fictional aspect of IR reflected in popular culture seems to be a particularly creative way of engaging with International Relations. The science fiction genre in particular (and arguably the fantasy genre as well) creates a space for something Ling and Nakamura identify as "thought experiments" (Ling and Nakamura 2019, 544). The TV series *The West Wing* was even utilized as a space for US congress members to assess potential future policies (Grayson, Davies, and



Philpott 2009, 157). Ling and Nakamura demonstrate the usefulness of this imagination in science fiction in disputes in IR. In their article, they show that narratives from popular culture do not necessarily need any relation to the target domain in order to be useful (Ling and Nakamura 2019, 553). Kiersey and Neumann argue this is because these types of popular culture “maintain a link with the experiences we share in our own world” (Kiersey and Neumann, 80). Even though these genres in visual culture are great sources for analysis in IR, they can give a false representation due to their fictional nature which might spread falsehoods about reality among viewers (Daniel and Musgrave 2017, 503).

After listing these links between popular culture and IR, it is important to also note the limitations of using this type of analysis. First, as mentioned by Ramel, including popular culture does not mean that the study of more ‘classic’ approaches to IR should be ignored (Ramel 2018, 372). Furthermore, popular culture representations should not be the most important influence in decision-making processes as they are fictional (Bleiker 2009, 188). However, they can illuminate more information on our options and uncover options we never thought were options at all (Ibid.). As Bleiker concludes in his book: “the problems we face today are far too serious not to draw upon all the resources we have to understand and address them” (Ibid.).

### [Underrepresentation of Non-Western Popular Culture in IR](#)

In the previous section, the significance of popular culture in IR was established by reviewing scholarly literature. Since this subfield is relatively new to the study of IR, the overwhelming majority of popular culture sources used is Western. In the conclusion of the article by Ling and Nakamura, the authors stress the importance of the inclusion of other sources for this reason (Ling and Nakamura 2019, 553). This begs the question if other, non-Western sources might be able to generate different insights to the study of IR. It is important to note that what constitutes popular culture is more than just the movie medium, however, the visual aspect of culture (anime in particular) will be the focus in this paper. Anime is one type of non-Western popular visual culture that is drawing increasingly more attention to itself in terms of its analytical possibilities in academics. Since the late 1990s, the medium has been analyzed by scholars, and features have

been discovered that are quite different from those of Western popular visual culture. The differences will be discussed in this section.

Even though anime seems similar to Western cartoons such as those of Disney, Napier argues that there are multiple elements that set it apart. For example, anime covers more serious themes than other types of video entertainment and includes a larger variety of them (Napier 2005, XIV). The reason for this is because anime is not just catered to children, as grown-ups are also part of the target audience, as this form of expression is common in Japanese society (Kuwahara 1997, 40). Napier argues that besides entertainment purposes, anime also creates a space to critically engage with past or current issues (Napier 2005, 4). Furthermore, whereas Western video entertainment is “dialogue-intensive,” anime and manga are very focused on the visual, while still containing long and in-depth storylines (Ibid., 17, 20). These distinct characteristics combined with anime’s engagement with a wide range of themes (including universal ones) can be seen as the reason for anime’s success globally (Ibid., 10).

Anime also generally includes ‘mukokuseki’ (literally ‘without nationality’) in its aesthetics and characters, which means the display of these can be nationally, ethnically and/or racially ambiguous (Iwabuchi 2004, 58). This lack of specificity might also influence how ideas and theories of IR travel through this medium and how they are interpreted by international viewers, as will be discussed in the analysis in chapter ... These differences in interpretations also play a role in the critics’ claims of inherent fascism in *Attack on Titan*. For the analysis of the case study in the following chapters it is important to discuss and review fascism and particularly the Japanese case of fascism.

### Fascism: Rise, Elements, History and (Collective) Memory

For a long time after WWII, scholars debated over whether to include Japan in the case of fascism. Critics such as Duus and Okimoto dismissed the Japanese case because in their view it was too different from European fascism, which is often believed to be the birthplace of fascism (Duus and Okimoto 1979, 66). However, more recently, Eley and Thomas have argued for a more global rise of the far-right and fascism leading up to WWII (Eley and Thomas 2020, 2-4). Before looking at Japan’s rise to fascism, it is necessary to define the concept of fascism.

Countless scholars have tried to (re-)define fascism in postwar literature. The definitions vary, often to make a case for a particular country to be included (Duus and Okimoto 1979, 66). Duus and Okimoto touch upon the limitations of defining the concept, while also considering whether it is worth expending resources in the attempt (Ibid., 76). Generally, however, there are multiple characteristics of fascism that are found across different definitions. These are summarized as follows: indicators of ultranationalism and (totalitarian) militarism, a disdain for democracy and liberalism in line with far-right authoritarian political ideology, and the notion that there is a “natural social hierarchy” (religion-based or not) (Soucy 2024). These combined elements constitute a broad working definition of fascism that is useful to the analysis part of this paper, whether discussing fascism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as fascist tendencies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These elements are focused and divided into three separate fascist pillars (fascist ideology, collective memory and militarization/) in the following three chapters of the analysis. The next paragraph summarizes scholarly work on Japan’s rise to fascism.

The nineteenth century is often characterized by scholars as the period in which the “tidal wave of Westernization” (Holcombe 2017, 217) was reaching the rest of the world, including Japan. The modernization during the Meiji era set the stage for Japan’s eventual aggression of WWII (Panton 2010, 196). The influence that Western superpowers (especially the U.S.) had on Japan was not always voluntarily accepted by the Japanese, and forceful treaties led to the perception of an unequal relationship (Ibid., 169). According to scholars, this in turn drove Japan toward an “aggressive and quick modernization”, out of fear of being consumed by Western powers (Ibid.). This is considered to be the reason Japan wanted to appear as a Western country, not (as popularly diffused) because they wanted to join the West, but to establish themselves as equals and to not be associated with other predeveloped countries in the East that could be perceived as inferior (Ibid., 168). This included a new Western-style constitution in which the divine right to rule absolutely was attributed to the emperor (Ibid.) (Holcombe 2017, 251). According to Panton, this archaic concept of divinity is what paved the way for the rise of ultranationalism in Japan (Panton 2010, 168). Aside from the creation of the Western-style constitution, significant efforts were made to build a Western-style military and economy. This modernization in addition to Japan’s wins against China and Russia around 1900 then solidified

Japan as “a modern world power” (Holcombe 2017, 255). The rejection of Westernization and the revival of interests in conventional Japanese culture was a process that further fueled ultranationalism (Holcombe 2017, 280). Add to that the economic hardships of the 1920s and 30s, and the Taishō democracy was discarded in favor of the pursuit of fascist ideals (Ibid., 282).

Another important aspect in the mechanics of fascism is the link between fascism, history and memory. As Teitel points out: “revisiting the past is understood as the way to move forward” (Teitel 2003, 86). This statement becomes more significant when one remembers that rulers of fascist nations, as well as the victors in conflicts, are in a position of power to revise parts of history in order to fuel ultranationalist and militarist sentiment, which over time becomes the historical narrative and part of our collective memory (Natermann 2020) (Olick and Robbins 1998, 110). This is especially important for the case of Japan (both pre-WWII and in the present) and thus for the analysis in chapter ...The fictitious world of *Attack on Titan* also displays examples of this notion and the consequences for collective memory as a result, as seen in the same chapter mentioned.

Montgomery and Itoh have studied the collective memory discourses they argued are present in *Attack on Titan*. They argue the interpretations of these discourses “diverge through transnational transformations of meaning” and “because of the context within which they interpret anime, many Japanese and American audience members recognize characters and elements of setting differently” (Montgomery and Itoh 2023, 168). For American viewers, the story and aesthetics are allegorical for the Holocaust, while for Japanese viewers, the series connects to the Japanese efforts to come to terms with their ancestors’ aggression in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the authors therefore connect the story with “the rise of right-wing sentiment in Japan” (Ibid., 169). Moreover, Montgomery and Itoh link *Attack on Titan*’s collective memory discourse and the main characters violent resistance to external oppression of his people to the resistance of American influence and post-WWII occupation of Japan (Ibid.). The American Occupation, including the new constitution which includes the now-much contended Article 9, can be argued to contribute to the rejection of Westernization that is still present in Japanese politics today. The conclusion of Montgomery and Itoh’s article is that anime has the possibility to change (inter)national views on nations’ collective history (Ibid., 173).

## Pacifism or (Re-)Militarization?

Since the end of WWII and its renunciation of war, Japan has been known around the world as a 'pacifist country'. The Japanese public had been largely supportive of the country's pacifist stance, up until the 1990s that is (Shibuichi 2017, 150-152). Shibuichi argues the decline and fragmentation of the political left on this issue caused it to become the exceedingly polarized issue it is today (Ibid., 158). Glosserman attributes the call for current (re-)militarization to the growing uneasiness in the East Asian region due to threats from North-Korea as well as China (Glosserman 2023). He even argues that Japan's 'pacifism' was a false designation to begin with, as the Self Defense Forces (SDF) were developed a few years after the new constitution and were expanded upon during the rest of the Cold War (Ibid.). Furthermore, Smith explains that "the extent of that [military] power was often overshadowed by the strained politics within Japan between right and left over the interpretation of Article nine" (Smith 2019, 23). As pointed out by Madison, Japan's military in 2019 was ranked at number seven on Global Firepower's military strength list, which is still the case today (Madison 2019, 123) (GFP 2024).

(Re-)Militarization is a term that in the context of contemporary Japanese politics is often bypassed, by scholars as well as politicians (Hughes 2020, 682). Unquestionably, as Hughes argues, "this is because of the connotations of remilitarization with prewar Japanese imperialism and militarism" (Ibid.). Yet, Hughes argues that (re-)militarization works effectively as a framework for analysis and rejects those connotations (Ibid.). He defines (re-)militarization as "a dynamic process over time" which prompts us to look at "not just continuity, but also for significant change in a society's military stance" (Ibid.). He also highlights the emphasis on both "institutional and ideological" (Ibid.) elements of military practices for analysis. Previous works by scholars have described the Abe administration ideology as an attempt at rewriting history (Smith 2019, 14) (Haruko 2018, 181). During prime minister Abe's governing, military expansion was not even characterized as change, but as a "proactive contribution to international peace" (National Security Strategy 2013, 3), which Hughes points out is in line with the pacifist discourse Japan presents to the world.

(Re-)Militarization relies upon the normalization of militarist ideology, which is why the glorification of an aggressive past as well as glorifying military institutions are important elements

to the study of (re-)militarization in popular culture (Stavrianakis and Selby 2012; 4, 12). Stavrianakis and Selby argue that popular culture is becoming of “increasing importance [...] as an arena for militarism” (Ibid., 17).

## Conclusion Literature Review

Firstly, this literature review has highlighted two notions with regards to culture and International Relations. The first notion is that the inclusion of popular culture is an undervalued part in the study of IR, and the second notion is that within this understudied field, non-Western forms of popular culture should be included in this analysis as well. The inclusion of serious themes, grown-up audience, visual focus, and the nationality-neutral nature of anime, are reasons that anime can be seen as a valuable part in the analysis of IR in popular culture. Secondly, it has touched upon scholarly work relating to IR concepts of fascism such as ultranationalism and militarism/militarization, also including critical work on topics such as collective memory, ideology and Japanese pacifism. Lastly some other academic analyses of *Attack on Titan* were discussed that will help put the analysis of this paper in a comparative context.

## Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The research of this paper functions within the foundation of author Tolkien’s response to the allegorical perceptions that readers voiced after the release of the first edition of his Lord of the Rings book series. Readers suspected the tale contained a hidden comparison and message with regards to WWII, where Mordor was perceived as nazi-Germany and the fellowship of the ring as the allied powers, among other symbolic meanings (Barnabé 2015, 52). He delivered his response in the second edition of the books (1966), where he made an important distinction between allegory and applicability: “I think that many confuse ‘applicability’ with ‘allegory’; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author” (Tolkien 1966, xxvi). Tolkien thus attributes the intention of the author as a vital aspect when distinguishing between the two concepts. Other scholars such as McGrath have added on to this

notion by asking: “is the fact that “you can allegorise the work before you”, a real “proof that it is an allegory”?” (Ibid.)(McGrath 2013, 281-282). This allegory vs. applicability framework is vital to this research paper, as the research chapter seemingly creates allegorical links between the series and events from reality. However, because AOT’s author Hajime Isayama has made close to no statements about the inspiration behind the series and has not responded to the critic’s claims mentioned in the introduction, it is impossible to speak of allegory in the context of this paper. Therefore, the analysis of this research paper occurs in the framework of applicability.

The methodological framework for this research paper is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This paper uses scenes from the case study to analyze the applicability of representations of fascist ideology, collective memory and militarization on the developments of those same pillars in Japanese contemporary political ideology. The research also makes use of multiple modes, including textual but also visual analysis. Generally, all representations that are critically reviewed in this paper are textual analyses, with the addition of visual analysis in cases where the visual has an impact on the applicability of the scene. CDA is a fitting method to uncover the discourses present in the *Attack on Titan* anime with regards to fascism in the qualitative approach to answer the research question.

Despite CDA becoming an increasingly used mode of analysis, not a single all-encompassing definition for it exists, which is similarly true for the term ‘discourse’ (Aydın-Düzgüt and Rumelili 2018, 286). Multiple schools of thought (Foucauldian, Habermas etc.) utilize CDA with different foci, also influenced by scholars’ “individual discursive practices” (Ibid., 287), which inevitably led to diversity. CDA is often seen in the analysis of cultural works and is a way of critically engaging with (mainly) textual sources to reveal hidden ideologies, power structures and CDA challenges “everyday beliefs” that are covered up by symbolism (Wodak, Maingueneau and Angermüller 2014, 362).

It is important to note the limitations of this method. The first critique that is often voiced is sampling. What is often done to maintain appropriate sampling is “to make sure that representations are constantly repeated in a wider [sampling] network and that the analysis and [samples] are revised upon encountering a [sample] which cannot be accounted for by the discursive positions identified in other analysed [samples]” (Aydın-Düzgüt and Rumelili 2018, 301).

The second limitation is that CDA is considered to be on the subjective side, as it makes use of interpretive methods. It is therefore valuable to uphold self-reflexivity throughout the analysis, in which “the analyst does not exist independently of the discursive [...] context within which society operates” (Ibid.).

In conclusion, while CDA is a useful mode of analysis, there are significant limitations that have been monitored during the course of the research in order to uphold professionalism.



## Chapter 2: Fascist Ideology

This chapter looks at how fascist ideology is represented in *Attack on Titan*. Additionally, after reviewing the examples from the case study, they are put into the context of contemporary Japanese politics. The main ideologies in relation to fascism that are analyzed here are segregationism, racism and ultranationalism.

As briefly mentioned in the introduction to this paper, *Attack on Titan* follows the story of how Eren Yeager and his comrades navigate the threat of human-eating giants without intelligence, called 'Titans'. In the beginning of the series, it is believed that due to this threat the last of humanity decided 100 years ago to make three walls and create a safe haven for them to live peacefully. In the first episode, however, an enormous Titan appears before the outer wall of Eren's hometown and creates an opening for the smaller titans to enter through, wreaking havoc and forcing humanity to retreat behind the second wall. The first two seasons show Eren and his friends joining the military in order to defeat the Titans and retake the most outer wall. The details behind their unknown giant adversaries are gradually uncovered, however, their origins remain unknown. In the twist halfway through the series, the company learns the truth: the people within the walls belong to a race called 'Eldians' that is the origin of Titans because their blood contains Titan-shifting abilities. Furthermore, there are many other humans alive in other nations around the world who are determined to erase all Eldians because of this mysterious and dangerous power. This is the starting point of the rise of nationalism and ultranationalism in Eldian society, as it does not play a role in a secluded society presumably being the only one left.



Figure 1 “About the Walls: Humanity lives surrounded by three walls. The outermost wall is Wall Maria, the second is Wall Rose, and the centermost wall is Wall Sina.”<sup>1</sup>



Figure 2 “Wall Sina encloses the capital and about 200,000 people. Residency requires special permission and is technically restricted to the royal family and their relatives.”<sup>2</sup>



Figure 3 “One may also earn residency rights through meritorious service in the Garrison Regiment or Military Police Regiment, which is considered the sole means for the poor to gain safe refuge.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Attack on Titan*. Episode 1, “To You, in 2000 Years: The Fall of Shiganshina, Part 1,” written by Hajime Isayama, aired April 7, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> *Attack on Titan*. Episode 24, “Mercy: Assault on Stohess, Part 3,” written by Hajime Isayama, aired September 22, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

### Segregation: Paradis and Marley

Despite nationalism and racism developing after the twist, other forms of discrimination are already present in Eldian society up until that point.

As depicted above in figure 1, there are three walls: Wall Maria, Wall Rose and Wall Sina. Each wall's population has its own characteristics and the closer to the center one wants to live, the more requirements citizens need to meet. As seen in the text in Figure 2 and 3, the innermost wall is exclusively reserved for royals or highly ranked military officers, motivating people to put their lives on the line in the military, signified by the skulls on the arm on the right in Figure 3. Meanwhile, the outermost, and thus most unsafe, wall to inhabit is where people with the lowest social standing (for example farmers) live. This class system contributes to the enforced hierarchy, with the royal government at the top of the power structure. It signifies the belief in a "natural social hierarchy" (Soucy 2024), one of the components of fascism mentioned in the literature review. During the fall of Wall Maria, the gates between Wall Maria and Wall Rose are closed. In addition to the prevention of the titans advancing to the next wall, fear of food shortages made the military by order of the government make this decision. Consequently, many refugees were sacrificed as food for the Titans, in line with the perceived natural social hierarchy.

Another example of segregationist ideology is revealed during the twist. Eldia is revealed to be the world's aggressor for 2000 years before the events of Eren, particularly devastating their main competitor nation Marley with Eldia's Titans. This devastation, in addition to infighting in the Eldian nation, led the Eldian King of 100 years ago to decide to seclude him and his people to the island of Paradis. This is where they could enjoy their time in 'paradise' by erasing his subjects' memories of that history with his Founding Titan powers, before the expected submission to the world's inevitable revenge for Eldia's sins. However, not all Eldians followed the king to Paradis, and some remained in Marley. Grisha Yaeger (Eren's father) is a descendant of these mainland Eldians, and through his memories the main characters find out that these Eldians are forced to live separately from Marleyans, in 'internment zones', closely monitored and guarded by the military, where they have to atone for their ancestors' sins.

Additionally, they are forced to wear armbands indicating their racial identity, resembling the 'Star of David' badges or armbands Jewish people were forced to wear during WWII (see Figure 4 below).



Figure 4 "Eldian Armband: These armbands are used to differentiate the Eldian "devils" from the other races. Eldians of higher classes may have armbands with different colors. Armband color can also vary depending on if the Eldian is in the military or a regular civilian. It is mandatory for Eldians in Marley to wear their armband when they go outside."<sup>4</sup>

As explained in the information scene from Figure 4, armbands had different colors indicating their status within the oppressed Eldian population in Marley, which is an additional dimension within the existing racist framework utilized by Marley. White armbands are for regular Eldians and red armbands for Eldians that are military 'warriors', who have access to one of the nine intelligent Titans. Eldians with red armbands are officially called 'honorary Marleyans', receiving some special privileges and higher social status, which extends to the warriors' immediate family. Even during the genocide that takes place in the finale, when most of the Marleyan continent is already destroyed, certain Eldians from the zone that are on the run still refuse to take off their red armbands. This symbolizes the tremendous value it holds in their mind after decades of oppression and social conditioning.

<sup>4</sup> *Attack on Titan*. Episode 61, "Midnight Train," written by Hajime Isayama, aired on December 14, 2020.

### Racism: Armbands, Beatings, and Social Conditioning

Red armband or not, all Eldians are considered to be inferior citizens in Marley and receive mental and physical abuse by the hands of Marleyans. A good example of this is shown when a young Grisha and his little sister leave the internment zone and are hurled with insults by the Marleyans walking down the street. Grisha and his sister left the zone without an exit permit and are stopped by two officers of the Public Security Authorities (PSA). Upon finding out the two children are not in possession of a legitimate exit permit, one of the officers asks:

*"You entered the city without permission? You know what that means right? Labor or beating. Which is it?"<sup>5</sup>*

This seemingly indifferent response of the officer and the established punishments convey the habitual nature of this situation in Marleyan society, and the social norms ingrained in that society. After Grisha took his and his sister's beating, he asks himself:

*"I wondered who was truly in the wrong. Was it me or this world?"<sup>6</sup>*

This can be interpreted as a nuance to the presented fascist practices, because the scene puts Marley in a negative light as the antagonist of the main characters that are followed by the viewer from the beginning. Grisha's treatment on that day is shown to have led to him to secretly establish the 'Eldian Restorationist Movement', which sought to restore the Eldian Empire to its former glory. The sentiment in the last sentence, when Grisha perceives the world to be the reason, can be seen as the catalyst for the genocide that ultimately erases 80% of humanity later in the story, as he passes these beliefs on to Eren.

The last example from the case study focused on racism follows Gabi's journey, a young Eldian girl living in the Marleyan internment zone who is aspiring to become a warrior, called a warrior-candidate. During the battle between the military forces of Marley and the Mid Eastern Alliance, Gabi is first introduced to the viewer. Here, she and her fellow warrior-candidates seek

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<sup>5</sup> *Attack on Titan*. Episode 57, "That Day," written by Hajime Isayama, aired on July 17, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

to prove their ability on a real battlefield as a final assessment. Before she successfully tricks the opponent, which wins the war for Marley, she utters the following words:

*“I am prepared to shoulder the fate of us Eldians...and to slaughter that island of devils who’ve done nothing but make us suffer! I am going to win this battle and prove that the Eldians left in this world [referring to those living in the internment zone] are good Eldians!”<sup>7</sup>*

Despite being an Eldian, she clearly indicates there is a difference between those living on Paradis and those living in the zone. From the perspective of Eldians in the zone, the people from the island are the cause of their current predicament, which is due to the indoctrination and education they received from Marleyans and obedient Eldians from a young age. After Eren attacks Marley and the internment zone shortly after these events, Gabi manages to infiltrate one of Eren’s airships with another candidate, Falco, and is taken to Paradis as a prisoner. After they escape their prison cell and hide, Falco rips off her Eldian armband so as not to stand out, followed by a violent reaction from Gabi as she physically tries to recover it. This results in the following exchange:

*Falco: “What is the point of even wearing it here?!”*

*Gabi: “I’m a good Eldian! Without that, I’m the same as the island devils!”<sup>8</sup>*

Even in situations that could pose dangerous while wearing the armband, the resolution to nevertheless hold on to it as a symbolic need to distinguish herself from ‘the evil enemy’ is further evidence of her upbringing and indoctrination mentioned above. While Gabi and Falco are hiding from the authorities, a family who takes care of orphaned kids takes them in. This is where Gabi first experiences the everyday family life of Eldians within the walls, and where she builds a relationship with an orphan from within the walls, Kaya. Kaya and her foster parents find out the two are from Marley and try to help them get back to the outer wall, endangering their own lives to help the two. When they succeed, Gabi experiences a moment of clarity:

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<sup>7</sup> *Attack on Titan*. Episode 70, “Deceiver,” written by Hajime Isayama, aired on February 22, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

*“There weren’t any devils. On this island...there were just people. [...] We just decided that these people we never met were devils. Doing the same things...! The same things, over and over!”<sup>9</sup>*

This scene is a critical point in the series. From the first moment her character is introduced, her beliefs are very rigid and are not up for debate when these beliefs are challenged. As the viewer is conditioned to side with the main characters from Paradis, the first instinct is to disagree with Gabi and her racist-colored mentality. Her character development is a way for the viewer to work through the perceptions and interpretations of both sides of the conflict. Racist ideology is challenged in this quote and especially the last sentence presents this ideology as flawed and dangerous. The “over and over” can be interpreted as a need for change.

Furthermore, there is visual symbolism present in the scene. In Figure 5, the scene is shown to take place in a room full of closed birdcages. The ‘caged bird’ motif is a recurring theme throughout the series to symbolize not only the Eldian people ‘caged’ within the walls, but also ideology as a restrictive framework for humanity striving towards peace. After she utters the words from the quote above, a frame is shown with a birdcage with its door open in Figure 6 on the next page. This signifies Gabi having a breakthrough that allowed her to ‘open the door to her own cage’, symbolically abandoning her restrictive ideology so she can be ‘free’. As a result of this scene, the viewer can process their own (political) ideological beliefs in a stimulating setting, which is one of the useful elements of anime, in line with Duncombe and Bleiker their work mentioned in the literature review. The next subsection looks at another progression of (political) ideology related to fascism, namely, ultranationalism.

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<sup>9</sup> *Attack on Titan*. Episode 77, “Sneak Attack,” written by Hajime Isayama, aired on January 17, 2022.





*Figure 5 Dabi's epiphany: room full of closed birdcages*



*Figure 6 Birdcage with its door open, signifying Gabi's breakthrough*

### Ultrnationalism: Us vs. Them, Yaegerists

The largest contribution to nationalist sentiment in *Attack on Titan* is the 'Us vs. Them' dichotomy, while military success is the second largest. Both are analyzed in this subsection by utilizing the example of the Yaegerists.



During Eldia's 2000-year domination, being of Eldian blood held positive and powerful status around the world. During this time, people of other nations dominated by Eldia were forced to breed with Eldians with the goal of increasing Eldia's population. This is only a part of the devastation that occurred during Eldia's rule, in addition to cruel totalitarian practices and an exorbitant amount of lives lost. Moreover, due to the titan-shifting capabilities of Eldians, Eldians outside of the walls are now dominated by their predecessors' enemies, who have become the aggressor of the Eldians living within the walls as well. As previously mentioned, all Eldians living inside the walls are unaware of the atrocities of their ancestors on account of the King's Founding Titan powers. Therefore, even after learning about this history, the people of Paradis refuse to accept their punishment even more and the escalation of the conflict seems inescapable. Consequently, the main character Eren, who possesses two special Titans, unilaterally decides to attack Marley in the middle of an international gathering of world leaders, following this rationale:

*"If we lose, we'll die... If we win, we'll live. If we don't fight, we can't win!"<sup>10</sup>*

This dichotomous sentiment is introduced to the viewer from the very beginning of the series to motivate soldiers to fight back against the titans, but now the Titans have been replaced by all of humanity outside of Paradis. The dichotomous nature lies in the fact that it indicates there are only two options and two corresponding outcomes. This type of binary, fear-based language that attempts to call people to action is often seen in fascist nations throughout history (Buyse 2014, 785). These words eventually become the new motto of an ultranationalist faction within the military, called the 'Yaegerists'.

When Eren and his comrades reach the sea for the first time after learning the truth, he has a similar, albeit bleaker, realization:

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<sup>10</sup> *Attack on Titan*. Episode 6, "The World the Girl Saw – Battle for Trost (2)," written by Hajime Isayama, aired on May 12, 2013.

*“On the other side of the sea... is freedom. That’s what I always believed. But I was wrong. On the other side of the sea... are enemies. [...] I we kill all our enemies... over there... will we finally be free?”<sup>11</sup>*

This scene further demonstrates the us vs. them dichotomy in the series, which is used to justify taking action to bring about change (also called “motivational framing” (Ibid., 789)). The word ‘freedom’ used here, as well as later in the series, is a powerful accelerator in the us vs. them framework in the series, which in turn fuels ultranationalist sentiment on Paradis. The attainment of freedom is an additional justification for the actions Eren takes to bring his plans for genocide to fruition. After reviewing his actions in the finale, before Eren is stopped and killed by the other main characters in an attempt to save what little is left of humanity, Eren admits his faults in the popular paradoxical phrase:

*“I am a slave to freedom.”<sup>12</sup>*

This statement is inherently contradictory and is an example of fascism disguised as (the pursuit of) freedom. This scene is also a negative commentary on Eren’s actions, as Eren expresses intense regret, and his tenacious calm demeanor has shriveled into despair and sadness as he sits in the imagined sea of blood of all the people he has killed (see Figure 7).



Figure 7 Eren (left) stating his regret to Armin, his best friend, while standing in an imagined sea of blood of Eren’s victims<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Attack on Titan*. Episode 59, “The Other Side of the Wall,” written by Hajime Isayama, aired on July 1, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> *Attack on Titan*. Episode 94, “Toward the Tree on That Hill,” written by Hajime Isayama, aired on November 19, 2023.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

When Eren leaves Paradis to start the rumbling with the army of enormous Titans from within walls, the Yeagerists, on behalf of Eren, stage a violent military coup d'état in Paradis. The goal of the Yeagerists is to establish the 'New Eldian Empire', seeking to restore Eldia to its former glory while eradicating all other races, in line with ultranationalist fascist ideology. Premier Zachary is instantly killed by a bomb, after which every single person in the former government who expresses the smallest amount of resistance is publicly executed. This exemplifies the disdain for democracy, which is an essential element of fascism mentioned in the literature review.

The previous subchapters have analyzed how fascist ideology is represented in *Attack on Titan*. The next subchapter dives into these claims, evaluating them in the context of contemporary Japanese politics.

#### Fascist Ideology in Contemporary Japan:

Critics fear the implication of a 'natural' and 'inevitable' will influence the people of Japan (interpreted by critics as our world's Eldia) to call for the strengthening of its forces due to the growing instability in East Asia (Brinkhof 2023), as mentioned in Chapter 1. They also include reactions from South-Korean viewers when Isayama revealed one of the successful commanders in the series to be modeled after an infamous commanding officer in the era of Imperial Japan (Ibid.). Additionally, it is mentioned the series is banned in its entirety in China, however, that could also be because of the censorship of extreme violence and acts of terror that China enforces. The next paragraphs examine the existence and developments surrounding fascist ideology in Japanese society.

As mentioned in the literature review, after the fall of Imperial Japan, the country found significant relief in the rebranding of its national character. Nationalism had reached an all-time low following Japan's defeat, and it slowly built up its image with economic development and the 'cute' and 'cool' cultural aspects (in which anime played a big role) (Panton 2010, 170) (Agyeiwaah et al. 2019, 128). This formation, coupled with Japan's prided pacifist nature resulted in a new (inter)national identity and sense of nationalism. In recent years, several scholars have

noted an upsurge in ultranationalist sentiment and far-right extremist movements such as the Action Conservative Movement (Yamaguchi 2018, 93-94) that (partially) deny Imperial Japan's history of war crimes. Even though anime creates a space to critically engage with historical or contemporary progressions (Napier 2005, 4), as discussed in Chapter 1, it is questionable whether *Attack on Titan* has a significant impact on sentiments of ultranationalism in comparison to other socio-political developments from the past decades. This includes but is not limited to the rise of the global right and economic recessions. Furthermore, one could also argue that Gabi and Eren's individual journeys are a good example of the opposite interpretation, warning viewers about harboring and fueling said ideologies. Especially because the surge of ultranationalism and other fascist ideals coupled with denial about Imperial Japan's past is a socio-political issue in contemporary Japan, this story could also be interpreted as a reminder for Japanese people of the dangers of harboring these ideals.

## Conclusion

In summary, fascist ideology is proven to be present throughout *Attack on Titan*. Examples of segregationism, racism and ultranationalism have been analyzed, utilizing both textual and visual modes of analysis. Some of these examples, especially with regards to ultranationalism are applicable to Japan's contemporary politics. However, there are several symbolic moments where these ideologies are critically challenged, such as Grisha's backstory, Gabi's journey, and Eren's regret, which means one could use examples to argue for the reversed or neutral side of influence.

The next Chapter analyzes how Collective Memory is represented in *Attack on Titan*.

## Chapter 3: Collective Memory

In this chapter, the representations of the use of collective memory in fascist practices in *Attack on Titan* are analyzed and afterwards put into the context of contemporary Japanese politics. First, this chapter gives multiple examples on indoctrination in relation to collective memory, followed by an analysis of memory erasure.

### Indoctrination: Marley and the Eldian Restorationist Movement

Previously mentioned in Chapter 2, indoctrination by Marleyans on their citizens greatly affected their worldview, as demonstrated by the analysis of Gabi's journey. During the reveal of Grisha's backstory, in addition to the beatings he received because he and his sister left the zone without a permit, to the shock of him and his parents, his sister's lifeless body was found in the river the next day. The second PSA officer never returned her to the zone, and it is evident he likely caused her death. While ignoring Grisha's pleas to seek penance, Grisha's parents are shown trying to educate their rebellious young son about the 'sins of their ancestors', using history books provided by Marley. Below is the exchange between Grisha and his father:

*Grisha's father: "I told you... Our ancestors did terrible things. They believed in eugenics and tried to cleanse—" Grisha: "Faye and I did nothing like that! We were just walking around!" Grisha's father: "What is wrong with you? Are you that eager for all of us to get shipped off to paradise? Listen, Grisha... It doesn't matter that we're not directly responsible for the sins. But what we are able to do is live humble lives within this internment zone."<sup>14</sup>*

This exchange points towards the fear-based indoctrination that parents of Eldians outside of the walls instilled in their children. Grisha's reaction to this father's explanation gives an argument against the generational curse of repenting for one's ancestors' sins. While not to the same degree of being segregated from the rest of society and receiving physical abuse, even in today's global society, people are socially conditioned into feeling shame generations after the conflict has passed. One is reminded of German and Japanese collective guilt following the end of WWII,

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<sup>14</sup> *Attack on Titan*. Episode 57, "That Day," written by Hajime Isayama, aired on June 17, 2019.

preventing future generations from making those same mistakes, which this scene can be interpreted referencing toward.

Grisha rejects this guilt and when he reaches adulthood, he secretly starts the Eldian Restorationist Movement with other Eldians, also referred to as patriots. Furthermore, when his own son is a child, the warrior-candidate program (mentioned in Chapter 2) is established by the Marleyan government. He forces his first son, Zeke, to enter the program in order to position a spy within the military government, despite knowing that a warrior who inherits a special Titan will only survive for thirteen years. During Zeke's candidate training, Grisha spends a large amount of time on the reeducation of Zeke, using history books from the era of the Eldian Empire. This leads to Zeke betraying his parents and reporting them as Restorationist to the government. At this point in the series, Grisha realizes:

*"But if anyone, I should have known... How terrible the sin to besmirch one's beliefs on your children..."<sup>15</sup>*

This statement indicates an admission of guilt, realizing that even though the content differed, he continued in his own's father's footsteps of indoctrination. Both of these two scenes are seemingly deliberately displayed within a few minutes of a singular episode, in addition to exhibiting similar visual cues. The most important similarity visually is the facial expression of both Grisha and Zeke while undergoing the educational practices (see Figure 8).



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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

*Figure 8 Grisha (on the left) and Zeke (on the right) during their respective educations from their parents<sup>16</sup>*

Similar facial expressions seem to indicate something close to emotional withdraw or disassociation with the present moment, as a reaction to the pressures of their indoctrinatory education. This is further enhanced by the use of shadows in the animation. The similarities and link between the two scenes can be interpreted as both sides of the conflict being equally at fault. The use of the word 'besmirch' to describe Grisha's own indoctrination upon Zeke is a sign of a qualitative statement that portrays these actions as unfavorable.

The last example of this section is another nuance to the presence of indoctrinatory practices that are represented in *Attack on Titan*. Grisha's punishment for starting the Eldian Restorationist Movement are torture and being 'shipped off to paradise', which means he will receive an injection to indefinitely turn him into a standard unintelligent Titan who is then released on Paradis island. Just shy of receiving the injection he is saved by a fellow patriot, Kruger, who had positioned himself in the PSA. Before this spy gives Grisha his final mission to go within the walls of Paradis, they talk about the founder of the original Titan, also referred to as the 'Founding Titan':

*Grisha: "Who was the founder Ymir exactly?"*

*Kruger: "Under Marley authority, she is a pawn of the devil. During the Eldian Empire era, she was a miracle of God. [...] The only truth in this world is that there is no truth. Anyone can become a god or a devil. All it takes is for people to believe it."*

Since Kruger's statement has a very neutral nature, not oriented toward any particular side of the conflict, his character can be interpreted as a way to approach topics of memory and collective memory. Furthermore, the statement ties into the impact victors have on the interpretation of their and their adversary's history, as summarized in the work of Natermann as well as Olick and Robbins in the literature review. When Eldia dominated the earth, they controlled the discourse on the history of Titans, and the same applies to Marley in this point in time in *Attack on Titan*.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

## Memory Erasure: The Powers of the Founding Titan

One of the details about the power of Titans that is revealed before the revelation of the big twist, is the power of the Founding Titan, held by the royal family on Paradis. Eren and his comrades secretly find out the Founding Titan has the power to erase the memories of Eldians within the walls, and has done so for the past 100 years in order to establish a brief paradise. He erased all memories and existing collective memory of the time before the seclusion, therefore, the people of Paradis are ignorant of humanity outside of the walls. Even though this ignorance is secretly protected by the military police (one of the three categories in the army), there are stories of people dying in mysterious accidents that circulate society. This is an excerpt of a military police officer that Eren and his comrades forced to explain this:

*“Within these cramped walls, do you know why war has never broken out? It is because we [military police] dirtied our hands to protect the peace. A teacher too smart for their own good... A stupid couple who tried to fly... [...] Humanity has only made it this far because we erased them! You should be thanking us!”<sup>17</sup>*

The words ‘dirtied our hands’ imply the character perceives his action as a noble sacrifice for society, and his position holds a lot of value in his eyes, demanding respect from his interlocutors with the last sentence. Furthermore, the qualitative language used (‘too smart for their own good’ and ‘stupid’) implies the people he referred to were erased, in his perception, due to their own actions. The excerpt perfectly embodies the justification of extreme violence for the greater good of the nation, in line with fascist practices of keeping control over the masses.

When the outer wall is breached in the beginning of *Attack on Titan*, a peek into Grisha’s more recent memories much later in the series shows a considerably older Grisha confronting the Founding Titan about the institutionalized oppression of the people:

*“The people of the walls don’t know about their ancestors’ sins! Because you erased all their memories! Do you really think the ignorant getting eaten by Titans is atonement?!”<sup>18</sup>*

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<sup>17</sup> *Attack on Titan*. Episode 39, “Pain,” written by Hajime Isayama, aired on July 30, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> *Attack on Titan*. Episode 79, “Memories of the Future,” written by Hajime Isayama, aired on January 31, 2022.



Grisha's character shows in this quote ('Do you *really* think [...]') he perceives the situation of the Eldians within the walls to be unjust and directs the blame ('*Because* you [...]') for this injustice very clearly toward the action of memory erasure. This qualitative statement therefore exhibits signs of a social commentary on the fascist practices of Paradis, similar to how these signs offered a qualitative comment on the fascist indoctrination discussed in the previous subchapter. After the exchange between Grisha and the Founding Titan, Grisha decides to steal the Titan's powers and passes it down to his (second) son, Eren, who eventually uses the other special power of the Founding Titan to initiate The Rumbling. As mentioned before, this leads to genocide on a global scale. Therefore, the altering of collective memory is causally linked to a perilous outcome, signifying the dangers in influencing historical narratives.

In closing, indoctrination in changing historical narratives and the erasure of history are both impactful in the formation and perpetuation of collective memory. The next subchapter evaluates these elements of collective memory in the context of contemporary Japan.

### [Collective Memory in Japan: Revision and History Books](#)

The themes discussed in this chapter are applicable to contemporary Japanese politics, and this subchapter evaluates this applicability.

As recognized in the literature review, former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo has an infamous reputation for trying to change narratives of historical objective truth in multiple military exploits of Japan. During an interview with *The New Yorker*, professor of history Alexis Dudden describes Abe as a large contributor in the government (especially the LDP)'s attempt at rewriting and de facto denial of the history of atrocities of Imperial Japan such as denials of Japan's acts regarding the Nanjing Massacre and comfort women (Chotiner 2022). His intentions are made clear in his personal works such as *Towards a Beautiful Country*, in which he shares his plan to "make Japan great again" (Ibid). Additionally, this is also apparent in speeches given during his tenure about his perception of Japanese history, for example in 2015 during a speech in cabinet when he described Japan as a global savior of exploited societies during the Russo-Japanese War (Abe 2015), which Dudden likens as "a direct slap to Korea" (Chotiner 2022). Furthermore, Abe and the LDP brought about changes in government-issued history books that minimize atrocities of

the past (Ibid.), which supplies the new generations with an incomplete review of historical objective truth. Therefore, it is credible that his pursuit of changing historical narratives from the 1990s onward has contributed to the rise of far-right political ideology in Japan.

The rewrite of historical narratives and de facto denial of objective historical truth in Japanese society, as discussed in the previous paragraph are both represented in the *Attack on Titan* anime. The changing of historical narratives in Marley and the Eldian Restorationist Movement in the series are applied by both sides in the advancement of their own political ideology and justification of fascist practices. This is similar to a high degree to the practices of Abe and the LDP, highlighted in the previous paragraph. Additionally, the memory erasure practiced by the Founding Titan during the 100-year peace period in Paradis can be likened to the LDP's denials of Japan's atrocities during the Taisho and Early Showa eras (1912-1945). However, the anime devotes significant effort in showing the dangers of the revision and denial, in addition to demonstrating that both sides of the conflict are guilty of these practices. Grisha's backstory portrays him falling into the same pattern of indoctrination that he was subjected to by Marley and his parents, and his character expresses this realization in a regretful manner. Similarly, the rhetoric behind the use of the Founding Titan's powers is questioned and opposed, as it ultimately leads humanity towards a huge loss of life in the course of the anime. Therefore, it is more reasonable to use the case study of collective memory in *Attack on Titan* as an argument against the contribution of the series to far-right political sentiment in Japan, as it is more akin to a criticism or warning when applied to the contemporary Japanese context.

## Conclusion

This chapter has discussed representations of collective memory in the form of attempted historical revision, indoctrination and memory erasure, afterwards linking these representations to contemporary Japanese politics. In conclusion, even though representations of collective memory in a fascist context apply to Japanese politics, the nuances, (internal) dialogue and story progression go against the support of said practices. The next chapter takes a deeper look at representations of militarization and militarism.

## Chapter 4: Militarization

This chapter aims at uncovering the representations of militarization in *Attack on Titan*. The examples from the case study are divided in three subchapters, based on the chronological events of the series. The first subchapter analyzes the starting point of the vow renouncing war, the second focuses on the gradual militarization during the course of the second half of the series, and the third looks at Eldian society after the events of The Rumbling. After reviewing these examples of the case study, they are positioned within the context of contemporary Japanese politics.

### Beginnings: The Vow Renouncing War and First Coup d'État

Chapter 2 introduced the reason why the Eldian king of 100 years before the breach of the wall decided to seclude him and his people behind the walls of Paradis, namely, the devastation he realizes he and his predecessors brought upon the world. As mentioned, he hopes to secure a brief era of peace, deterring attacks from his adversaries by threatening to unleash The Rumbling. However, as revealed at a later stage, the king has additionally made a vow renouncing war, which binds all his successors and inheritors of his Founding Titan to his will, making it impossible to release The Rumbling.

When Grisha finds the owner of the Founding Titan in that point in time, Frieda, and pleads with her to use the Founding Titan's power to save them from the Titans who have breached the wall:

*Grisha: "King of the Walls! Please, you have to kill the Titans attacking the walls! Before my wife and children...! Before the people of the walls are eaten!"*

*[brief pause]*

*Frieda: "We mustn't escape our sins. Judgement day has come for the Subjects of Ymir. When it comes to great power, people are weak. I realized something from the Great Titan War. We mustn't allow the Power of the Titans to fall into people's hands. If the Founder's power falls again into weak hands, the world shall again become hell. To save the world, we must accept our sins and welcome our ruin."<sup>19</sup>*

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<sup>19</sup> *Attack on Titan*. Episode 79, "Memories of the Future," written by Hajime Isayama, aired on January 31, 2022.



*Figure 9 Frieda (owner of the Founding Titan) her facial expressions in response to Grisha's plea for help in four stages. Her eye color has changed in the last panel from blue to purple.<sup>20</sup>*

Frieda's visual response to Grisha's plea is depicted in Figure 9, which takes place in the brief moment of silence that passes before she responds to Grisha. It is evident that the first panel depicts her initial shock from Grisha's words, as she is looking at him directly. In the second panel, her eyes are looking down, portraying a pained look as if debating whether to help Grisha. This is followed by the closing of her eyes in panel three, after which she opens her eyes portrayed in panel four, having changed eye color from her usual blue eyes to a purple palette. Her usual shade of blue eyes indicates the reaction her individual 'self' brings forth, while the change to purple indicates to the vow renouncing war that binds the previous king's will to her will. The response in the excerpt is the articulation of the king's vow renouncing war, expressed in a decisive and confident demeanor. The words 'we must' and 'we mustn't' convey the prescriptive nature of her answer. Interestingly, the vow renouncing war coupled with her words in the excerpt can be interpreted as symbolic for the renunciation of war of Article 9 of Japan's Post-War constitution. This is examined further in the last subchapter of this chapter.

After Grisha successfully steals her Titan powers, the people of Paradis are no longer capable of being subjected to the power of memory erasure. Shortly after Eren and his comrades find out about this change, a peaceful military coup d'état takes place to replace the government with people that have Paradis' best interest at heart, with former commander Zachary as Premier. This can be characterized as the first change in Paradis' military stance. Zachary is known in the military as an individual with fascist ideological tendencies, which is best summarized in the following scene where he uses a torture device of his own making on one of the former political elites from Frieda's rule, depicted in Figure 10.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



Figure 10 Zachary using his torture device on a former political elite. The former politician is chained to a chair upside-down and stripped of his clothes.<sup>21</sup>

Figure 10 depicts a scene in which Zachary is torturing the former politician by chaining the man without clothes upside-down to a chair, followed by these words:

*“From now on, you’ll be digesting everything you eat from the bottom up. Plus, the only clothes you get to wear start at your knees and below. Of course, once a week we’ll take you outside and parade you around to the public. How beautiful... This may very well be the finest work of art ever conceived. All those decades I spent envisioning it paid off. But see, only after you’re publicly humiliated in front of the same people you tyrannized will this masterpiece be truly complete.”<sup>22</sup>*

The fascist tendencies here are apparent, as Zachary explains he has looked forward to using this particular method of torture for a long time (‘decades’). The publicized nature of punishments, as mentioned before in Chapter 2, is also an indicator of this glorification of extremist militarist thought and normalization of (extreme) military ideology, in line with Stavrianakis and Selby’s work discussed in Chapter 1. This is the man that the insurgent new government chooses to place at its top position, signifying an ideological shift in the country’s military norm.

The next paragraph examines further shifts in the gradual process of militarization on Paradis.

<sup>21</sup> *Attack on Titan*. Episode 43, “Sin,” written by Hajime Isayama, aired on August 27, 2018.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

### Gradual Militarization

The military coup, discussed in the earlier subchapter, is solidified by the successful military victory over a massive Titan threatening one of the walled cities. Several weeks later, the Scouts (one the military branches that perform missions beyond the walls) set out to retake the outer wall, which, if performed successfully, will result in more living space and the cultivation of more food for the people of Paradis. Preparing to descend the top of the wall, they are surprised to see a gathering of people from the walled city giving them a send-off (depicted in Figure 11). The following interaction is shown:

Unnamed Scout soldier: “How long has it been since the Scouts got a send-off like this?”

Scout commander Erwin: “As far as I’m aware, this is a first.”<sup>23</sup>



*Figure 11 Group of people from the walled city the Scouts protected from a Titan attack. The people are cheering, raising their arms to give the Scouts on top of the wall a send-off.<sup>24</sup>*

Erwin’s response to the posed question indicates a significant shift in the people’s support for the military, as success is one of the prime movers of legitimacy in military practices. Figure 11 shows a visual representation of the shift, symbolically placing the Scouts in this scene in the

<sup>23</sup> *Attack on Titan*. Episode 49, “Night of the Battle to Retake the Wall,” written by Hajime Isayama, aired on October 15, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

middle of the sun behind them and the wall. Characters cloaked in sunlight from behind is a useful visual trope in anime to add symbolism, often referring to a newfound hope of sorts.

After additional victories in the years following the last scene, militarization and militarist ideology is further strengthened. Railways and a harbor are constructed for military use across the island in a relatively brief period of time, in preparation for the escalation of the conflict between Paradis and Marley. These institutionalized priorities are in line with Hughes' definition of militarization. The gradual but dynamic process of militarization in these four years soon reaches its boiling point and fascist turn. After Eren initiates The Rumbling, the ultranationalist military faction known as the Yeagerists stages a violent coup, as mentioned in Chapter 2. The totalitarian militarist ideology is exemplified in the events following the successful but violent coup d'état. Floch, who leads the Yeagerists on behalf of Eren, offers existing soldiers the choice of joining the Yeagerists. After several soldiers step forward, Floch asks them to prove their loyalty:

“Good! Now show me your resolve! Beat Commandant Shadis until he can't stand anymore! He represents the old ways that must be driven out! Now, do it! Those who can't go to prison!”<sup>25</sup>

This required abuse is the high point of fascist rhetoric in the Eldian army, and the phrase 'the old ways that must be driven out' is used symbolically to make way for a new regime. It also represents the indifference towards democracy in the definition of fascism explained in Chapter 1 (Soucy 2024). Interestingly, the episode this scene is from is titled “Savagery.”

This subchapter has reviewed fascist elements of militarization in the second half of *Attack on Titan*. The next subchapter summarizes relevant examples of militarization of the story after the events of The Rumbling.

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<sup>25</sup> *Attack on Titan*. Episode 73, “Savagery,” written by Hajime Isayama, aired on March 22, 2021.



## The Rumbling: Aftermath

One of the last scenes of the finale gives viewers a glimpse of an Eldia three years after The Rumbling has taken place (depicted below in Figure 12).

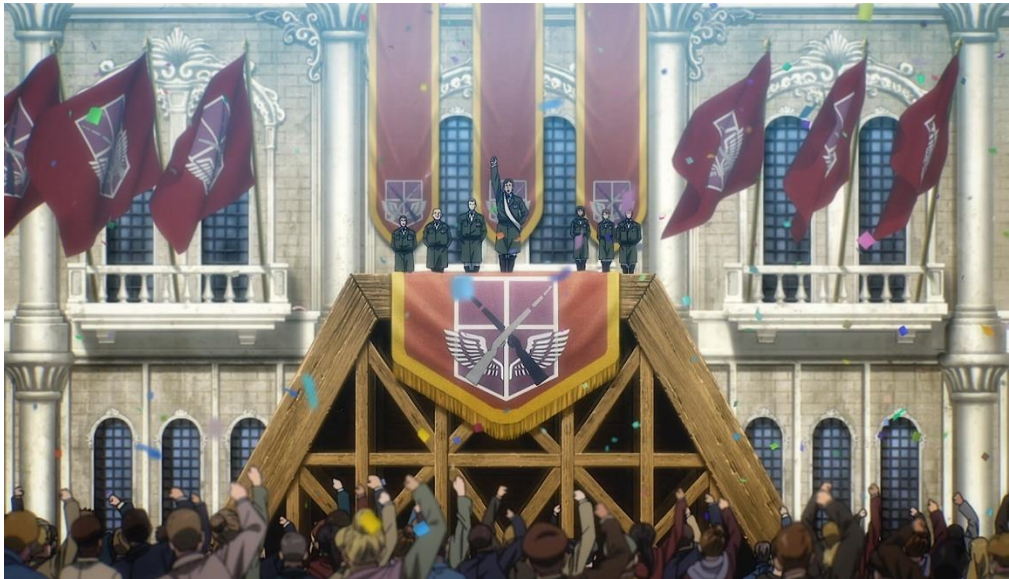


Figure 12 Eldia 3 years after The Rumbling. Military and citizens shout Eren's motto while performing a military salute on stage. The new flag with guns and the wings of freedom is shown for the first time.<sup>26</sup>

While the image in Figure 12 is shown, Queen Historia gives the following narration:

*“Just as the world, still reeling from the loss, feared, Eldia formed a military led by the Yeagerists which gains strength with every passing day. Out of fear of reprisal from the survivors of humanity across the sea, the island shouts with one voice: “If we win, we live. If we lose, we die. We have to fight to win.” [...] Even with the Titans gone, the conflict will not go away. [...] We must fight, so we needn’t fight anymore. Even if we should find ourselves living lives divorced from peace.”<sup>27</sup>*

This depiction and underlying statement imply multiple significant issues. The Yeagerists have succeeded in creating a new Eldia where fascist rhetoric has persevered, despite the lesson of Eren’s actions that viewers experienced in his apologetic scene. ‘With one voice’ indicates that

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<sup>26</sup> *Attack on Titan*. Episode 94, “Toward the Tree on That Hill,” written by Hajime Isayama, aired on November 19, 2023.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*



Eren's motto is the new standard for *all* Eldians on Paradis, it is not just a minority ultranationalist movement as before. The flag is the perfect embodiment of this rhetoric, depicting guns in a red background with the symbolic 'wings of freedom', in line with the usage of freedom as fascist justification. This scene implies that even when the world is rid of the Titans, fascism and conflict are an inevitable result of human nature, reflecting back to Grisha's conclusion previously mentioned; that the world is simply an unequal and cruel place.

After the scene mentioned above, the credits of the series start to roll, showing a timeskip of Eldia in the background. First, viewers see towering skyscrapers being built, seemingly referencing modern infrastructure from reality and possibly even beyond this time. In the next seconds of the timeskip we see modernized Eldia attacked with rocket launchers and eventually bombs on the atomic scale. In the final scene, what is left of a deserted urban Eldia is shown overgrown with greenery, indicating substantial time has passed. Here we see an unnamed character wandering through this scenery and stumbling upon a giant tree with an opening at its roots, resembling the one the original founder Ymir stumbled upon that gave birth to her Titan powers 2000 years before Eren's story. The comparison of these two images is seen in Figure 13 and 14 below.



Figure 13 Founder Ymir standing in front of the tree with an entrance at its roots where she gained the power of the original Titan.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *Attack on Titan*. Episode 80, "From you, 2000 Years Ago," written by Hajime Isayama, aired on February 7, 2022.



Figure 14 Unnamed character with their dog, standing in front of the tree with an entrance at its roots.<sup>29</sup>

The tree in Figure 13 is where Ymir, the first Titan-shifter, meets a creature that grants her these powers. The Titan powers are seen by most characters, regardless of their nation, as the source of the extreme international conflict, because they create an unequal power structure. Eren sacrifices 80% of humanity to bring about the eradication of Titans from the world, in a desperate attempt of creating future generations of Eldians that are no longer persecuted for their association to Titan powers. After all the devastation and loss of human lives, coupled with the desperate attempt to achieve peace, the resemblance of the trees in Figures 13 and 14 indicate the cycle will start again. This final scene is open to interpretation and possible meanings are passionately debated by fans online. While the author has not commented on the meaning of this final scene, the most logical interpretation seems to be the same as the one from the previously discussed scene. Again, referring to the nature of humans and the inevitability of conflict in the world.

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<sup>29</sup> *Attack on Titan*. Episode 94, "Toward the Tree on That Hill," written by Hajime Isayama, aired on November 19, 2023.

### Japan: Constitutional Revision

The three subchapters prior have reviewed the themes in relation to militarization that are present in *Attack on Titan*. This subchapter applies these themes to the larger context of contemporary Japanese politics.

Firstly, as mentioned in the first subchapter, the vow renouncing war can be interpreted as a symbol for the renunciation of war captured in Article 9 of the Post-War constitution. Besides the similarity in phrasing, Eldians are shown to exhibit a division in their views on the renunciation of war, similar to contemporary Japanese society. It is without a doubt the most polarized issue in Japanese politics, as the average polls show 43.5% in favor and 37.5% against revision as of May 2023 (Harrison 2023). The reviewed interaction between Grisha and Frieda can be argued to represent the pro-revision and anti-revision camps respectively. Grisha calls for a revision due to external threats, as is in line with the pro-revision camp's urgent claims of instability in East Asia (referencing North-Korea and China) (Brinkhof 2023). Meanwhile, Frieda's reaction points to the importance of reminding the sins of one's ancestors, pointing to the danger of the revision of the vow renouncing war. The words 'the world shall again become hell', referencing to the height of Imperial Eldia's world domination, can also be applied to the fear for Japanese to returning to Imperial Japan's domination in the Pacific. Frieda's pacifist stance be applied to the pacifism that is embedded within the national identity of the Japanese, which is the rhetoric of the anti-revision camp. However, to conclude that the series indicates that revision is the preferable solution is a misconception. If anything, both views are shown to be challenged in different ways, indicating a neutrality and letting the viewer work through these opposing views.

Secondly, as mentioned in the literature review, politicians such as Abe have described the revision not as an abandonment of this sentiment, but as a "proactive contribution to international peace" (National Security Strategy 2013, 3) in line with perceived pacifism mentioned in the precious paragraph. However, wary of the past, these types of phrases have often been linked to the fear of a "gradual remilitarization" mentioned in the introduction to this paper. This chapter has shown that the case study of Paradis exhibits signs of gradual militarization. Eldia experiences a gradual militarization over time, with dynamic events that contribute to the shift in military ideology, similarly to Japan's change in views about

militarization since the end of WWII. Furthermore, Japan's military is currently ranked at number seven on Global Firepower's military strength list (GFP 2024). This is not in line with what one expects a pacifist nation's firepower to be. The anime's representations of the effect of militarization in the final two scenes examined in subchapter three can be argued to show the meaninglessness of efforts to militarize as a nation, as conflict is perceived to be eternal and an inevitable part of human nature. One could also argue that if that is the case, there is no reason not to engage in military practices as well.

## Conclusion

This chapter has provided an analysis of representations of militarization by following Eldia's journey through militarization, by reviewing militarist practices and ideology in a chronological version of the events from the case study. To sum up, the overall interpretations that can be derived from the examples about militarization examined in this chapter are mixed, and generally provide the viewer with a neutral or nuanced representation of militarist ideology.

The next chapter discusses the findings of this research paper.

## Discussion and Conclusion

In this chapter, the findings of the research are discussed, as well as limitations and the identification of possible areas for further study.

The research question: 'In what way is fascism represented in *Attack on Titan* in the context of contemporary Japanese politics?' has been analyzed in relation to three focused pillars of fascism, namely fascist ideologies, collective memory, and militarization. The foundation of Chapter 1 has been used throughout the research chapters, relating back to key concepts and scholarly work cited. Additionally, the framework of applicability was a helpful tool in the analysis, as allegorical interpretations are quick to enter one's mind and in the way of remaining objective. The following paragraphs summarize the findings of each chapter.

Chapter 2 about fascist ideology provides an analysis of how fascist ideology is represented in the case study. Examples of segregation, racism, and ultranationalism pointed towards the abundance of representation of these in *Attack on Titan*. In contrast to the critics' claims that the series is a deliberate nourishment for far-right political sentiment in Japan, the findings point to the representations either shedding a light on multiple points of view (through Grisha's backstory), or arguably making the case for the perilous nature of fascist ideology (through for example Gabi's journey).

Chapter 3 about collective memory examines examples of indoctrination and memory erasure, and links these representations to the practices of the LDP and especially former Prime Minister Abe. However, the nuances, (internal) dialogue and story progression go against the support of said practices.

Chapter 4 about militarization reviews militarist practices and ideology in a chronological version of the events from the case study and links these to Japan's gradual militarization. Similar to the findings of the earlier chapters, it is concluded that the representations generally provide the viewer with a neutral or nuanced representation of militarist ideology.

In conclusion, the critics' claims have been reasonably debunked in this paper. Additionally, this research has shown once more that anime is a useful mode of analysis of IR subjects. In addition to this, the very nature of anime as popular culture allow the viewer to work through complex political thought in a stimulating setting. Therefore, people who are not initially

interested in IR can still engage with it through anime and thus *Attack on Titan*, lowering the point of entry for these types of studies.

An identified limitation in this study is that it remains unclear how sentiments about political thought in anime actually influence the viewer's beliefs on political themes, as one's preexisting views are expected to impact the variation of influence. This would pose an interesting area for further study. Additionally, the interpretations and reactions to *Attack on Titan* on the internet would also be an interesting addition here. Furthermore, as this paper uses interpretations from the framework of an East Asian country, I think it would be interesting to see how Western viewers would interpret the series.

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<sup>30</sup> Quotes, screenshots and translation used in the analysis of speech and text are acquired from <https://www.crunchyroll.com/series/GR751KNZY/attack-on-titan>.

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