

German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ)

DIJ History and Humanities Study Group



Thursday, 11 July 2013, 18.30 h

Jessamyn R. Abel, Pennsylvania State University

The Bullet Train and Techno-internationalism

The idea of a “bullet train”, which had emerged in the early 1940s in Japan, captured popular imaginations again after World War II. Echoing wartime efforts to display technological prowess while bolstering economic strength, the post-war quest to build faster trains moved to centre stage after the war as a key element of rebuilding the national economy. The introduction of the bullet train on the eve of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics broadcast a new vision of Japan as a world-class nation, coinciding with and reinforcing a shift in Japan’s status in organizations such as GATT, as well as in the eyes of other powers. This sleek high-speed train—at the time the world’s fastest, and packed with advanced high-tech features—helped redefine Japan’s position within the global community of nations. At the same time, the growing perception of Japanese technology as a formidable challenge to American dominance in trade and industry created a tension between U.S. diplomatic interests and domestic demands for protection of threatened industries. This talk will frame the bullet train as one of several new technologies that together helped build Japan’s soft power as a high-tech nation and transform its post-war foreign relations.

Jessamyn R. Abel is a historian of modern Japan at Pennsylvania State University. Since completing her Ph.D. in History at Columbia University, she has held post-doctoral fellowships at Columbia’s Weatherhead East Asian Institute and Harvard University’s Program on U.S.-Japan Relations. Her recent publications include articles on the 1940 and 1964 Tokyo Olympiads, wartime cultural exchange programs, and Japanese whaling culture. She recently completed a book manuscript on Japanese internationalism in the twentieth century. Her talk will relate to her new project, a cultural and international history of the bullet train in the context of the global development of high-speed rail.

The DIJ History and Humanities Study Group is a forum for young scholars and Ph.D. candidates in the field organized by Kristina Iwata-Weickgenannt, Susanne Klien, and Torsten Weber. All are welcome to attend, but registration (weber@dijtokyo.org) is appreciated.

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