**Aum Shinrikyo and the “Aum Incident”**

**Radicalization Processes Among Young Japanese**

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1. Introduction

In the early 1980s, a small group of yoga practitioners in the Tokyo area began to gather around a young man whose original name was Matsumoto Chizuo. Photos in publications of the time depict him and his disciples peacefully meditating in natural environs such as riverbeds or mountain slopes. This group, called “Aum Shinrikyo,” slowly grew. In the early 1990s, however, published illustrations of them shifted drastically towards doomsday imagery. Finally, in 1995, the police raided their compounds and apprehended their leaders as well as a number of followers. These were put on trial for murder and nerve gas attacks. Their crimes and terrorist attacks came to be known collectively as the “Aum incident.” Hence the question: How and why did such drastic radicalization occur?

There are a number of different and even contradictory narratives of Aum Shinrikyo and the Aum incident; some interpretations have dominated, while others have been neglected. The accounts of the police and public prosecutor became the mainstream story due to the fact that the media and influential scholars of religious studies accepted them in a fairly uncritical manner.[[1]](#footnote-1) The comparatively independent perspectives of ordinary Japanese adults[[2]](#footnote-2) and younger peer groups,[[3]](#footnote-3) for example, were more or less ignored. The stories of ordinary Aum members met a similar fate.[[4]](#footnote-4)

As many accounts took the poison gas attacks of 1995 as a basis for understanding Aum Shinrikyo and viewed the group’s prior developments anachronistically and in retrospect, grave heuristic problems arose. The official story provided a view of the religious group through the single lens of the “Aum incident,” i.e., in terms of the various crimes and gas attacks that it had perpetrated. According to these narratives, internal factors such as the teachings and practices of the guru, led by necessity to an evil outcome. However, they also ignored external contributing factors as well as the group’s unproblematic aspects, proven by the fact that many ordinary members were not involved in the crimes and continued with their beliefs and practices in one way or another after the incident. Aum Shinrikyo (henceforth abbreviated as Aum) should therefore be distinguished from the Aum incident.

Based on the definition offered by the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (2018) and my own research, the term “radicalization” is here understood as a process that (1), relies on a certain ideology,[[5]](#footnote-5) (2) increasingly questions the normative order of a society and its legitimation, (3) leads to extreme polarization, and (4) often is transformed into action (including violence) through attempts to defeat the institutions of the established social order, which it hopes to replace with its own envisioned order. Radicalization can be political, ethnic or religious, or a combination of these.

Political radicalization is often caused by a deep resentment of Western endeavors to achieve global hegemony through neo-colonialism or globalization, as in the case of oil exploitation in the Middle East or unfair trade treaties in Africa. Since the “internationalization” propounded by the West threatens native cultures and religions as well as traditional societies and economies, it provokes reactions from that part of the population that does not profit from it and may set in motion radicalization processes directed against Western countries. In the modern history of Japan, the first religio-political radicalization processes were triggered by the forced “opening of the country” to trade and diplomatic relations with the United States and other Western powers in the nineteenth century. Political, Buddhist and new religious ideologies that polarized “East” and “West” emerged from this development[[6]](#footnote-7) and often pitted what they viewed as invasive Western “materialism” against Japanese or Asian “spiritualism.” Such native ideological and religious radicalization also exerted a strong influence on politics and the military, which, in turn, led to the rise of Japanese imperialism in the late nineteenth century and eventually to the Pacific War. Religions such as Aum as well as rightwing politicians perpetuate the polarized discourse of Western materialism versus Asian spiritualism to this day.[[7]](#footnote-8)

2. Developments

Matsumoto Chizuo, the founder of the group later known as Aum Shinrikyo, was born in 1955 in Kumamoto prefecture (Kyushu). Visually impaired, he attended a school for the blind. Afterwards he became an acupuncturist, a profession often chosen by persons with visual disabilities. In 1977, he moved to Tokyo, where he got married. He and his wife had six children (AEN 5/16/1995). It was during this time that Matsumoto turned to traditional Asian medicine and developed an interest in fortune-telling, divination, and Daoism. He began practicing traditional medicine in Funabashi near Tokyo. In the early 1980s, he became a member of a new religion known as Agon-shu, which focused on the practice of yoga and was part of an international yoga boom initiated by Bhagwan and other Indian gurus. While practicing yoga, the young Japanese acupuncturist also became interested in acquiring “supernatural powers” (Cf. Kiriyama 1973). In 1985, the esoteric magazine *Twilight Zone* published a photo of Matsumoto Chizuo “levitating” during yoga practice on its front page along with an article (Cf. Asahara 1991c). The publication inspired young people to gather around him. In April 1986, they formed a small group called *Aum shinsen-no-kai* (“the Om group of mountain ascetics”). That summer, Matsumoto travelled to India in order to improve his practice under a yoga master. In July, at the end of his stay, he claimed to have attained awakening, the “state of absolute freedom, happiness and joy, where one’s suffering is extinguished and [the cycle of] life and death transcended.”[[8]](#footnote-9) In 1987, Matsumoto Chizuo changed his name to Asahara Shoko because the Chinese characters were believed to bring good luck. That same year, his group also renamed itself *Aum Shinrikyo* (The Om Teaching of Absolute Truth) (*Vajrayana Sacca* No.9: 36). From this point on, Buddhism was emphasized alongside yoga.

Why did Asahara attract many young followers? Most of them were searching for the meaning of life, filling an inner void, working towards self-knowledge and acceptance, or seeking mental or physical healing which they failed to find in society and established religions. Many were disillusioned with material consumption and wished to pursue a spiritual path. As Japan reached the peak of the “Bubble Economy” in the1980s, these young people no longer wished to dedicate their lives completely to the companies for which they worked, as their fathers had. They found no satisfaction in social progress and material profit, as the previous generation of new religions taught. Many quit good jobs or promising careers. They were *Aussteiger*, those who “stepped out of” ordinary society. Yoga and various kinds of meditation seemed to offer solutions to their spiritual quests and health problems. And when an even more intensive form of practice was introduced, many of them left their families and became nuns or monks. Because celibacy is one of the most radical forms of religious life, it too should be considered a first step in Aum’s radicalization process.

3. Internal factors triggering radicalization

3.1 Celibacy

The first Aum members were laypeople who lived at home, worked (or studied), and commuted to the Aum centers. In the fall of 1986, an important step in the group’s development took place; members began “leaving home” (*shukke*) in order to become nuns or monks and dedicate their time to religious practice and the communal life. The celibates formed a community called *sangha*, a Buddhist term. “Leaving home” meant cutting ties with family and society. The practice was introduced by early Buddhism and caused conflict within families in India centuries ago. When Buddhism spread, such problems also arose in other countries such as China, which had a Confucian government.[[9]](#footnote-10)

The impact of Aum’s introduction of celibacy in Japan becomes clear from the historical context. Although lay and celibate Buddhism had been practiced in Japan since its origins in the sixth century, in 1872 the government enacted a law forcing monks and nuns to become laypeople. A side effect of this policy was the emergence of new lay Buddhist groups such as Rissho Kosei-kai and Soka Gakkai, which grew into huge organizations after World War II. Against this backdrop, it becomes clear that Aum’s re-introduction of celibacy must have posed quite a challenge to traditional Buddhism, more recent religious sects, and Japanese society as a whole.

“Leaving home” may include transferring family property to the new community, quitting school or work, divorcing one’s spouse, and leaving behind children, or else bringing them into the new group. Such radical measures cause numerous conflicts between families and celibates. The first serious conflicts between Aum and society thus began with the introduction of celibacy. As Richard Young (1995: 239 f) explained:

Wherever the world and its ways have been rejected and a separate community of renunciates has been established, Buddhism—or whatever goes by that name—has been denounced as economically unproductive and the Buddhist monks who have been sexually unreproductive have been traduced as unfilial. Productivity and reproductivity are the essential ingredients of the pervasive *musubi* (growth) mentality one finds in Japan. Aum was obviously a threat to both.

When leaving family and society, monks and nuns enter a community with its own rules, bonds, and boundaries. The “boundary control” (Galanter 1989: 111-116; 124) of such a community is much stricter than that of a group of laypeople who move freely between ordinary life and their engagement in a religious center. When concerned parents try to communicate with celibate family members in such situations, they have to deal with a whole community that functions according to mechanisms quite different from those of ordinary society. The celibacy of young people in this case held much potential for conflict.[[10]](#footnote-11) In October 1989, the first public harsh criticism of Aum was voiced by parents in the tabloid *Sunday Mainichi* and focused primarily on issues related to celibacy. The first murder cases likewise emerged in conflicts occurring on the interface between Aum’s encouragement of celibacy and outside society.

3.2 Legal recognition, murder, and repercussions

In September 1988, an Aum member died due to excessively ascetic practice. In order to avoid a police investigation, leaders ordered that his body be burned and disposed of, which is an illegal act. In late 1988, Aum began application procedures for attaining the legal status of a religious body from the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, which grants privileges such as tax breaks. The combination of these two issues led to the first murder among Aum’s adherents. Due to the aforementioned premature death, another member expressed his desire to leave the sect. When he threatened to leak the case to the police in February 1989, the leaders of Aum ordered that he be killed lest he hamper the legal recognition of the religion.

Aum received legal recognition in August of that same year. However, it now faced various repercussions. That July, a lawyer named Sakamoto Tsutsumi established a “Lawyers` group for the victims of Aum Shinrikyo.” In October, concerned family members founded the “Association of Aum Shinrikyo Victims.” That same month, the tabloid *Sunday Mainichi* began publishing a series entitled “The Madness of Aum Shinrikyo,” which criticized the vast number of donations to the sect, the celibacy of its members, its separation of parents and children, and its strange religious practices. The tabloid portrayed Aum as “anti-social.” The articles were one-sided, written in a sensationalist style, and based only on reports by former Aum members and the families of those who followed the sect. The editors did not bother asking Aum adherents for comments. Only after representatives protested did the paper publish a response that emphasized that the practices discussed on its pages did not apply to ordinary believers but celibates who had left their families by their own free will. This distinction is important because it confirms the proposition that the introduction of celibacy was a major cause of the ensuing conflicts between Aum and society.

3.3 Political ambitions

After the sect was awarded legal status, Aum leaders developed more ambitious plans in the second half of 1989 despite emerging public criticism. Aside from aiming to expand the group on an international level, they also planned to enter politics. Political ambitions are not unusual for religious organizations in Japan as demonstrated by the Oomoto incidents before World War II[[11]](#footnote-12) and the political party Komei-to, founded by Soka Gakkai in 1964. In order to enter the world of politics, Aum established the Shinri-to (Truth Party) in late 1989 and campaigned for the Lower House Elections scheduled for February 1990. One of Aum’s professed political aims was the abolition of the consumer tax. In one campaign pamphlet, Asahara wrote, “It takes political action to do what a religion cannot do. Therefore, I am taking a political approach to my activities” (DY 5/17/1995). What his political goals really were is unclear. Aum members holding election campaigns in white clothing wore head masks of Asahara and praised their leader in simple songs. The Disney-like performance of these young people, who appeared to lack common sense, did not appeal to ordinary voters. When the “Truth Party” did not win a single seat, members of Aum perceived this as social rejection, which increased their stance against society. Asahara’s motive to engage in politics seems encapsulated in an observation made by the journalist Egawa Shoko, who had investigated Aum early on: “Asahara differed from other cult leaders in that he did not spend a lot of money on himself. ... his primary objective was to achieve power” (DY 5/17/1995). Most likely he did not completely abandon this goal.[[12]](#footnote-13)

4. Central factor in the conflicts: Asahara’s authority and ideology

Asahara must have possessed a certain charisma if he was able to attract so many young people and organize them into a functioning religious group. According to interviews with Aum members,[[13]](#footnote-14) his sermons were appealing because he could explain difficult content in an easily comprehensible manner. He spoke in a direct language and addressed problems in a way that was blunt and unlike the prevalent communication style in Japan, which tends to be indirect and ambiguous. Some followers admired his enthusiasm and energy. Asahara was also a good “head hunter,” who found qualified followers to serve his cause and skillfully used people, from gifted disciples up to religious leaders like the Dalai Lama (see below).

The relationship between Asahara and his followers soon became uneven. The admiration of his followers helped increase his self-consciousness, and he began representing himself as an indispensable guru by telling them: “Be aware that you cannot get [Buddha’s] Dharma without asking it of me” (Asahara 1991b: 85). In another case, he stated: “So those of you who are aiming to attain enlightenment must come to me and receive an initiation from me” (Asahara 1992b: 82). The followers of the religion thus became dependent on their leader, who gradually assumed absolute authority. He even replaced Buddhist precepts with his own directives (Asahara 1988: 84).

Asahara had originally based his authority on his claim of having attained an “awakening,” the highest Buddhist goal. His authority thus relied on religious teaching as he understood it. He had no proof of it, but he collected authorizations from other Buddhist leaders. In this case, he followed a pattern introduced by earlier Japanese founders of new religions, who, when visiting the Pope, for example, published the photos afterwards. When Asahara met the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala in February 1987, the Tibetan leader reportedly stated:

Dear friend, look at the Buddhism of Japan today. It has degenerated into ceremonialism and has lost the essential truth of the teachings. As the situation continues, Buddhism will vanish from Japan. Something needs to be done, and you should spread real Buddhism there. You can do that well. If you do so, I shall be very pleased and it will help me with my mission (Asahara 1988: 10).

Asahara (1988: 11) used this statement as authorization of *his* “mission.” For the same reason he visited other Tibetan leaders as well. During a trip to Sri Lanka in 1991, Asahara (1992c: 154) claimed to have been praised as “the only man who can save the world.” The Prime Minister presented him with a Buddhist relic, an important symbol of spiritual power. In the end, he claimed himself to be the “Buddha of our times” and an incarnation of Shiva, the Lord of yoga (Asahara 1991b: preface; 1993b: 105). His attempts at an apotheosis are also reflected in the titles he subsequently assumed. Whereas in earlier publications Asahara had himself called *sensei* (teacher) or guru, he later changed his appellation to “Revered Master” (*sonshi*), to which he added, from 1992 on, the title “His Holiness” (*saisho*) (*Shinri* No. 19), an epithet usually reserved for personages such as the Dalai Lama or the Pope. His claim of having achieved “awakening” provided him with absolute authority and gave his group autonomy vis à vis other religious groups. The unquestionable authority excluded the possibility of any control as well as flexibility or compromise in conflicts with other religious or secular authorities. This is an ideological factor of radicalization.

5. Internal contributing factors to radicalization

5.1 Youth membership

In 1995, the average age of Aum followers was twenty-seven (DY 5/18/1995). We may therefore speak of a “youth religion.” Most leaders at the time were under forty years old. According to Maeda (1997), a member of the Aum peer group, his generation, which had grown up in the 1970s and 1980s, was a “youth without a father.” As fathers in this period had spent most of their time at work in companies, young people had been left on their own to mature into adults . Many members joined the sect because they felt that they were understood by Asahara, who may thus have acted not only as a guru, but also as a father figure. As an Aum member and experienced school teacher in his forties explained to me, most followers had had little or no work experience in society and were therefore not “socialized people” (*shakai-jin*). Their distance from mainstream society played a role in the process of their radicalization. In their interactions with society, they thus often made mistakes and even committed crimes, such as those mentioned above.

A conflict with villagers in Southern Japan illustrates this matter. In May 1990, Aum acquired land in Namino-son (Kyushu) and built facilities in order to establish the “Lotus Village,” a utopian community and alternative to mainstream Japanese society. However, here as in other places, the young members of the sect were inconsiderate of the sentiments and social rules of their neighbors and thus provoked hostility. When Aum members wished to register as local citizens, officials refused their applications because they feared a “foreign take-over.” This was understandable, but illegal. On the other hand, village representatives accused Aum of having bought the land unlawfully through a front company and thus started a court case against the group. Consequently, the police searched the Aum facilities in October 1990 and placed three of its leading members under temporary arrest. Aum perceived this incident as “suppression by the state” and viewed its members as victims. The court then ruled that the sect had to abandon the site, but in exchange would receive a hefty financial compensation from the village. This more or less self-inflicted conflict with the surrounding population increased Aum’s animosity towards society. The polarization that ensued contributed to the group’s radicalization.

Another tendency attributable to the youth of Aum members and their leaders was their proclivity for proceeding in a “trial and error” fashion.[[14]](#footnote-15) This too contributed to their radicalization. More firmly established new Japanese religions, by contrast, have been led by experienced leaders and advisors who have acted according to rational deliberations and taken the potential results of their actions into consideration.

5.2 Social structure

As noted, Aum consisted of both laypeople and celibates. Its monks and nuns wore Indian-style clothes and constituted the upper strata of its hierarchy. Lay members pursued their ordinary life as before, but commuted to Aum centers to study and practice in their free time. They also participated in seminars and retreats that lasted several days. The celibates, in turn, lived in Aum facilities, where they engaged in religious practice and work. Their life was largely regulated. They formed “circles,”[[15]](#footnote-16) and each group was assigned its particular task, such as printing, translation, video production, childhood education, and the reparation and construction of buildings. These units functioned independently of one another. Each was led by a “teacher” (*shi*), and several were placed under the leadership of a “truly enlightened teacher” (*seigoshi*). This kind of social structure maintained efficient control, both vertical and horizontal, of the entire organization. The movements of members and the flow of information among them were thus watched. Ordinary members did not know what was actually happening in the groups above or next to them. The units functioned independently from each other, and discussions critical of the sect or talk about secular matters were discouraged. Even suggestions for the improvement of the living and working facilities, e.g. greater cleanliness, were not permitted. One former monk told me that he left the group because he was not permitted to engage in constructive criticism. This seems to have been in stark contrast to the experience of the young lay people, who initially enjoyed the frank atmosphere of the group, in which they were able to discuss and criticize anything. However, the more members moved towards the inner circles, the tighter the sect’s control over them.

5.3 Ideological factors

5.3.1 Religious justifications of murder

Nakazawa Shinichi and Lama Khetsun Sangpo’s book on Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, *Niji no kaitei* (Guide to the Rainbow), was popular among Aum members and other young people critical of traditional Japanese Buddhism. Its final chapter describes a ritual performed by lamas to guide the soul of a deceased person during transmigration to a higher dimension known as *poa*. At some point, senior figures in Aum began using *poa* as a euphemism for murder sanctioned by a certain kind of Buddhist reasoning. According to the state prosecutor, Asahara allegedly stated in a speech:

The end justifies the means. Let’s say there’s a man whose vices are so many that he is certain to go to hell when he dies. If an enlightened individual determines that it’s best to put an end to his life sooner and ... kills him, this act would be seen as plain murder by society in general. But in the light of our doctrine, the killing amounts to letting the man have his *poa*. As such, any enlightened person will see at once that both the killer and the person to be killed are going to benefit from the act (AEN 4/26/1996).

Conventional ethics are here suspended by a certain type of religious reasoning that is based purely on functionalist thinking. After the Aum incident came to light, many people in Japan and across the world could not believe that Buddhists would commit murder since Buddhism is perceived as a “peaceful religion.” This idealized image of the religion quickly disappears, however, once Buddhist history is taken into account. The “warrior monks” of premodern Japan and the Buddhist effort during the Pacific War are only two examples.[[16]](#footnote-17) In all these cases, however, we must distinguish between the primary encouragement by religious teachings to commit crime and the secondary legitimation of already committed murders,[[17]](#footnote-18) as in the Tendai discourse on warrior monks or Aum’s *poa*-theory.

5.3.2 Apocalyptic expectations

Like founders of other new religions, Asahara had studied Chinese divination and astrology because he was concerned with his own fate, but later came to utilize his skills to control the fate of others. Eventually, he began to announce prophecies about humankind (Asahara l991a: 120). His meditation practice, he claimed, enabled him to travel in the synchronous “astral-world,” from which he could see future events in the phenomenal world (Asahara 1991c: 275). In 1987, he predicted that a “nuclear war” would occur between 1999 and 2003 due to economic conflicts between Japan and Europe resp. the USA. However, he promised that if Aum “spreads all over the world, we can avoid World War III certainly” (Asahara 1988: 92, cf. 87 f). In 1989, Asahara (1992c: 153 f) began studying Nostradamus’ *Les Centuries*. It was Goto Ben’s science fiction series, “Great Prophecies of Nostradamus,” that had triggered a “Nostradamus boom” in Japan in 1973 (cf. Asahara 1991a: 103 f). Its subtitles predicted that a catastrophe for humankind would take place in 1999. As the year approached, the popularity of the issue increased. Agon-shu and Kofuku no kagaku had already taken up the matter earlier (Kiriyama 1981; 1995; Okawa 1988; 1991). Such prophecies appealed to people who sensed an imminent crisis in affluent Japan.

As noted, Asahara’s visions became more pessimistic as he was repeatedly rejected by society. In 1990, he stated:

We are heading for Armageddon. It becomes very clear if you analyze the situation in the Middle East. Also the coming of Haley’s comet, the frequent appearances of UFO’s, the Soviet Union’s democratization ... all these incidents ... are telling us that the world is getting ready for Armageddon. ... This is why I always say we must think of the way to protect ourselves ... I have decided to build a facility for 1,500 to 2,000 people ... . Nuclear war, bacteriological weapons, chemical weapons, no matter what kind of weapons should attack us, we must protect ourselves and preserve a place for our practice(Asahara 1992a: 103 f).

Hope for the renewal of the world through humankind’s conversion to Aum was abandoned. Disappointment in society as well as hopelessness spread (Cf. *Shinri* No. 26: 4-16). The only escape from the impending catastrophe lay in practicing the religion more rigorously and building shelters for the group’s protection (Asahara 1992a: 105 f). An important book on this matter, entitled *Hiizure kuni, wazawai chikashi*, was published in March 1995, several days before the Tokyo gas attack. The cover of its English version *Disaster Approaches the Land of the Rising Sun*, exhorted the reader to “Survive Armageddon!”, that is, World War III. The publication went on to say:

This is the prophesied final war which shall surpass all others technologically and in sheer scale of destruction. The book presents a detailed picture of future political and economic events, natural disasters, as well as the goals of the worldwide Freemasons conspiracy. ... Learn protective measures against them ... Master Asahara and his followers are preparing for Armageddon by combining the wisdom of spiritual practice with science, and pave the way for a new era of peace.

The core of this “final war”[[18]](#footnote-19) was, according to Asahara, neither political nor military, but religious:

Religious wars are breaking out throughout the world. Christianity is controlling the world, and there is no doubt that it is persecuting other religions. ... Everything happens according to the law of the karma. Those who persecute must be persecuted, and those who oppress must be oppressed. I am sure that the final religious war on earth will be a confrontation between Buddhism and Christianity (Asahara 1995: 268).

However, this war would essentially consist of a conflict between Eastern spirituality and Western materialism (Asahara 1995: 306). The “Christian era will end,” the “entire world will change into Buddhist countries,” and then “Aum Shinrikyo will be the center of the world”! (Asahara 1995: 131; 297). These publications did not encourage the active instigation of Armageddon, as media sometimes alleged, but rather secured the protection and survival of Aum. The quotes above evince the fundamentalism and resentment against Westernization and globalization that is also found in other new religions.[[19]](#footnote-20) In Aum’s case, fostering expectations of Armageddon helped strengthen its members’ consciousness of being the people chosen to survive (Cf. Asahara l991a: 123). This sentiment contributed considerably to the sect’s further polarization from society. Apocalyptic expectations were thus part of Aum’s radicalization process on the ideological level.

6. External contributing factors to radicalization

6.1 Murder of the Sakamoto family and the TBS and police scandals

The period extending from Aum’s application for legal recognition in late 1988 until well after its obtainment of official status in August 1989 was critical for the group, which was trying to avoid negative public attention. In July 1989, however, lawyer Sakamoto Tsutsumi established a “Lawyers’ group for the victims of Aum Shinrikyo.” In October of that same year, concerned family members founded the “Association of Aum Shinrikyo Victims.” That month, the tabloid *Sunday Mainichi* also began publishing a series of sensationalist articles entitled “The madness of Aum Shinrikyo.” These criticized the high number of donations to the sect, the way in which it separated parents and children, and its strange religious practices. They also portrayed Aum as anti-social. An Aum representative countered that these practices only applied to celibates who had left their family by free will. This confirms our assertion that the introduction of celibacy was a major cause of the emerging conflicts between Aum and society.

In October 1989, the influential Tokyo Broadcasting System (TBS) also held an interview with Sakamoto, which it aired together with footage of Aum’s meditation practices. The TBS program director informed leading Aum members of his plans and, on their demand, showed them the interview in advance on October 26th, 1989 (JT 3/14/1996). When Aum leaders urged TBS not to air the interview, the broadcaster gave in and cancelled the program in exchange for a promised exclusive interview with Asahara (JT 4/4/1996). On October 31st, the same Aum leaders visited Sakamoto in his office and urged him to retract his statements from the video, which he refused to do (JT 4/4/1996). Several days later, Sakamoto as well as his wife and child suddenly disappeared from their apartment. An Aum badge was found, but the police failed to investigate the case properly. The case was not resolved until the comprehensive police investigation of Aum began in March 1995, six years later. The reason for this professional negligence lay in the fact that Sakamoto`s lawyer’s office had represented in court an official of the Communist Party who had been illegally wiretapped by the police in 1986.[[20]](#footnote-21) Aum thus escaped police investigation at the time. As the perpetrator of the murder was not detected and punished, the failure of the police made it possible for Aum leaders to continue criminal activities. Only later, in the court trials that took place after 1995, were several leading Aum members convicted of the murder of the Sakamoto family and other individuals. This shows that the radicalization of the group could have been stopped had state officials worked properly and in time. After their raids on the Aum facilities in 1995, police found that between October 1988 and February 1995 thirty-three followers had died in accidents or through suicide and murder, and twenty-one more had gone missing.[[21]](#footnote-22)

During the Aum trials, the TBS involvement in the Aum incident likewise emerged. As one editorial read: “Throughout the six years of the [Sakamoto] family’s absence, and despite the strong suggestion of an Aum connection with their disappearance, TBS did not find any reason to notify the police of the visit to the network by cult leaders” (JT 3/24/1996). The TBS case was called both a “blow to journalistic integrity” and a “further blow to public trust” (JT 3/24/1996; cf. JT 4/4/1996; 4/21/1996). The chairman of the National Association of Commercial Broadcasters in Japan finally admitted that had TBS broadcast the video, the murderers of Sakamoto and his family may have been discovered sooner (JT 4/4/1996; 4/21/1996). Another, even worse accusation pointed out that “it [was] actually possible that the sarin nerve gas attacks in Matsumoto and on the Tokyo subways might never have occurred if TBS had alerted the police to the cult leaders’ visit” (JT 4/12/1996). This indicates that the role of the media in the radicalization process needs to be considered as well.[[22]](#footnote-23)

6.2 Russian connections, gas attacks and the police raids

When Gorbachev introduced the policy of Glasnost, the Japanese government, like others, attempted to syphon technical and military know-how from the former Soviet Union. The “Russo-Japan University,” which was meant to serve as a front organization, was established for this end. As far as I know, *comprehensive* research on Aum’s entry into Russia has not yet been conducted, but evidence shows that the Russian branch was located in a state-owned building, and that from early on Aum leaders were well connected with the highest government officials, such as Security Chief Oleg Lobov.[[23]](#footnote-24) This would have been impossible without the introduction by Japanese politicians, e.g. the Foreign Minister. In 1995, a military helicopter imported from Russia was found in the Aum compounds. It and other evidence, such as the combat training given to Aum members, pose a number of serious questions, which have not been sufficiently addressed in public. In 1992, Aum opened a branch in Moscow, where its membership rapidly grew due to the spiritual void left by Communism in young people, who now searched for answers, especially in Buddhism. Estimates show that approximately 30,000 Russians joined the sect, as compared to the merely 10,000 ordinary and 2,000 celibate members in Japan.

In June 1994, a poison gas attack that injured 147 people and killed seven occurred in Matsumoto City, Japan (JT 4/25/1996). The police treated the man who first reported the incident as the main suspect even though his wife was one of the victims. A year later, the police and mass media were forced to apologize to him for their false accusation. After the raids on Aum quarters in 1995, police revealed that the group’s members had also attacked several of its individual opponents with VX poison gas between May 1994 and January 1995 (JT 4/25/1996).

On March 20th, 1995, poison gas attacks occurred in five metros of the Tokyo Metropolitan Subway during rush hour, killing twelve people and injuring approximately 4,000, many of them seriously and with long-lasting effects. Two days later, about two-thousand-five-hundred armed police, equipped with helmets, gas masks, and crowbars, searched the Aum facilities. Numerous journalists and camera men were waiting at these locations well in advance, because police had informed them beforehand. Aum, therefore, was forewarned in time, and the whole nation could view the broadcast live. The search warrant had been issued not for the gas attacks but for the abduction that past February of a notary public who had hidden his sister, an Aum follower, because the group had been pressing her to donate her property to the sect (JT 4/23/1995; 4/25/1996). Because Aum was accused of the terrorist attack in Tokyo, the police took Asahara as well as a number of other leaders and ordinary members into custody. In 2004, he and the others received the death penalty and were executed in 2018.

Conclusion: Unresolved questions

Whereas the police, public prosecutors, and the courts considered Aum the definite culprit behind the poison gas attacks in Matsumoto and Tokyo, a number of dubious claims remain to be clarified with sufficient evidence. The police were quick to identify the poison gas as “sarin;” according to their reports, the culprits placed plastic bags full of the gas on the floor of the metro and pierced them with umbrellas. The first problem is that sarin is heavier than air and should therefore have been placed for release in the overhead bins. Second, the effects of the gas on the health of victims and the residue on their clothes differed from those of sarin.[[24]](#footnote-25) Third, how could the culprits have released the poison with an umbrella without having affected themselves? Such a feat would have required professional military training. Fourth, the acclaimed “Aum gas factory,” “Satyan No. 7,” in Kamikuishiki had no chimney for poisonous exhaust, only horizontal cooling pipes that surrounded the building. Aum members who had been in Kamikuishiki at the time of the raids told me that they saw the police taking off their protective gear due to the heat after entering this building. They concluded that police had staged a performance outside for the media and Japanese public. Police also never showed the confiscated chemicals as evidence to the public (Cf. Tabata 1995). It is therefore impossible to determine which materials were used for the alleged poison gas and which for the chemical drugs produced and sold by Aum (Cf. Nunn Report 1995: 45). This also raises the question of why the government had not controlled an extensive trade in certain chemicals, as it was obliged to do according to international conventions. In Europe and elsewhere the early detection of the purchase of ingredients needed to build bombs has prevented a number of terrorist attacks.

Asahara and a number of followers definitely did commit serious crimes such as murder and abduction. However, too many significant issues regarding the gas attacks remain unresolved and demand clarification by independent experts. As for the question of ideological and social radicalization, our findings show that it was not Aum’s teaching *per se* or other internal factors *on their own*, such as the existence of a “guru” figure—as insisted by the police, prosecution and some scholars—which led to this development. It was Aum’s *interactions* with established society—as well as the “government inaction” (Nunn Report 1995: 46) and police negligence of the latter—that led to its increasing radicalization and violence. The head of the National Police Agency, Kunimatsu Takaji, admitted that if the police had acted promptly in the murder case of the Sakamoto family, “the nerve gas attacks in Matsumoto and on the (Tokyo) subway would not have taken place” (JT 9/9/1995).

Unlike theories that perceive radicalization in a monocausal or unilateral way, this study suggests that it should be understood as a *communication process*,[[25]](#footnote-26) one that consists of a sequence of ideological, verbal, and other interactions among several internal and external agents. This process may also include a lack of normally required action as in the case of gross negligence by state officials. Such a communicative conglomerate eventually increases the polarization of conflicting parties rather than leading them to conflict resolution.

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1. E.g. Shimazono (1995) and Reader (2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Gardner (2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Maeda (1997) and Miyai (1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. After the police raids in 1995, Lewis (1999) dealt with the human rights violations against Aum; Mori Tatsuya portrayed Aum members as we their treatment by police and media in his documentary films, “A” and “A 2.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I.e. certain ideas are absolutized and non-negotiable. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Kleinen (1994) for "Nichirenism," which is based on Nichiren Buddhism, and Nadolski (1975) for the new religion Oomoto. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. In Europe, similar radicalization processes occurred among rightwing groups, which emerged in the Eastern bloc countries due mainly to the destruction of socially and economically secure communist societies, the sweeping invasion of highly competitive capitalist economies, migration movements of cheap laborers from Eastern Europe to the West, and finally (in all of Europe) due to the mass migration of refugees and others from the Middle East and Africa whose presence infringed on cultural customs and threatened social stability. Such developments cause tough competition for work, housing and social welfare in economically weak classes. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Asahara (1993a: ix). We have no confirmation of Asahara’s "awakening" (*satori*) by a master. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. In 1996, for example, conflicts emerged in Taiwan between a group of parents and forty daughters because they became nuns without the former‘s consent (JT 9/19/1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. In most studies, celibacy has been neglected as an important factor in the emerging violent conflicts between Aum and mainstream society. The same is true for the next factor. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. See Nadolski (1975). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. The media reported that in 1994 some Aum leaders were assigned certain "government ministries" (Japan Times Special Report 1995: 12; 14-15). It is not clear how seriously this should be taken because they also liked playing around. My Aum interviewees learned about such "ministries" from the media only in 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Since 1995, I have interviewed many followers in Tokyo and Kyoto. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. E.g., see the story of a failed "submarine" test recorded in AEN 10/21/1997. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. This section is based on information from my interviews with ex-members. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. See Repp (forthcoming) and Victoria (1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. E.g., Reader (2000: 127) neglects this important distinction. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Cf. "Nichirenism" (Kleinen 1994: 99-111). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Nadolski 1974: 50 f; 94-96; Agon-shu 1989: 7 f; Davis 1992: 49 f. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Eleven years later, the court found the Kanagawa Prefectural Police and the National Police Agency guilty of illegal wiretapping (JT 5/26/1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. JT 3/5/1995. For attacks on non-members see below. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Another aspect is that terrorists aim at publicity after attacks and thus utilize the media for their own strategy. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Kabanoff (2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. See Parker (1995) and Shimatsu (1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. This confirms my analysis of the Danish Cartoon Conflict. (Repp 2006) [↑](#footnote-ref-26)