**Aum Shinrikyo and the "Aum Incident"**

**Radicalization Processes Among Young Japanese**

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1. Introduction

During 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 this time depict him and his disciples peacefully meditating in natural environs such as a riverbeds or mountain slopes. The group later called "Aum Shinrikyo" began to grow. During the early 1990s, however, illustrations in publications had changed drastically to a doomsday imagery. In 1995, finally, police raided their compounds and apprehended the leaders as well as a number of followers. They were put on trial for having committed murders and even nerve gas attacks. These crimes and terrorist attacks became known as the "Aum incident." Hence the question arises: How and why did such drastic radicalization occur?

There are a number of different and even contradictory narratives of Aum Shinri-kyo and the Aum incident; some interpretations have dominatated while others have been neglected. The accounts of the police and the public prosecutor became the mainstream story as a consequence of the media and influential scholars of religious studies following them rather uncritically.[[1]](#footnote-1) 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)

Because many accounts took the poison gas attacks 1995 as a presupposition for understanding Aum Shinrikyō and portrayed its prior developments anachronistically from behind, this poses grave heuristic problems. They provided a view of the religious group Aum Shinrikyo through the single lens of the "Aum incident"; i.e., in terms of various crimes and the gas attacks. According to these narratives, internal factors such as the teachings, practices and the guru led necessarily to an evil outcome. However, external contributing factors were neglected as well as unproblematic sides of the group. After all, the latter accounts for the fact that many ordinary members were not involved in crimes continued with their beliefs and practices in one way or another. Therefore, Aum Shinrikyō (henceforth abbreviated as Aum) should be distinguished from the Aum incident.

Based on a definition of the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (2018) and my own research, the term "radicalization" is here understood as a process, which (1) relies on a certain ideology,[[5]](#footnote-5) (2) increasingly questions the normative order of a society and its legitimation, (3) thereby constructs extreme polarizations, and (4) often transforms into actions (including violence) by attempting to defeat the institutions of the established social order and replace it by the own envisioned order. Radicalization can be political, ethnic or religious, or a combination of these.

Political radicalizations are often caused by deep resentments against Western endeavors to achieve global hegemony in form of neo-colonialism or globalization, such as oil exploitation in the Middle East or unfair trade treaties in Africa. Since Western induced "internationalizations" threaten native cultures and religions as well as traditional societies and economies, they provoke reactions among the non-profiting part of the population and may trigger radicalization processes directed against Western countries. In Japan's modern history, the first religio-politicial radicalization processes were triggered by the forced "opening of the country" for trade and diplomatic relations through the USA and other Western powers during the 19th ce. In reaction, political, Buddhist and new-religious ideologies developed which polarized "East" and "West".[[6]](#footnote-6) This was often called an intruding Western "materialism" versus Japanese or Asian "spiritualism." Such native ideological and religious radicalizations also heavily influenced politics and military which led to Japanese imperialism since the end of the 19th ce. and eventually to the Pacific War. Also today, religions like Aum or rightwing politicians repeat the polarized discourse of Western materialism versus Asian spiritualism.[[7]](#footnote-7)

2. Developments

Matsumoto Chizuo, the founder of the group later known as Aum Shinrikyo, was born 1955 in Kumamoto prefecture (Kyushu). Being visually impaired he attended a school for blind pupils. Thereafter he became an acupuncturist, a profession often chosen by persons with visual disabilities. In 1977, he moved to Tokyo, where he married; the couple had six children. (AEN 5/16/1995) During this time, Matsumoto turned to traditional Asian medicine and developed interest in fortune-telling, divination, and Daoism. He practiced traditional medicine in Funabashi near Tokyo. During the early 1980s he became member of the new religion Agon-shu, which at that time focused on yoga practice. This was part of the international yoga boom initiated by Bhagwan and other Indian gurus. When practicing yoga, young Japanese became also interested in acquiring "supernatural powers." (Cf. Kiriyama 1973) In 1985, the esoteric magazine *Twilight Zone* published a picture of Matsumoto Chizuo "levitating" during yoga practice on the frontpage together with a report. (Cf. Asahara 1991c) This publication motivated young people to gather around Matsumoto. In April 1986 they formed a small group called Aum shinsen-no-kai (Om group of mountain ascetics). In the summer, Matsumoto travelled to India in order to improve his practice under a yoga master. At the end of his stay in July, 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-8) In 1987, Matsumoto Chizuo changed his name to Asahara Shoko because the Chinese characters were believed to bring good luck. In the same year, also his group was renamed as Aum Shinrikyo (Om Teaching of Absolute Truth). (*Vajrayana Sacca* No.9: 36) Now also Buddhism was emphasized besides yoga.

What were the reasons that Asahara attracted many young followers? Most of them searched for finding the meaning of life, filling an inner void, gaining personal understanding and acceptance as well as mental and physical healing. They had not found solutions in society and established religions. Many members were disappointed with material consumption, instead they pursued spiritual ways. When, during the 1980’s, Japan had reached the height of the “Bubble Economy,” these young people did not want to dedicate their lives completely to the company, as their fathers did. They did not find satisfaction in social progress and material profit, as the previous generation of new religions taught. Many followers quit good jobs or promising careers. They were *Aussteiger*, they "stepped out of" ordinary society. Yoga and various kinds of meditation seemed to offer solutions for their spiritual quests and health problems. And when an even more intensive form of practice was offered, many members left their families and became nuns or monks. Because celibacy is one of the most radical forms of religious live, it should be considered also the first step of Aum's radicalization process.

3. Interior factors triggering radicalization

3.1 Celibacy

The first Aum members were lay people who lived at home, worked (or studied) and commuted to the Aum centers. In fall 1986 occurred an important step in the group's development, when members began to "leave their home" (*shukke*) in order to become nuns or monks and to dedicate their time to religious practice and communal life. The celibates formed a community called *sangha*, a Buddhist term. "Leaving home" means cutting ties with family and society. This practice derives from early Buddhism, which already caused conflicts with families in India. When Buddhism spread, also in other countries such problems occurred, e.g. in China with the Confucian government.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The impact of Aum's introduction of celibacy in Japan becomes clear from the historical context. Whereas lay and celibate Buddhism was practiced in Japan since its beginning in the 6th ce., in 1872 the government forced monks and nuns legally to become laypeople. As a side-effect, also new lay Buddhist groups emerged, such as Rissho Kosei-kai and Soka Gakkai, which grew into huge organizations after WW II. Before such background, it becomes clear that Aum's introduction of celibacy posed quite a challenge to traditional Buddhism, the new religions and the Japanese society.

"Leaving the home" may include to transfer parts of the family property into the new community, to quit studying or working, to divorce and to leave children behind or take them into the new group. Such radical measures cause numerous conflicts between families and celibates. Therefore, the first serious conflicts between Aum and the society started 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, the monks and nuns enter a community with its own rules, bonds and boundaries. Its "boundary control" (Galanter 1989: 111-116; 124) is much stricter than that of a group of lay people who move freely between ordinary life and engagement in a religious center. When concerned parents tried to communicate with celibate family members, they now had to deal with the whole community which functions according to own mechanisms being quite different from ordinary society. Hence, celibacy of young people contains many explosives for possible conflicts.[[10]](#footnote-10) In October 1989, the first public harsh criticism of Aum was voiced by parents in the tabloid *Sunday Mainichi* which focused mainly on issues related to celibacy. Also, the first murder cases emerged in conflicts occurring on the interface between Aum's celibacy and outside society.

3.2 Legal recognition, murder and repercussions

In September 1988, an Aum member died due to excessive ascetic practice. In order to avoid police investigation, leaders ordered to burn his body and dispose of it, which is illegal. Towards the end of 1988, Aum had started application procedures for attaining the legal status of a religious body at the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, which grants privileges such as tax breaks. The combination of these two issues led to the first murder in Aum. Because of the afore mentioned premature death, another member wanted to leave. When he threatened to leak this case to police, in February 1989 Aum leaders ordered to kill him because they feared that it would hamper the legal recognition.

The legal recognition was granted in August of this year. However, Aum now began to face also various repercussions. In July, the lawyer Sakamoto Tsutsumi had established a "Lawyers` group for the victims of Aum Shinrikyo." In October, concerned family members formed the "Association of Aum Shinrikyo Victims." Also in October, the tabloid *Sunday Mainichi* began to publish the series "The madness of Aum Shinrikyo" which criticized the high amounts of donations, the celibacy separating parents and children, and strange religious practices. It portrayed Aum as being "anti-social." The articles were one-sided, based only on reports by ex-Aum members and families of Aum followers, and were written in a sensationalist style. The editors did not bother to ask Aum for comments. Only when representatives protested, a response was published which emphasized that these practices concerned not ordinary believers, but celibates who had left their families by free will. This distinction is important because it confirms the proposition that the introduction of celibacy was a major cause for the ensuing conflicts between Aum and society.

3.3 Political ambitions

After having received legal status, Aum leaders developed more ambitious plans during the second half of 1989 in spite of emerging public criticism. Besides their religious goals to expand the group internationally, they also planned to enter the political world. Political ambitions are not unusual for religious organizations in Japan, as the Oomoto incidents before WW II[[11]](#footnote-11) and the political party Komei-to founded by Soka Gakkai in 1964 show. In order to enter the political world, 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 proclaimed political aims was the abolition of the consumer tax. In a 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) It is not clear what his political goals really were. Aum members performing election campaigns in white clothes wore head masks of Asahara and praised their leader with simple songs. The Disney-like performance of young people lacking common sense did not appeal to ordinary voters. When the “Truth Party” did not win a single seat, Aum perceived this as a social rejection, which increased its stance against society. Asahara's motive to engage politically seems to be found in an observation by the journalist Egawa Shoko, who had investigated Aum from 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) He probably did not completely abandon this goal.[[12]](#footnote-12)

4. Central factor for the conflicts: Asahara's authority and ideology

Asahara must have had a certain charisma to attract so many young people and to organize them into a functioning religious group. According to interviews with Aum members,[[13]](#footnote-13) his sermons were appealing because he could explain difficult contents in an easily understandable way. He spoke in a direct language and addressed problems bluntly whereas the prevalent communication style in Japan is rather indirect and ambiguous. Some followers admired his enthusiasm and energy. He also was a good "head hunter," who found qualified followers to serve his cause, and he skillfully utilized people, from gifted disciples up to religious leaders like the Dalai Lama (see below).

The relationship between Asahara and his followers soon became uneven. His followers' admiration helped to increase his self-consciousness and he began to render himself indispensable as guru by claiming: "Be aware that you cannot get [Buddha's] Dharma without asking it of me" (Asahara 1991b: 85). Elsewhere 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) Thereby followers became dependent on the leader who gradually assumed absolute authority. He even replaced Buddhist precepts by his own directives. (Asahara 1988: 84)

Originally, Asahara based his authority on his claim to have attained "awakening," the highest Buddhist goal. Hence, his authority relied on a religious teaching as he understood it. He had no proof for it, but he collected authorizations from other Buddhist leaders. Hereby he followed a pattern which Japanese founders of new religions had introduced before, for example when visiting the Pope and publishing the pictures later. 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 for *his* "mission." For the same reason he also visited other Tibetan leaders. During a journey 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 a Buddhist relic, an important symbol of spiritual power. In the end he claimed to be the "Buddha in 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 early publications Asahara was called *sensei* (teacher) or guru, his appellation then changed to "Revered Master" (*sonshi*), to which then the title "His Holiness" (*saisho*) was added since 1992 (*Shinri* No. 19), an expression 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 over against other religious groups. The unquestionable authority excluded any control as well as flexibility or compromise in conflicts with other religious or secular authorities. This is an ideological factor for radicalization.

5. Interior contributing factors for radicalization

5.1 Young membership

In 1995, the average age of Aum followers was twenty-seven years (DY 5/18/1995), therefore we may speak of a "youth religion." Most leaders were still under forty years old. According to Maeda (1997), a member of the Aum peer group, his generation having grown up in the 1970s and 1980s was a "youth without a father." Because the fathers spent most time to work in the company, young people had to become adults by their own. Since many members had joined because they felt understood by Asahara, he may have acted also as a substitute father, not only as guru. An Aum member and experienced school teacher in his forties explained to me that most followers had no or not much work experience in society, therefore they were no "socialized people" (*shakai-jin*). Their distance to society played a role in the process of radicalization. In their interactions with society they committed more mistakes and even crimes, such as those mentioned before.

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 Japanese society. However, here like in other places, the young people were not considerate of the sentiments and social rules of their neighbors and thus provoked adversary reactions. When Aum members wanted 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, therefore they started a court case against the group. Subsequently, police searched the facilities in October 1990 and temporarily arrested three leading members. Aum perceived this incident as "suppression by the state" and viewed themselves as victims. The court decided that Aum had to abandon the place in exchange for receiving a hefty financial compensation from the village. This more or less self-inflicted conflict with the surrounding society increased Aum's attitude against society and through such polarization contributed to its radicalization.

Another characteristic of the young age of Aum members and their leaders was that they proceeded according to the principle of "trial and error."[[14]](#footnote-14) This also contributed to radicalizations. In contrast, the older of the new Japanese religions are led by experienced leaders and advisors who act according to rational deliberations and consider possible results of actions.

5.2 Social structure

As mentioned, Aum consisted of lay members and of celibates. Monks and nuns wore Indian style clothes and constituted the upper strata of the group's hierarchy. Lay members pursued their ordinary life as before and in the free time they commuted to the Aum centers in order to study and practice. They participated also in seminars or retreats for several days. On the other hand, the celibates lived in Aum facilities for religious practice and work. Their life was to a large degree regulated. They formed "circles"[[15]](#footnote-15) and each group had its particular task, such as printing, translating, video production, teaching children, repairing and constructing buildings. These units functioned independently from each other. Each of them was led by a "teacher" (*shi*), and several of them were placed under the leadership of a "truly enlightened teacher" (*seigoshi*). Such kind of social structure maintained efficient control over the whole organization, both vertically and horizontally. Thereby the movements of members and the flow of information were controlled. Ordinary members did not know what really happened in the groups next to them horizontally or vertically. The units functioned independently from each other, and critical discussions concerning the group or talk about secular matters were discouraged. Even suggestions for the improvement of the living and working facilities, e.g. for more cleanliness, were not permitted. One former monk told me that he left the group because his constructive criticism was not permitted. This seems to be in stark contrast to the experience of the young lay people, who in the beginning enjoyed the frank atmosphere of the group to discuss and criticize anything. However, the more one moved into the inner circles, the tighter the control became.

5.3 Ideological factors

5.3.1 Religious justifications of murder

Nakazawa Shinichi's 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 being critical of traditional Japanese Buddhism. Its last chapter describes a ritual performed by lamas to guide the soul of a deceased person during transmigration to a higher dimension which is called *poa*. Eventually, however, senior figures began to use *poa* as euphemism for murder sanctioned by a certain kind of Buddhist reasoning. According to the state prosecution Asahara allegedly stated in a later 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).

Ordinary ethics is here suspended by a certain religious reasoning being based purely on functionalist thinking. After the Aum incident came to light, many people in Japan and worldwide could not believe that Buddhists would commit murder since Buddhism is perceived as "peaceful religion." This idealized image quickly disappears when Buddhist history is taken into account. The "warrior monks" in premodern Japan and Buddhist efforts in the Pacific War are only two examples.[[16]](#footnote-16) In all these cases, however, we have to distinguish between the primary encouragement to commit crimes by religious teachings and the secondary legitimation of already executed murder,[[17]](#footnote-17) as in the Tendai discourse on warrior monks or in Aum's *poa*-theory.

5.3.2 Apocalyptic expectations

Like founders of other new religions, Asahara had studied Chinese divination and astrology since he was concerned with his own fate, but then he utilized his skills also for others. Eventually, he began to announce prophecies concerning humankind. (Asahara l991a: 120) His meditation practice, he claimed, enabled him to travel in the synchronous "astral-world" whereby he could see future events in the phenomenal world. (Asahara 1991c: 275) In 1987, he predicted a "nuclear war" between 1999 and 2003 caused by economic conflicts between Japan and Europe resp. the USA; however, he promised, if Aum "spreads all over the world, we can avoid World War 3 certainly." (Asahara 1988: 92, cf. 87 f) In 1989, Asahara (1992c: 153 f) had begun studying Nostradamus' *Les Centuries*. Goto Ben's science fiction series "Great Prophecies of Nostradamus" had triggered a "Nostradamus boom" in Japan since 1973. (Cf. Asahara 1991a: 103 f) The subtitles predict a catastrophe for humankind in 1999, and the nearer this year approached, the more this topic became popular. Agon-shu and Kofuku no kagaku already had taken up these "prophecies." (Kiriyama 1981; 1995; Okawa 1988; 1991) The theme appealed to people who sensed a crisis in affluent Japan.

Asahara's visions became more pessimistic when he repeatedly felt rejected by society, as explained above. 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 renewal of the world by converting humankind was abandoned. Disappointment with society spread as well as hopelessness. (Cf. *Shinri* No. 26: 4-16) The only escape from the impending catastrophe was to practice more rigorously and to build shelters for the own protection. (Asahara 1992a: 105 f) An important publication on this topic is *Hiizure kuni, wazawai chikashi*, published a few days before the Tokyo gas attack in March 1995. On the cover of its English version *Disaster Approaches the Land of the Rising Sun*, the reader is exhorted "Survive Armageddon!”, WW III. Here we read further:

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-18) is, according to Asahara, not political or 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 is essentially 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) Such publications do not encourage to actively bring about Armageddon, as media sometimes alleged, but to secure Aum's self-protection and survival. These quotations express fundamentalism and resentment against Westernization and globalization, which is also found in other new religions.[[19]](#footnote-19) In Aum's case, fostering expectations of Armageddon served to strengthen its members' consciousness of being the chosen people to survive. (Cf. Asahara l991a: 123) This contributed considerably to further polarize Aum and society. Hence, apocalyptic expectations were part of Aum's radicalization process on the ideological level.

6. Exterior contributing factors for radicalization

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

The time from Aum's application for legal recognition in late 1988 until well after having received the official status in August 1989 was critical for the group because it had to avoid negative public attention. However, in July 1989, the lawyer Sakamoto Tsutsumi established a "Lawyers` group for the victims of Aum Shinrikyo." In October, concerned family members formed the "Association of Aum Shinrikyo Victims." Also in October, the tabloid *Sunday Mainichi* began to publish a series of sensationalist articles titled "The madness of Aum Shinrikyo." It criticized the high amounts of donations, the separation between parents and children, and strange religious practices. It portrayed Aum as being anti-social. An Aum representative countered that these practices concerned only celibates who had left their family by free will. This confirms our assertion that the introduction of celibacy was a major cause for the emerging conflicts between Aum and society.

Also in October 1989, the influential Tokyo Broadcasting System (TBS) interviewed the lawyer Sakamoto in order to air it together with a footage of Aum's meditation practices. The program director informed leading Aum members of his plan and upon their demand he showed them the interview in advance on October 26, 1989. (JT 3/14/1996) When the leaders urged TBS not to air the interview, the broadcaster gave in and cancelled it in exchange for a promised exclusive interview with Asahara. (JT 4/4/1996) On October 31, the same Aum leaders visited lawyer Sakamoto in his office and urged him to retract the statements from the video, which he refused. (JT 4/4/1996). A few days later, Sakamoto, his wife and baby suddenly disappeared from their apartment. An Aum badge was found, but the police failed to investigate properly. During the following six years this case was not solved until the comprehensive police investigation of Aum began in March 1995. The reason for such professional negligence was that Sakamoto`s lawyers office represented an official of the Communist Party in court, who had been wiretapped illegally by the police in 1986.[[20]](#footnote-20) Therefore, Aum escaped police investigation at this time. Because the murder was not detected and punished, the police failure permitted Aum leaders to continue criminal activities. Only much later in court trials after 1995, several leading Aum members were convicted of having committed the murder of the Sakamoto family and of others as well. This case shows that a radicalization process could have been stopped if state officials would have worked properly and in time. After their raids of the Aum facilities 1995, police found that between October 1988 and February 1995 thirty-three followers had died through accident, suicide or murder, and twenty-one more were missing.[[21]](#footnote-21)

During the Aum trials also the TBS involvement in the Aum incident emerged. An 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 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 admitted finally that TBS` showing the video may have led to the murderers of lawyer Sakamoto and his family. (JT 4/4/1996; 4/21/1996) An even worse accusation was voiced: "Indeed, it is 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 case shows that also the role of media for radicalization processes has to be considered.[[22]](#footnote-22)

6.2 Russia connections, gas attacks and the police raids

When Gorbachev introduced Glasnost, the Japanese government like others attempted to syphon technical and military know-how from the former Soviet Union. For this purpose, the establishment of a "Russo-Japan University" was planned to serve as front organization. As far as I know, *comprehensive* research on Aum's introduction into Russia has not yet been conducted, but facts are that its Russian branch was located in a state-owned building and that from early on Aum leaders were well connected with highest government officials, such as Security Chief Oleg Lobov.[[23]](#footnote-23) 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. These and other cases, such as combat training of Aum members, pose a number of serious questions, which have not been publicly discussed sufficiently. In 1992 Aum opened its branch in Moscow and membership grew rapidly because Communism had caused a spiritual void in young people, who now searched for answers especially in Buddhism. It was estimated that approximately 30.000 Russians had joined, compared with about 10.000 ordinary members and 2.000 celibates in Japan.

In June 1994, all of the sudden a poison gas attack occurred in Japan in Matsumoto city, injuring 147 people and killing seven persons. (JT 4/25/1996) The police treated the man who had first reported the incident as main suspect even though his wife was a victim. A year later, police and mass media had to apologize to him for their wrong accusations. After the raids 1995, police revealed that Aum members had also attacked several individual opponents with VX poison gas between May 1994 and January 1995. (JT 4/25/1996)

Finally, on March 20, 1995, poison gas attacks occurred in five metros of Tokyo Metropolitan Subways during rush hour which killed twelve persons and injured approximately 4,000 people, 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. Well in advance numerous journalists and camera men had been waiting at these locations because police had informed them beforehand; hence Aum was informed in time, and the whole nation could view the live broadcast. The search warrant was not issued for the gas attacks but for the abduction of a notary public in February, who had hidden his sister, an Aum follower, because the group pressed her to donate her real estate. (JT 4/23/1995; 4/25/1996) Because Aum was accused of this terrorist attack in Tokyo, the police took Asahara and a number of leaders and ordinary members into custody. In 2004 he and others received the death penalty which was executed in 2018.

In conclusion: Unresolved questions

Whereas the police, public prosecutors and the courts considered Aum as the definite culprit of the poison gas attacks in Matsumoto and Tokyo, there remain quite a number of doubts which had not been clarified with sufficient evidence. The police were quick to identify the poison gas as "sarin;" according to their reports, the culprits placed them in plastic bags on the floor of the metro and pierced them with umbrellas. The first problem is that sarin is heavier than air, therefore it should have been placed for release in the overhead bins. Second, the effects on health as well as the residues in clothes differed from that of sarin.[[24]](#footnote-24) Third, how could the culprits release the poison with an umbrella nearby without affecting themselves? It requires professional military training. Fourth, the acclaimed "Aum gas factory" "Satyan No. 7" in Kamikuishiki had no chimney for poisonous exhaust, but only horizontal cooling pipes surrounding 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 after having entered this building because of the heat. They concluded that police had rather staged a performance outside for the media and Japanese public. Police never showed the confiscated chemicals as evidence to the public. (Cf. Tabata 1995) Therefore, one cannot determine which materials were used for the alleged poison gas and which for chemical drugs produced and sold by Aum. (Cf. Nunn Report 1995: 45) This raises also the question why the government had not controlled the large trade of certain chemicals, as it was obliged according to international conventions. In Europe and elsewhere, the early detection of purchasing ingredients for bombs had prevented some terrorist attacks.

Certainly, Asahara and a number of followers committed serious crimes such as murder and abduction. However, too many significant problems concerning the gas attacks remain unresolved which still need to be clarified by independent experts. As for the question of ideological and social radicalization, our findings showed that it was not Aum’s teaching *per se* or other internal factors *alone*, such as the "guru" figure, which led to this development, as police, prosecution and some scholars assert. It was Aum's *interactions* with established society – including "government inaction" (Nunn Report 1995: 46) and police negligence – which 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 perceiving radicalization in monocausal or unilateral ways, this study suggests to understand it as *communication process*.[[25]](#footnote-25) This consists of a sequence of ideological, verbal and other interactions between several interior and exterior agents. It may include also a lack of actions which normally would have been required, such as the gross negligence of state officials. Such a communicational conglomerate eventually increased polarizations between conflicting parties rather than leading to conflict resolutions.

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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 1995, Lewis (1999) treated the human rights violations against Aum; Mori Tatsuya portrayed Aum members in his documentary films “A” and “A 2” and their treatment by police and media. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I.e. certain ideas are absolutized and nonnegotiable. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Kleinen (1994) for "Nichirenism" based on Nichiren Buddhism and Nadolski (1975) for the new religion Oomoto. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In Europe, similar radicalization processes occurred among rightwing groups which in the Eastern countries mainly emerged due to the destruction of the socially and economically secure communist societies, the sweeping invasion of highly competitive capitalist economies, migration movements of cheap laborers from East Europe to the West and finally (for whole Europe) the mass migration of refugees and others from the Middle East and Africa which infringe on cultural customs and threaten the social stability. Such developments cause tough competitions for work, housing and social welfare in economically weak classes. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Asahara 1993a: ix. We have no confirmation of Asahara's "awakening" (*satori*) by a master. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In 1996, conflicts emerged in Taiwan between parents and their 40 daughters because they became nuns without the former's consent. (JT 9/19/1996) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In most treatments, celibacy has been neglected as an important factor for the emerging violent conflicts between Aum and the society. The same is true for the next factor. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Nadolski (1975). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. 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 to play around. My Aum interviewees learned about such "ministries" only from media in 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I interviewed many followers since 1995 over a number of years in Tokyo and Kyoto. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. E.g., see the story of a failed "submarine"-test recorded in AEN 10/21/1997. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This section is based on information from my interviews with (ex-)members. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Repp (forthcoming) and Victoria (1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. E.g., Reader (2000: 127) neglects this important distinction. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Cf. "Nichirenism." (Kleinen 1994: 99-111) [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Nadolski 1974: 50 f; 94-96; Agon-shu 1989: 7 f; Davis 1992: 49 f. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Eleven years later, the court found Kanagawa Prefectural Police and the National Police Agency guilty for illegally wiretapping. (JT 5/26/1999) [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. JT 3/5/1995. For attacks on non-members see below. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Another aspect is that terrorists aim at publicity after attacks and thereby utilize the media for their own strategy. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Kabanoff (2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See Parker (1995) and Shimatsu (1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. This confirms my analysis of the Danish Cartoon Conflict. (Repp 2006) [↑](#footnote-ref-25)