

Historical and Political Context of Kazuo
Ishiguro's
„Remains of the Day“

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1. Historical and Political context and its perception by the main character

1.1 Presentation of history in *Remains of the Day*

The presentation of historical facts in *Remains of the Day* is sketchy at best. The occurrences that lie beneath the plot are usually only hinted at, detailed descriptions of related historical events are not present. Usually the historical element is limited to the mention of names, as this is probably the only thing that would concern a butler. The only instances that have a direct political reference are the conference¹, where the divergence in attitude between the British and the French is clearly visible and, near the end of the novel, during Ribbentrop's visit, when young Mr. Cardinal tries to explain the implications of Darlington's involvement in foreign politics to Stevens².

1.2 Political Views of Stevens and Lord Darlington

Stevens's political views, as far as he can be said to have any, don't differ from those of his master, who himself does not comprehend the full implications of his actions. Lord Darlington is strongly influenced by aristocratic concepts such as tradition, honor and fair play (“It does us great discredit to treat a defeated foe like this. A complete break with the traditions of this country”, 71). Stevens is content to know that his master is working “for the good of humanity”. He goes so far in his cult of professionalism, aspiring the ideal of the “great butler”³ that he does not only keep his political views to himself but sometimes gives the impression of not having a political attitude at all. It is in this setting that, in his factual style, the events are related as he experiences them. And in that sense he limits his discourse to names and events, not bothering to think about consequences and connections, as others

¹ see p.91 ff

² see p.221 ff

³ see p.42-43

know better of these things than him⁴, thereby relieving himself from the burden of developing an own critical opinion.

It is only in retrospect that Stevens comes to realize that, although well meaning, his master went along a wrong path. But even here a certain detachment can be felt, as if he were again not talking about his own views but only reproducing another's opinion⁵.

1.3 Importance of the Historical Background

Even though the historical backgrounds are of great importance to the background of the story, the novel can be read and understood without knowing about any of the underlying events. The characterisation is not dependent on the knowledge of historical facts, as this is Stevens' view of the world, not concerned about anything that happens outside Darlington Hall, and perfectly happy to know no more than that his master is working “for some greater good”⁶. This lack of curiosity seems to be more than just professionally motivated as Stevens does not only want to be a good, professional butler but styles his self to the ideal of the “great butler”, making professionalism the essence of his being.

He has either a very firm belief in his master's infallibility or he doesn't care⁷.

2. The Aftermath of the Great War

2.1 The treaty of Versailles (1919)

The treaty of Versailles which is the subject of Lord Darlington's political involvement, is actually only one of many treaties signed there. It marked the end of the first world war and called into existence the League of Nations. It also placed severe restrictions on Germany regarding military force, and reduced Germany's area

⁴ see p.223

⁵ see p.243

⁶ see p.77

⁷ see p.221 ff

by one eighth. Alsace-Lorraine for instance was put under the control of France and Germany's colonies were placed under control of the League of Nations as "mandated territories". Some areas of Germany, the Rhineland for instance, were made demilitarized zones and occupied by the allies.(Pichler, 73; Concise Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia⁸). The most important point of the treaty was that Germany was forced to pay large reparations to the victors, especially Britain, the chief negotiator for Britain was Lloyd George (Parker, 17).

The strict terms of the treaty (Darlington mentions disturbing trips to Berlin, 71) in combination with the suicide of Herr Bremann⁹ are the initial reasons for Darlington's political activities ("clear goal in mind", 75) which cumulate in the debate in March 1923¹⁰.

2.2 The attitudes of the victorious nations towards Germany

France maintained a very rigid position, demanding fulfillment of the treaty and promoting further sanctions in order to keep Germany immobilized while Britain was more or less maintaining a pro-German attitude, calling for a revision of the treaty of Versailles, which was seen as unfair by many. As the Hitler regime established its power and more and more violations of the treaty of Locarno, which had by then replaced the treaty of Versailles, became known, Britain was the country to advocate a peaceful settlement, prepared to make large concessions to Germany, like mentioning the option of reducing the reparations or accepting the further expansion of the Reich. This policy became known as the appeasement policy (Parker, 18).

⁸ <http://encyclopedia.com/articles/13429.html>

⁹ see p.73

¹⁰ see p. 93 ff

3. Britain in the interwar years

3.1 The rise of fascism in Britain

In the years after the great war fascist ideas cropped up all over Europe. This can be partially attributed to the general instability of the political landscape of Europe, but also to the economic crises after the war (inflation in Germany for example; Hausner, 26) and of the thirties. When one considers that Germany suffered severe political turmoil until about 1923 (Hausner, 16), and up to that point had “used up” seven Cabinets, it is more than understandable that a general feeling of nostalgia and maybe longing towards the old Kaiserzeit was felt. Furthermore the horrors of the mechanized warfare of the great war were still relatively fresh in the minds of the people, so the need for stability, if just to prevent another war from happening, was very intense (Pichl, 73).

In Britain the situation was different from the rest of Europe. Although Britain had overstretched its budget due to the war, it survived with a relatively stable government and democratic system. On the whole, Britain was better off than the rest of Europe, which suffered severe financial and political problems, mostly because of the war, which, after all, had completely redrawn the map.

A factor that facilitated the appearance of certain fascist tendencies in Britain was the aristocracy. Many nobles had difficulties in adjusting to their new roles in society, their class being on a steady decline, they themselves being reduced to a mere ornamental function (Pichl, 80). Growing disillusionment with parliament and democracy lead to some aristocrats, like Sir Oswald Mosley becoming increasingly attracted to ideas of a strong authoritan rule. This may be because some of the ideas of fascism closely resembled some of the old aristocrat ideals, like “the benevolent paternalism of the landed estate” (Cannadine, 1992, in: Pichl, 80).

3.2 Sir Oswald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists

Mosley had a long political history before getting involved with fascism. After serving in the Great War first as an infantryman, then in the flying corps, he joined the conservative party. In the 1918 general election he became the youngest MP (he was 22 at the time) in the house of commons. He became disillusioned with the conservative party and chose to run as an independent in the next general election. In 1924 he joined the labour party. After 1929 he became a member of the labour government but resigned his post as an economic programme based on the ideas of Keynes was rejected.



Sir Oswald Mosley,
*Oswald Mosley*¹¹

He founded the New Party soon after. In the following election the New Party failed, none of its candidates being elected. After a visit to Italy, during which he met Mussolini, he became more and more attracted to fascist ideas. He disbanded the New Party and replaced it with the BUF (British Union of Fascists), also to be known as “blackshirts”, modelled on the examples of fascist Italy and Germany.

The BUF was strongly anti-communist and in favour of a program based on government protectionism. The BUF had immediately won the support of the Daily Mail, Britain's biggest newspaper at the time (*Oswald Mosley*¹²).

Mosley himself states in an interview that the formation of the blackshirts had purely practical reasons. In an interview (*Who were the blackshirts?*¹³) he talks about a meeting in Birmingham that took place in front of 12000 people:

“Among them were about 500 reds, determined that the audience should not hear a word. I was then new to this experience and had with me only 60 young men ... for the purposes of showing people to their seats ... When I appeared the reds rose in a body and began a steady chant of abusive and violent threats. After a warning I went down with my 60 stewards. They attacked me at once. ... but we put the lot of them out. ... That's why I organized the Blackshirts to prevent the organized violence of the reds stopping our free speech.”

¹¹ <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/Prmosley.htm>

¹² <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/Prmosley.htm>

¹³ <http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/3759/who.html>

Soon Mosley had not only taken over the political ideals from his role models but also the anti-semitic tendencies and was organizing marches through Jewish districts of London, thereby provoking riots (*Oswald Mosley*¹⁴).

I must be stated that, although Jews were discriminated against, the matter never deteriorated so far as to allow the large scale outbreaks of violence that were common in the rest of Europe.

It is in this climate that Lord Darlington feels the necessity to release his two Jewish employees, not so much because he himself had become antisemitic but rather because he does not want to offend visitors¹⁵. At least that is his explanation. A year later, after the violent and extremist nature of the British fascists had manifested more clearly he admits to his mistake and even makes a half-hearted attempt at reconciliation¹⁶.

Stevens had never agreed to his masters measures but he had also failed to voice any concern about the issue. It is understandable that he would not speak to Lord Darlington himself, as his professionalism forbids it. (Cmp Stevens's father's incident with General, 40) But it is worth noting that he did not say anything about his feelings on the matter to Ms Kenton, who, as she said later¹⁷ would have taken much consolation from his shared view. It is only much later that he mentions that he thought that his attitude on the subject were clear anyway.

3.3 The Failure of fascism in Britain

As stated above, the situation in Britain differed in many ways from that in the rest of Europe, one of the most important being that Britain had survived the war more or less intact, both politically and economically and thus giving the people less desire for a more rigid and orderly system. The parliamentary monarchy was relatively stable and the principal traditions of democracy were, unlike in some other European countries, longstanding and highly regarded. The system of political representation was relatively well-entrenched (Blinhorn, 264) and had withstood the problems that arose from industrialization and urbanisation. It had also well adapted

¹⁴ <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/Prmosley.htm>

¹⁵ see p. 146

¹⁶ see p. 151

¹⁷ see p. 153

to the acceptance of mass democracy. Another factor is that, although many aristocrats were in some way attracted to the fascist movement they did not possess great enough numbers to make a difference in a general election. Furthermore the increasingly violent activities of the BUF would probably have had an adverse effect on the small numbers of aristocratic supporters (“...his Lordship by that time having severed all links with the “blackshirts”, having witnessed the true, ugly nature of that organization”, 151).

The BUF had throughout its existence remained an insignificant political force, failing to win any election. It had however some effect on the masses, demonstrations and incited riots being the rule. In the late thirties, when the BUF resolved to more and more violence, most prominent example being the meeting held at Olympia, London which produced “flagrant brutalities on a scale that shocked opinion in both country and parliament” (Thomson, 148). In 1936 the public order act made the wearing of political uniforms illegal and giving more power to the home office in regards to dealing with marches, thereby severely inhibiting the BUF. With the nearing of the outbreak of the second world war the BUF's support dwindled further as more and more became known about the methods of Hitler – Germany. After all the BUF had openly committed itself to Hitler. In 1940 Mosley was interned under wartime regulations.

He was released in 1943 and in 1947 he formed the Union Movement, which advocated British integration into Europe but was unsuccessful to enter the house of commons on two occasions. He died in 1980.

Mosley was often described as highly intelligent and well educated but, as worded by Jennie Lee in *My Life with Nye* (in: *Oswald Mosley*¹⁸), his “ ... overwhelming arrogance and .. unshakeable conviction that he was born to rule ... “ lead him to becoming “... a pathetic imitation Hitler, doomed to political impotence for the rest of his life.”.

Although this political era is long over and his views can safely be considered as outdated, Sir Oswald Mosley is still held in high regards by various far right groups and treated as a kind of visionary especially in the Neonazi scene¹⁹.

¹⁸ <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/Prmosley.htm>

¹⁹ see stormfront.org/truth_at_last/the-problem.htm

3.4 John Maynard Keynes

Mentioned as one of the many famous visitors of Lord Darlington²⁰ Keynes was undoubtedly the most prominent figure in national economics in his time. Born in 1883 he had already served in His Majesty's Treasury office and made headlines when he left the peace negotiations under protest, describing the demands of reparations from Germany and Austria as excessive and economically unreasonable and foolish (Hausner, 28).

His main point had always been that for a national economy to work the value of money would have to remain stable. Then saving could be left to private investors and investment to businesses, thereby creating a self-regulating system between supply and demand. In this system supply, demand, interest rates and wages would be interdependent, affecting each other in such a way that the system would eventually stabilize itself (Nortmeyer²¹).

In the early twenties he argued against fixing a currencies value on the gold standard on the grounds of modern central banks being able to do a better job maintaining price stability if they were not tied to the current value of gold. Some economists argue that the attachment to gold is a major cause for the inability of central bank to effectively counter the Great Depression of the thirties (DeLong²²; Hausner, 28).

The Great Depression showed that the economical system was obviously not self regulating. Although this phenomenon cannot be attributed to one single set of causes some of the influencing factors can be mentioned. Some very important components had changed. The private savers and their banks were not ready to invest their money in the economy. This caused the already dwindling wages to be reduced further. The self regulation was also hindered by the workers unions. In the latter 19th and the early 20th century society and democracy had developed enough to allow a strong representation of employers. This effectively prevented the wages from falling enough to ease the crisis.

²⁰see p.74

²¹<http://uni-karlsruhe.de/~za301/Gemeinschaftskunde/11122015.htm>

²²<http://econ161.berkeley.edu/Economists/keynes.html>

As both investements and workforce did nothing to help overcome the crisis many people lost their jobs, and the whole society stumbled from recession into depression (Nortmeyer²³).

This led to the conclusion that if the equilibrium between supply and demand existed neither on the stockmarket nor on the labour market, the state had to intervene. Four main points have been mentioned by Keynes:

The state must supply the economy with more money, either by low interest rates or higher tax-deductible income. The state should also lower taxes, to enable a higher percentage of the income to be spent on goods to increase demand. And the last point would be for the state to act as an investor itself, building houses or roads. This means that the expenditures have to be financed by loans, causing a deficit as the tax income would also be reduced. This practise has been termed deficit spending (Nortmeyer²¹).

Mosley's proposed programme to increase spending power and reduce unemployment was based upon these theories and contained many of the most modern and advanced thoughts of that time. The Labour government reject the idea however, going for more traditional means of battling the unemployment, such as extending benefits to the unemployed. After the rejection of his plan in 1930 Mosley left the Labour party to found his own "New Party"(Parker, 130).

4. More historical characters

There are numerous other figures mentioned, among them not only political figures but also writers like George Bernhard Shaw²⁴ or H.G. Wells²⁵, which is something out of the ordinary because they are not political figures. Wells had some strong beliefs on society and politics²⁶, which were entirely pro-democratic and had no fascist tendencies whatsoever.

²³ <http://uni-karlsruhe.de/~za301/Gemeinschaftskunde/11122015.htm>

²⁴ see p.135

²⁵ see p.74

²⁶ see http://econ161.berkeley.edu/politics/open_conspriacy.html

4.1 Joachim von Ribbentrop

First mentioned only casually²⁷ Ribbentrop becomes a much more important character later on. While the other historical figures are presented in a matter-of-fact way Ribbentrop is later depicted as a dark and almost sinister figure. He arrives at night with an armed escort, the house is sealed off and even Stevens, as the head butler, sees him only briefly. This atmosphere of conspiracy is deepened by the questioning by Mr. Cardinal²⁸.

Ribbentrop joined the Nazi movement in 1921 and quickly rose in ranks. He was appointed foreign minister in 1938 and remained in that position until the end of the war. He negotiated the system of alliances between Germany, Italy and Japan, which became known as the Rome-Berlin-Tokyo Axis. He was also responsible for negotiating the German-Soviet nonaggression pact in 1939 (Microsoft Encarta²⁹). This agreement with Soviet prime minister Molotov contained additional secret treaties, mainly on the division of Eastern Europe between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Poland and Lithuania went to the Nazis, the rest became Soviet-administered. Lithuania was later added to the other Baltic states in exchange for gold and other territories. This deeply affected the Baltic States. In 1940 they were occupied by the Red Army, to be incorporated into the Soviet Union. That this process was not an easy one is obvious. It is believed that hundreds of thousands of civilians were arrested, deported or murdered. From 1941 to 1944 the Baltic States were again under German occupation but after the war the Soviet Union reestablished its claim and the Baltics remained a part of the Soviet union for the next fifty years.

The consequence for Germany was that the threat from the east had been eliminated and a one-front war could be fought in Europe (Turjanis³⁰).

Ribbentrop also played a major role in the planning and administering of the German program of expansion. After the war he was arrested and tried as a war criminal. Found guilty of conspiring, war crimes and crimes against humanity he was executed in 1946 (Microsoft Encarta²⁷).

²⁷ see p. 135

²⁸ see p. 221 ff

²⁹ <http://www.encarta.msn.com/index/conciseindex/5A/05AA8000.htm>

³⁰ http://www.bafl.com/m_p_pact.htm

4.2 Lord Halifax (Lord Irwin)

A former viceroy in India, he succeeded Anthony Eden as foreign secretary after his resignation in 1938 (Thomson, 105,171). In one instance Stevens prides himself of having relieved the anxiety of Lord Halifax, prior to a meeting with Ribbentrop³¹.

It is interesting that Halifax should be so nervous in regards to the visit of the German ambassador, as he was an experienced statesman and diplomat, and had frequent dealings with Hitler himself (Sontag, 68).

4.3 Neville Chamberlain

Although hardly mentioned in *Remains of the Day* he played a significant role in the events that lead up to the Second World War. He was Britains (conservative) prime minister at the outbreak of the second world war. He attempted to establish peaceful relations with Hitler and Mussolini through a policy of appeasement. This approach was controversial at best and resulted in fierce opposition from Winston Churchill and caused the resignation of foreign secretary Anthony Eden.

Chamberlain had reached an agreement with Hitler in 1938 settling the division of Czechoslovakia, giving a fifth of the country to Germany, the rest going to Hungary and Poland. But the peace didn't even last a year. Germany took the rest of Czechoslovakia and Chamberlain was cornered into guaranteeing Poland against a German attack. When Germany invaded Poland, Britain declared war. Chamberlain was then forced to resign by his own party (*Neville Chamberlain*³²).

He was succeeded by Winston Churchill, one of the strongest enemies of the appeasement politics, who remained in office until the end of the war. Churchill became prime minister again after the conservative victory in 1951 and resigned in 1955. He remained a member of parliament until 1964. He received, among other

³¹ see p.135

³² <http://www.britannia.com/history/prime/prime46.html>

honors the insignia of the order of Garter and the Knighthood (The Nobel Foundation³³).

5. The Suez Crisis

The Suez canal crisis is never mentioned in *The remains of the day* but Guttman³⁴ mentions the idea that the concurrence of the date of the nationalization of the Suez Canal by Egyptian president Nasser (26th of July 1956) and the journey of Stevens, also set in 1956, is hardly a coincidence.

The Suez Crisis marks “..a major shift in power relations of the western Europe, ... [signalling] ... the continuing decrease of Britain’s influence as a colonial and imperial power.” (<http://landow.stg.brown.edu/post/uk/ishiguro/rodsuez2.html>).

This political deterioration is in parallel to Stevens’s gradual realization of the inadequacy and failure of Lord Darlington’s political ideas and maybe even to the downfall of aristocracy itself.

³³ <http://nobel.sdsc.edu/laureates/literature-1953-1-bio.html>

³⁴ <http://landow.stg.brown.edu/post/uk/ishiguro/rodsuez.html>

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