

Above: Taiwan branch rally in Taipei, 1935.

Above right: The Deguchi Clan in 1900, with Nao (front, second from left), her daughter Sumi (front, far left) and Ueda Kisaburo, aka Deguchi Onisaburo (front, far right); background image is an example of Nao's *Ofudesaki* (automatic writing)

It remains a great point of contention amongst historians: the question of exactly how and when the transformation of the government of Japan, from the essentially democratic system that existed during the 1920s into the grim military dictatorship that governed during the Second World War, took place. In contrast to interwar Germany and Italy, both of which experienced sudden, dramatic regime changes, Japan joined the ranks of the “despotic empires” (in British historian Paul Johnson’s words) in a rather more ambiguous fashion.

Many are quick to pinpoint the year 1931 as the crucial turning point, citing the Japanese army’s invasion of Manchuria and the parliamentary system’s subsequent loss of control over the military. Others emphasize the importance of the events of February 26, 1936 (the infamous “2-2-6 Incident”) in which an abortive *coup-d’état* saw the establishment of a de facto police state.

Surprisingly few, however, have stressed the events of December 8, 1935, which clearly illustrate that by the time of the February Mutiny, Japan was already a police state. In the early morning of that day, some 430 officers of the Kyoto-stationed *Kenpeitai* (military police) descended on the outlying towns of Ayabe and Kameoka and raided the centres of the religious sect of Omoto, detaining nearly five hundred sect members, taking approximately three hundred into custody, and sealing off all sect property from the public.

Meanwhile, in the neighbouring town of Matsue, the sect’s eccentric leader Deguchi Onisaburo and his wife were apprehended and incarcerated on charges of *lèse majesté* and violation of the Peace Preservation Law. The subsequent year saw the arrest of approximately a thousand Omoto adherents throughout Japan and her colonial dependencies, as well as

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Religion & Suppression in '30s Japan

A Pyrrhic Victory

the physical destruction of all Omoto religious properties, buildings, and objects of veneration.

Within a year, a spiritual movement which counted over a million followers in the Japanese islands and many more elsewhere in the world, had been obliterated in a fashion unseen in Japan since the anti-Christian campaigns of the early years of the Tokugawa shogunate, ushering in an era of repression and intimidation of religious minorities and the unequivocal imposition of State Shinto on the Japanese public.

Considering the ferocity of its suppression, one could be forgiven for leaping to the assumption that Omoto — much like the murderous Aum Shinrikyo which some sixty years later would attack the Tokyo subway system with sarin gas — was a dangerous sect far removed from the socio-political mainstream. It is therefore surprising to find out that this upstart Kansai-based New Religion (*shinko shukyo*), which at its peak in the early 1930s may have counted as many as three million adherents worldwide, was in fact a staunchly conservative force, was well-entrenched within the nationalist right-wing, and its leader, while an outlandish and self-aggrandizing figure often dismissed as a buffoon and a megalomaniac in the popular press, nevertheless gained considerable political capital thanks to his Asian mainland proselyzation campaigns and his promotion of Emperor-centric Pan-Asianism.

In the end, the paranoid political climate of the times combined with the sect's association with extremists intent



Onisaburo posing as the Buddha

on overthrowing the parliamentary system brought about its suppression, the upshot being that, in a paradoxical fashion, the sect's demise was part of the process which saw the emergence of the sort of authoritarian governance which the sect had been advocating. It was a Pyrrhic victory, though, as the suppression destroyed most of the sect, which remained an illegal organization in Japan until the country's defeat at the hands of the Allied forces in 1945.

The tale of Omoto, from its humble rural Kansai origins in the late-Meiji period to its meteoric rise and subsequent demise at the hands of the military police, is a complex story of a religious movement desperate for widespread acceptance and legitimacy in the eyes of the central government. The sect was born in the early 1890s,

making it the last of the first wave of "New Religions," which include Kurozumikyō, Tenrikyō and Konkōkyō. Its foundress was an elderly rural woman by the name of Deguchi Nao, who is said to have received a communication from a Shinto deity known as *Ushitora-no-Konjin* (a deity also central to the Konkōkyō faith) which told of an imminent apocalypse followed by the creation of an earthly paradise for those demonstrative of true loyalty to the *kami*.

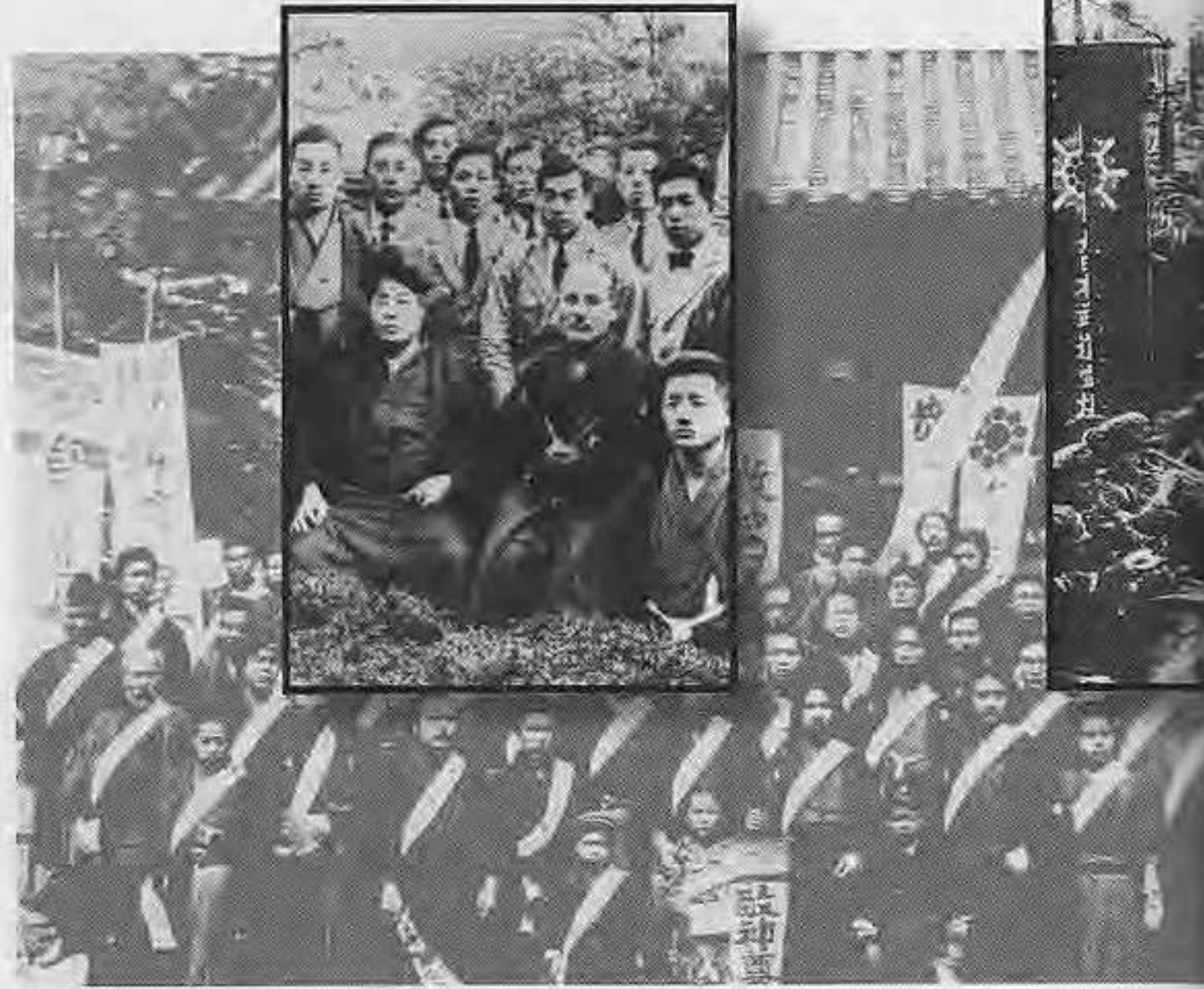
In the years that followed her alleged spirit possession, Deguchi quickly established a regional reputation as both a faith healer and as a fierce polemicist against the Meiji Restoration, which she denounced as having opened the doors of a once-divine country to an assortment of 'foreign demons.' However, it was under the leadership of her opportunistic son-in-law, a renegade Shinto scholar and former *yamabushi* (mountain priest) by the name of Ueda Kisaburo, who upon marrying her daughter adopted the foundress' surname in addition to the regal-sounding Onisaburo, that the sect began to expand beyond its rural Kansai base.

Following Onisaburo's accession, the sect adopted the name *Omoto-kyō* (the Religion of the Great Source) and embarked on a campaign of zealous proselytization and ingratiation with the authorities that would see it persistently shift gears in accordance with the spirit of the times.

In stark contrast to his uncompromising mother-in-law, Onisaburo was a considerably more flexible and prag-



Left to right: Omoto paraphernalia; Kodo Omoto rally in Kameoka, circa 1916; Onisaburo with Aikido master Ueshiba Morihei; Kodo Omoto paramilitary rally in Kameoka, November 1933; Ransacked Omoto premises following the first suppression of the sect, October, 1921; Onisaburo in Mongolia, circa 1924; Onisaburo (left) with ultra-nationalist leaders Toama Mitsuru (center) and Uchida Ryohei (right), July 1931



matic sect leader, prioritizing above all the securing of official government recognition of Omoto as a Shinto sect. To this end, following the outbreak of the First World War, he sought to demonstrate the sect's patriotic zeal by organizing an Omoto organization known as *Shinreigun* (Righteous Spirit Army), a group which would don military uniforms, march in columns, sing patriotic anthems, and make pilgrimages to the country's major Shinto shrines. In 1916 the sect changed its name to *Kodo Omoto* (Imperial-Way Omoto), with its leader embracing the causes of direct imperial rule and the complete merger of shrine and state.

In the World War I years, Omoto gained followers at a remarkable rate, thanks in large part to the sect's ambitious wartime propaganda campaign in which it launched two newspapers, the *Omoto Shinbun* and the *Omoto Jiho* (*Omoto Bulletin*), and acquired the Osaka-based daily *Taisho Nichi-Nichi Shinbun* (*The Taisho Daily Newspaper*). By the end of the war, Omoto membership was in the tens of thousands, with an increasingly urban and educated following. It was during this time that the sect gained a strong foothold in military circles and even permeated the country's most hallowed institution with the conversion of Princess Tsuridono Ohikako, the niece of the dowager empress, following a visit to the sect's Ayabe centre in 1917.

As the sect's size and influence expanded, however, so too did its cast of adversaries. The postwar Seiyokai government of Prime Minister Hara Ta-

kashi, which faced the task of curbing mounting anti-government insurrection in the wake of a postwar economic meltdown, became increasingly nervous of Omoto's widening influence. An increasing number of both liberal and conservative journalists, alarmed by the upstart sect's establishment of a veritable media empire, began denouncing Omoto as an "evil cult" (*jakyō*) and lurid accounts of murder, brainwashing, and sexual improprieties within its ranks became standard fare in the nation's newspapers.

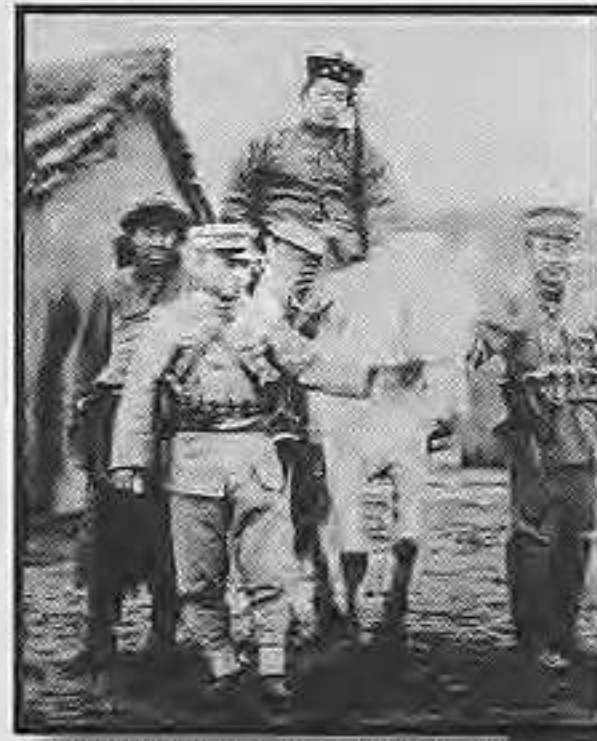
In 1920, rumours that the sect was planning a rebellion led the central government to impose a ban on all Omoto publications and on the practice of *chinkonkishin* (a form of divination practiced by Omoto), a ban which Onisaburo and his followers subsequently ignored, resulting in the arrest of the sect leader and two of his close associates in February of the following year. Convicted by a Kyoto court of lèse majesté (in response to alleged anti-imperial remarks) and violation of the newspaper law, Onisaburo was sentenced to five years in prison, in what would come to be known as the "First Omoto Incident." While this suppression was short-lived and the charges against the sect leader were eventually overturned by the Tokyo Grand Court, the crackdown greatly damaged the sect's reputation, with many of its high-profile supporters cutting their ties with the group following the leader's arrest.

With his sect at a crossroads, Onisaburo, released on bail after 126 days of

penal servitude, re-embraced his proselytizing mission with unprecedented zeal. In 1924, with his trial still pending, he embarked on a tour of the Asian mainland, undoubtedly seeing it as an opportunity both to gain new followers and to rehabilitate his image as a patriot and a loyal servant of the Emperor. The Omoto leader traveled first to Korea and then to Manchuria, where he befriended General Zhang Zuolin (aka Chang Tso-lin), the Manchurian warlord who, largely through Japanese support, had dislodged the region from Republican control. Having established a foothold on the Asian mainland, the Omoto leader then courted representatives of a wide array of religious groups, including the Baha'i faith and the pan-spiritualist Red Swastika Society (*Shijie Hongwan Zuhui*). With the help of the latter organization and members of Zhang's entourage (and accompanied by his disciple/bodyguard, Morihei Ueshiba, founder of the martial art of Aikido) he organized an ill-fated expedition to Mongolia, where he intended to found an Omoto-centred kingdom.

This Pan-Asianist phase of Omoto's history has come to be characterized by astonishing visions of grandeur and megalomania on the part of the sect's leader, who in the course of the campaign adopted the twin titles of Generalissimo and Dalai Lama and allegedly predicted the spread of the new Omoto order throughout Asia to Turkey and Jerusalem. In spite of his growing cult of personality and eccentric behaviour, the Japanese government appeared more than willing to support the Omo-

昭和青年会



to leader in his Asian mission, seeing his campaign as furthering Japanese influence. Omoto membership surged once again during the 1920s, spreading throughout the Japanese archipelago, making inroads in Japan's colonial territories and even gaining pockets of followers in Europe, South America, and Southeast Asia.

While Omoto had long shown itself to be a conservative, nationalist force, the late-1920s and early 1930s saw the sect make a sharp turn to the radical right, a decision which ultimately doomed it to suppression. Well before Japan's political leadership was thrown into disarray by the Guandong Army's seizure of Manchuria in 1931, Onisaburo had established firm ties with a number of influential ultranationalist figures, including Toyama Mitsuru, the venerable far-right figurehead and founder of the Meiji-era imperial expansionist organization *Gen'yusha* (Dark Ocean Society) and his protégé Uchida Ryuhei, founder of the *Kokuryukai* (Amur River Society) group, which was instrumental in furthering Japanese expansionist interests in Manchuria, as well as ultranationalist anti-democratic ideologue Kita Ikki, the man considered by many as the founding father of Japanese fascism.

In 1929 Onisaburo cemented ties with Toyama and Uchida through a joint pilgrimage to the Grand Shrine of Izumo, where the Omoto leader also demonstrated his adherence to the principles of State Shinto. Meanwhile, the sect abandoned the internationalist platform in favour of a militaris-

tic line even more aggressive than its First World War incarnation as Kodo Omoto. The sect officially re-adopted the Kodo prefix in 1933, and its leader further entrenched himself within the ultranationalist wing in 1934, through the formation of a nationalist youth auxiliary called *Showa Shinseikai* (the Showa Sanctity Society), which embarked on an ambitious recruiting campaign throughout Japan in 1934 and 1935, with the blessing of Toyama, Uchida and other notable rightists. However, Omoto's fervent displays of patriotism did little to ingratiate itself with the government of Japan, which at the time was beset with factionalism within political and military ranks and reeling from a spate of high-level assassinations (including that of Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi in 1932) and desperate to clamp down on extremism. Omoto's known ties to members of the ultranationalist fringe led the authorities to once more keep a close eye on the Ayabe sect.

While it is hardly surprising under the circumstances that the government moved to place the sect under supervision, why it chose to annihilate Omoto remains something of a mystery. Some have argued that the government sought to scare Japan's numerous independent religious sects into submission, taking advantage of widespread public fear of "pseudo-religions" (*ruiji shukyo*) in order to make an example of what was then the fastest growing spiritual movement in the country. Others have posited that it was Omoto's remarkable resilience as a socio-political force and

wide power base outside state control that drew the ire of the central government. It has even been suggested that the military police, having been granted substantial discretionary powers for the purpose of eliminating communism in Japan and having, by the mid-1930s, successfully done so, had simply run out of underground movements to suppress and, facing the prospect of a retrenchment of its powers, responded by playing up the threat of politically suspect religious organizations.

Whatever the reason, by early-1935 widespread suspicion of Omoto's collusion with anti-government forces had led to intense police scrutiny of the sect, and while concrete evidence of involvement in terrorist activity could not be found, the police concluded that there were legitimate grounds for suppression of the sect for violation of the Peace Preservation Law, which forbade any attempt at "altering the national polity or form of government." (Ironically, as a number of scholars have pointed out, the Peace Preservation Act, which was adopted in the mid-1920s and aimed at curbing communism, found some of its most enthusiastic supporters among religious organizations such as Omoto.)

The "Second Omoto Incident" began on December 8, 1935, and news of the sect dominated the national press for the next two months until it was displaced by the 2-2-6 Incident, an event which saw the government pursue Omoto followers with increased determination, accompanied by widespread allegations of torture of incarcerated sect members and forced confessions



Left and behind: Trial of hooded sect members in Kyoto District Court; Destruction of Omoto facilities, May 1936

sect was cited by a nearby authoritarian regime in its justification of a suppression of a popular religious group which in many respects closely resembled that of the prewar Omoto, namely that of the Chinese spiritual movement Falun Gong in 1999. The details are in fact remarkably similar: like Omoto, Falun Gong was an upstart religious movement with an enormous popular base and a charismatic, media-savvy leader. Also, Falun Gong, like Omoto, had proven itself to be a fundamentally conservative force, espousing above all traditional Chinese values and rejecting the mores and institutions of the West, earning it much early praise from Communist Party leaders. Furthermore, like Omoto, Falun Gong's surging popularity and growing influence ultimately led the state to perceive it as a threat, its suppression not borne out of any actual conflict with the official ideology but rather of the challenge it posed to the state's monopoly over the diffusion of ideological discourse.

The aftermaths of the two suppressions, however, differ drastically, as Falun Gong's leader and followers have since mounted an impressive resistance, whereas Omoto mounted virtually none, save its leader's court battles. The prewar incarnation of Omoto had indeed won a Pyrrhic victory, aiding in bringing down the superstructure of democratic governance in Japan at the cost of its very own existence.

The 1935 Omoto suppression clearly demonstrates that Japan had by the mid-thirties evolved into a despotic state that aspired to totalitarianism, crushing any movement that challenged its monopoly over the diffusion of nationalist ideology. Omoto, in its zealous espousal of nationalist doctrine, simply ended up attracting excessive attention to itself, and in the paranoid atmosphere of 1930s Japan, any form of attention from officialdom was a dangerous thing indeed.



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of attempting to overthrow the state.

The press overwhelmingly supported the crackdown, with many notable journalists calling for a widespread suppression of "pseudo-religions" and "evil cults." Such a sweep did indeed follow the Omoto crackdown, with a whole parade of religious sects falling afoul of the government, including *Hitonomichi Kyodan* (The Church of the Way of Man) in 1936, and the socialist-leaning New Buddhist Youth Alliance (*Shin Bukkyo Seinen Domei*), four Tenrikyo-related groups, and the Watchtower Society in 1938. Ultimately, even Japan's most venerable non-Shinto religious groups were not safe from repression, as the followers of Nichiren Buddhism were to discover in the early 1940s with the quelling of Soka Kyoiku Gakkai, the prewar antecedent to the modern Soka Gakkai movement in 1943. By this time, as one Nichiren leader lamented, the government had successfully reduced religion in Japan to shouting "*Tenno heika banzai*." ("Long live the Emperor!")

None of these crackdowns, however, would compare in their thoroughness and ferocity to that of Omoto, a campaign which would eventually lose momentum and drift from the attention of the Japanese public as the nation began gearing up for war in Asia. The trial of the sect's leadership did not begin until 1938 and would drag on for another four years with Onisaburo's lawyers filing appeal after appeal. The Peace Preservation Law violation conviction was eventually thrown out by an Osaka court in 1942, after which the

sect leader and his wife were released on bail and quietly returned to their Ayabe home.

Their legal team continued to fight the *lèse majesté* charge until the end of the Second World War, when the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (SCAP) officially dissolved all laws pertaining to "national polity" (*kokutai*). October 1945 saw a general amnesty declared covering all such offenses, and Onisaburo was officially pardoned at the behest of Prime Minister Higashikuni Naruhiko. The now-elderly religious leader quietly re-established the sect in early 1946 under the name *Aizen-en* (Garden of Divine Love), leading it until his death in 1948.

The Omoto sect still exists today, based in the town of Kameoka under the leadership of Deguchi Kurenai, the great-great granddaughter of sect's foundress Deguchi Nao, with a following which at the turn of the millennium numbered at around 165,000. The current organization, in stark contrast to the Omoto of yesteryear, attracts little in the way of media attention, and the sect's tumultuous past has largely faded from memory, with only the more exhaustive Japanese history treatises even mentioning it. However, the legacy of the Omoto suppression is still evident in the extreme reluctance that the authorities in postwar Japan have shown in dealing with troublesome religious sects, most notably the slow and ineffectual police response to the mounting allegations against Aum Shinrikyo prior to the 1995 gas attack.

Interestingly, the case of the Aum