

Spring 2018

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Recommended Citation

Unger, Marc; Spearman, James; and Hoben, Cassandra, "Marketing Terrorism: Aum Shinrikyo's Cult Following in Post-Soviet Russia" (2018). *Politics, Philosophy, and Legal Studies: Student Scholarship & Creative Works*. 2.

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Marketing Terrorism: *Aum Shinrikyo*'s Cult Following in Post-
Soviet Russia

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PS 370

Spring 2018

Introduction

Globalization of terrorist organizations has become a staple of affairs for the violent non-state actors. However, in the early 1990's, only a select few operated outside their country of origin. *Aum Shinrikyo*, translated as "Aum Supreme Truth," set the precedent for international marketing of doomsday cult ideology and ultimately the terrorist organization. Their operations began in Tokyo, Japan as a small yoga studio which blossomed into a international outfit terror. Prior to the Tokyo subway attack in 1995, their membership in the Russian Federation outnumbered Japanese membership by approximately 20,000, confusing academic scholars of terrorism to date. The following literature attempts to layout the factors that allowed Aum Shinrikyo to prosper outside their home nation in Post-Soviet Russia. After a brief historical introduction of the organization's efforts from beginning to the Tokyo subway attack in 1995, there will be a deep dive into Aum's recruitment methods and relationship with various Russian authorities as a pseudo-religious organization.

From Yoga Class to Chemical Gas, Japan, 1984-1995

Aum Shinrikyo was an apocalyptic Japanese religious cult that was formed in 1984. It began as a outlet for yoga teachings of only 15 members and developed into 50,000 members willing to partake in criminal and terrorist activities (Parachini, 2005). This group was best known for their chemical weapons assault on the Tokyo subway system. With the incorporation of Hinduism and Buddhism, Aum Shinrikyo justified its use of violence through their own interpretations. This organization turned a yoga class into a global terrorist organization.

The leader of this group, Master Shoko Asahara, started off with an acupuncture business, which later led to the creation of his own yoga classes. He created *Aum Shinsen no Kai* which eventually led to the creation of Aum Shinrikyo. This was created after completing the

final stage of his program in the Himalayas in 1986, “acquiring the supreme truth” (Metraux, 1995). It officially became a religious corporation by 1989 in Japan. This so-called truth consisted of every word Master Shoko Asahara spoke. Asahara created a spiritual message for people to feel as though they were part of a greater force, initially attracting the younger generation. They felt as though it was a new opportunity for spiritual awakening and a path to find new meaning in their lives. Takeshi Nakamura described Aum Shinrikyo as, “something personally transformative and socially prophetic,” before joining the cult (Jurgensmeyer, 2003). It differed from the common Japanese religions, like Zen Buddhism and Shintoism, appealing to future members looking for something new. Aum Shinrikyo had the elements of a cult with its, “small voluntary group of strict believers who chose to live apart from the world” (Metraux, 1995). This small group of believers, however, led to an organization whose members blindly followed a leader who claimed to be a god. Many perpetrators of the attacks felt they were “furthering a higher divine purpose” in their killings (Parchini, 2005). This shows the effective control Asahara had on his supporters.

Furthermore, the cult began to grow and evolve due to how strategically the group was run. Asahara was not a dictator, but had a rather charming personality and knew how to run his organization like a business. This meant money was raised through followers and businesses. In addition, Aum Shinrikyo also took the opportunity to see other countries’ weaknesses from the outside. Russia for example, falls short on stopping influence due the fresh post-communist landscape (Parachini, 2005). Ashara’s strategic developments of the organization attracted anybody who was looking for some spiritual movement in their lives. There were five stages in the evolution of this cult. In the first period, there was an initial attractiveness of the group’s beliefs. The second period beginning in 1988 involved the downfall of the organization through

deaths in the society. Following this, the third period, incorporated the defeat of the group which led to violence and chemical weapons. In the fourth period, the Tokyo subway attack occurred expanding the violence in the group. Finally, in the fifth period the organization ultimately weakened (Parachini, 2005). The evolution of Aum Shinrikyo shows a shift from one of peace to one of violence.

In early March, during rush hour, five members of Aum Shinrikyo went to different subway stops converging on a central point in the rail line. Backpacks were pierced and chemical gas trickled into the train cars. This resulted in the injury of more than 5,500 people. The reason behind this attack was to keep the “movement alive” (Jurgensmeyer, 2003).

As shown in the 1995 Tokyo Subway attack, Aum Shinrikyo was familiar with chemical weapons. *Aum* was one of three terrorist organization to have used chemical weapons, spending approximately \$30 million on such CBRNs, especially for the 1995 Tokyo Subway attack (Council on Foreign Relations, 2006). The expertise and energy put into these chemical weapons shows the great power this terrorist organization had over civilians. If the chemical backpacks were implemented with more precision in 1995, the damage could have increased the death toll dozens to hundreds. This attack dispersed few chemicals, but the widespread psychological turmoil was the consolation for the terrorist organization. Aum Shinrikyo’s successes in terror may be found in Japan, but the bulk of their membership lied northwest of the island state.

Russian Transfer, Appealing to the Post-Soviet Mind

Aum Shinrikyo’s presence, while definitely felt in Japan, was also felt in Russia. The doomsday cult looked to expand its reach over time roughly between 1992 and 1995. The decision to become a fixture in the young Russian community was a calculated political decision

to grow the group and develop a sphere of influence. With a new Russia on the rise, the opportunity for influence was at its highest during the new resurgence and awakening of a new generations of Russians (SGAPSI, 1995). By influencing Russian citizens, Aum Shinrikyo would potentially become a global presence with influence outside of Japan and providing legitimacy to itself by establishing rapport with different citizens from different areas of the globe.

With the Russian revolution in 1991, the younger generations were able to do something their recent kin found more difficult: forming and independent idea while simultaneously having the freedom to do so. Those who made their curiosities clear under the Soviet Union faced potential persecution from their own government (Knox, 2004). Once the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 occurred, religious freedom began to flourish in the new environment. People were able to explore something that had previously not been available to them, and with that came an opportunity. Aum Shinrikyo used this opportunity to gain followers and grow in power (SGAPSI, 1995). Young students in particular were vulnerable to non-traditional ideas.

Aum Shinrikyo targeted very specific areas, mainly St. Petersburg which had a newly vibrant and developing demographic of young people who were going to college and living a different type of life from what their parents had experienced under the Soviet Union. The appeal was a new way of thinking since Aum promised the “supreme truth” to all of its followers. Purchasing radio time in Russia, Aum propaganda reached thousands and recruit new members every day to join the group. Radio broadcast were directly appealing students, and the use of face to face/word-of-mouth was extremely effective as well (SGAPSI, 1995). Aum Shinrikyo, deemed an official religion by the Japanese government, faced pushback but continued to grow.

Russia, while globally a superpower, was not the most obvious place to expand influence; it was however, a strategic move for Aum. Russia had the most potential to produce malleable citizens. After the fall of the Soviet Union there was no better starting ground. The methodology was to infiltrate the youth of a global behemoth of the Russian Federation and give the group proximity to the rest of Europe. Media outreach was not the only method used in order to gain influence and clout. With Russia rebuilding and its future uncertain, Aum also had intentions of forming a company in the country to further grow in power. The company was called “Aum Protect” and the goal was to offer employment to loyal members within Russia and was set up in proximity to Aum’s Moscow headquarters (SGAPSI, 1995). The company ordered potential employees to quit their jobs once hired in order to assure loyalty and to cultivate dependency. The goal was to offer Aum members training in fields such as agriculture and medicine, assuring there members would be active and important members of the Russian community. Members of the sect who wanted to leave were now bound and personally invested in “Aum Protect” if they wished to be able to continue earning their own livelihood. People were now unable to leave the sect, facing serious unemployment and social rejection if they tried. Even early on in the Russian sect of Aum, they were perceived as problematic with Russian Orthodox Priest attempted to have the sect disbanded and were working to rehabilitate former members back into the church and society.

Russia did not crack down on Aum for years, until the attack on the Tokyo train system. The attack opened the eyes of everyone around the world what the group, who was hiding behind the facade of being a yoga club, could actually be capable of (Jurgensmeyer, 2003). While the attack was not executed correctly, the psychological damage was immense. This raised suspicion

of the group and what was usually referred to as a cult was now a full-blown terrorist organization with headquarters in multiple countries.

The group, which had been believed to have been outlawed as far as the public was concerned, was not actually outlawed until 2016 when Russia decided to officially crack down on the organization with a series of police raids into the homes of known members of the group as well as shutting down radio broadcasts that were still in existence (Sinelschikova 2016). Russia has since labeled *Aum* a terrorist organization and the group is completely banned (Sinelschikova 2016). The original Aum Shinrikyo, not to be confused with the *Aleph*, a reformed Japanese sect, had slowly been building up its presence in Russia for 20 years since the 1995 terrorist attacks (Sinelschikova 2016). A brief look into the early days of Aum's time in Russia and their established enemies may shed more light on their capabilities.

Russian Perspectives on Aum Shinrikyo

The doomsday cult thrived in the Russian Federation, but garnered mixed reviews from various heads of Russian society. Aum Shinrikyo received the most pushback from the Russian Orthodox Church and parent groups, while the government viewed the sect on equal ground with other faiths during the Post-Soviet religious boom.

Upon his first visit to Russia, Master Shoko Asahara captivated audiences in Moscow when he was not meeting with political figures. He gave lectures at Moscow State University and the Kremlin (Knox, 2004). This inspired so many individuals that Aum Shinrikyo was given radio airtime and eventually a television program. At their height of popularity, the sect had five offices in the capital and an approximate following of 30,000 members in Russia alone. Captivation at such high levels can be understood further by the context of the setting.

In 1992, the year when Aum Shinrikyo entered the Russian Federation, was going through a period of communist-free religious endeavor. The Russian Orthodox Church was able to engage more freely, and foreign religious organizations poured into the society (Knox, 2004). Russian citizens were craving spiritual enlightenment past their national pride, a message that could be steadily provided and offered by the organization and adjoining philosophy. Spreading their message was simple given the government freedoms they received. The proceedings for religious registration took place almost immediately in 1992. As a state-sanctioned religious sect, Aum's practices were protected from Orthodox influence and heavy scrutiny, allowing them to openly recruit on University campuses and yoga classes.

The primary voice against Aum Shinrikyo was the Orthodoxy. According to the centuries-old denomination, the new Japanese sect acted more like a "totalitarian cult," having full control over their followers (Stanley, 1995). One parent organization in particular led by an Orthodox priest initiated a lawsuit against Aum Shinrikyo for harming the spiritual health of young Russian citizens and brainwashing them for unknown large-scale purposes (SGAPSI, 1995). This lawsuit was heard for three years, coming to a fiery conclusion after the 1995 Tokyo subway attack was blamed on the sect. Within the time period of the suit, Aum Shinrikyo lost their Russian registration due to technicalities, but re-registered under the name, "Moscow's Aum Religious Association" in an attempt to confuse those expecting the "supreme truth" portion of their title (SGAPSI, 1995). The Committee for the Defense of Freedom was also registered, and they fought the lawsuit against Aum's Russian affiliate in the three year period. The final decision in 1995 was in favor of the Orthodox-led parent group, with justices accusing the cult of "harming Russia's young people," and also criticizing Mayak Radio and the Russian television station for, "allowing *Aum* propaganda on its airwaves" (SGAPSI, 1995). Their

registration as a religious sect was stripped by the Kremlin, and the courts banned all activities within the borders of the Federation.

An analysis of Aum's sanctioned three-year tenure in Russia shows just how susceptible the post-soviet Russian citizens were to a pseudo-religious ideology packaged as a new spiritual path. Their five known offices in Moscow remained busy every waking hour with recruitment and fundraising opportunities. The Russian Orthodox Church saw through the façade created by Aum Shinrikyo, and called them out through legal action. The Kremlin, Boris Yeltsin in particular, embraced the new Japanese religious opportunity. However, to his credit, once Aum's true intentions became clear to himself and other Russian authorities, they took swift action in removing the terrorist organization from their homeland. Aum Shinrikyo never held the same religious freedom in Russia again, but still remained an underground effort until 2016.

Conclusion

Spreading the message of "supreme truth" throughout Post-Soviet Russia came easy to Aum Shinrikyo. Their tenure in the Russian Federation from 1992-1995 garnered approximately 30,000 members. The majority belonged to the younger populations, those with an open mindset to new spiritual traditions and world views. As for recruitment, college students in the hard sciences received the most attention at major universities in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Their three main methods of marketing in Russia were media exposure, Master Shoko Asahara's endearing relationships with Russian officials, and Aum's company, "Aum Protect." Media included airtime on local radio stations and a television program for live recordings of yoga and meditation in stadiums. Asahara gave several lectures at the Kremlin and never held a negative characterization from leader Boris Yeltsin. The for-profit organization "Aum Protect," overseen by the sect, trapped members as permanent employees with no practical methods of departure.

Voices of dissent also rang against the cult. The efforts of the Russian Orthodox Church did not go unheard, with years of lobbying and lawsuits finally catching up to Aum Shinrikyo after the subway attack in 1995. The courts stripped the sect of their religious status within Russia, and ordered the exile of the group from the Russian Federation. Aum offices in Moscow were raided and their efforts were officially banned within Russian borders.

The limits of the research are as follows. Academic literature pertaining to Aum Shinrikyo lacks the abundance of theses and articles written about other terrorist organizations, like Al Qaeda, narrowing our window to a selection of sources. The paper lacks qualitative research from elite interviews conducted by the authors, and little data is available for comprehensive quantitative analysis. The majority of the cited literature comes from the United States and the West, bringing a perspective bias on the intricacies of Russia and Asian entity in question. Due to the specificity of the research in the Asian region, conclusions transferable to current affairs in Middle Eastern terror outfits are not advisable. While the research has its shortcomings, the necessity for diverse viewpoints in regards to academic literature on terrorism presents an opportunity for more emphasis on Asian-based groups spreading globally. The case study is unique and needs to be given the same scrutiny as the more infamous right-wing organizations. Future research into the influence of Aum Shinrikyo could look to their reformed religious affiliate, the Aleph, and their relations with Japan, and also the original group's continued underground presence in Russia in the late 2000's up until 2016.

Aum Shinrikyo set the stage in Asia for the transition from left-wing guerrilla terrorism to right-wing radical ideological terrorism in the early 1990's. Their use of CBRN's (chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons) were unique, becoming one of only three terrorist organizations to use them. The other two are the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam from Sri

Lanka and Al Qaeda in the Middle East. Aum Shinrikyo pioneered the idea of international terrorism and decentralizing their organization, holding affiliates in Japan, offices in Russia, and a sheep farm in Australia. In the age preceding the telecommunications boom of SMS and social media, rapid growth and spreading influence internationally was difficult for most, but not for Aum. Their sphere of influence among their 30,000 members in the Russian Federation proves that radical terrorism can come in different forms, especially as the sectarian cult they are. The group is mainly captured in the literature as the terrorist cult that bombed the Tokyo subway, but their marketing tactics in recruitment of Russian citizens provide a new perspective on the transition of terrorism deviant from the typical case of Al Qaeda.

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