UEMURA MASAHISA AND
THE HIGH TREASON INCIDENT:
EVANGELISM AND POLITICS

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UEMURA MASAHISA (1858–1925): PIONEER JAPANESE CHRISTIAN LEADER IN THE EARLY HISTORY OF PROTESTANT CHRISTIANITY IN JAPAN.

- Uemura was the eldest son of Tōjuirō and Tei, of the family of samurai. His family was wealthy but they fell into bankruptcy at the time of the Meiji Restoration of 1868. Uemura began Western studies and entered the private school conducted by the American missionary J. H. Ballagh. Later studied under Samuel R. Brown. In June, 1873 at age 16 he was baptized at the Yokohama Public Church by Ballagh. He was ordained in 1880 and became the pastor of Shitaya church (later Fujimichio Church).

- Uemura’s Evangelical Work:
  1. Forming evangelical churches
  2. Building up an acceptance of a theological way of thinking and training of evangelists
THEOLOGICAL DEBATE:

• In 1901 Uemura & Ebina Danjo entered into a theological debate that was carried on for several months in the pages of the journals of which the men were respectively editors.

• While Ebina emphasized the role of Jesus as teacher rather than as divine redeemer, Uemura believed that Jesus was the son of God. Unlike Ebina he saw Jesus as a divine figure.

• Uemura’s view was eventually adopted as Protestant orthodoxy in Japan.

- Uemura’s first important theological work, *Shinri Ippan* (Universal Truth), was published in 1884.
- In 1890 he began publication of the bimonthly magazine *Nihon Hyōron* (Japan Views).
- Teaching in the theological department of Meiji Gakuin
- A member of the Old Testament translation committee
UEMURA & THE HIGH TREASON INCIDENT

• Jan. 28, 1911: While funerals had been forbidden for the defendants of the High Treason Incident, Uemura conducted a consolation service for one of the defendants, Oiishii Seinosuke.

*The High Treason Incident (Taigyaku Jiken) was an anarchist plot to assassinate the Meiji emperor, one that led to the 1910 mass arrests of a number of socialist activists and concluded with 25 men and 1 woman being charged. 12 of these were hanged.*

• Jan. 8, 1925: His health was greatly damaged because of the strenuous effort he put into the reconstruction of Fujimicho Church after devastated by the Great Earthquake of 1923. Uemura died suddenly at his home in Kashiwagi, Tokyo.
THE HIGH TREASON INCIDENT

Under article 73 of the Criminal Code anybody who committed, or attempted to commit,
a dangerous act against the Emperor or other members of imperial family would face the death penalty. (Cronin 93)

- According to the preliminary investigations, the high treason incident was made up with three lesser incidents:

1. **THE AKASHINA INCIDENT**: Miyashita Takichi, a young lumber mill employee, produced a explosive in the village of Akashina, Nagano. Kōtoku Shūsei (socialist leader, 1871-1911), Kanno Suga, Furukawa Rikisaku, Niimura Tadao, Niimura Zenbei, and Nitta Tōru were charged.

2. **THE NOVEMBER PLOT**: Nov. 1908- Kotoku, Morichika Unpei, Ōishi Seinosuke, Matsuo Uitta and others met at the headquarters of Heiminsha (Commoners' Society) and plotted a revolution.

3. **THE CROWN PRINCE ASSASSINATION PLOT**: Uchiyama Gudō, a Zen priest from the Rinzenji Temple, Hakone, plotted to assassinate the Crown Prince. (Vera Mackie & Yamaizumi Susumu,3)

In the subsequent investigation, many known leftists and suspected sympathizers were brought in for questioning around the country.

Evidence against the defendants was mainly circumstantial. Only five or six were guilty.

The case was largely used as a pretext by authorities to round up dissidents.
THE SPEEDY TRIAL & VERDICTS

• Dec. 10, 1910: The trial began under tightened security: 50 military policemen and 150 police constable guarded the court. The first 30 minutes was open court.

• 11 AM the judge said that the case was of such importance to national security that the details could not be publicly reported and he cleared the court of all observers and reporters. (Cronin 100)

• Jan. 18, 1911: verdicts delivered: 24 out of 26 were sentenced to death.

• After the verdicts were delivered, in a ringing voice of Suga said sayonara to all. There was an echo of sayonara. (Cronin 106)
IMPERIAL INTERVENTION

• 24 of the 26 defendants were sentenced to death by hanging on January 18, 1911, and the remaining 2 defendants were sentenced to 8 years and 11 years respectively for violation of explosives ordinances.

• The following day an Imperial Rescript commuted 12 to life imprisonment.

• Imperial intervention, planned in advance by then prime minister Katsura Tarō, in collaboration with the chief prosecutor at the time, Hiranuma Kiichirō — who would himself became wartime prime minister. The Katsura administration was backed by the anti-socialist Yamagata Aritomo, the genro (imperial advisor) (Barbara Hartley 159)
ŌISHI SEINOSUKE (1867-1911)

- Born Nov. 29, 1867 in Shingu, the present day Wakayama Prefecture.
- 1884-1886 enrolled in Doshisha English School
- 1891 at 23 went to North America
- 1895 received medical degree from the University of Oregon Medical School
- 1896 started medical practice in Shingu
  Submitted regularly to this weekly literary newspaper, the *Tokio Humorist*.
- 1899-1900 travelled to Singapore and Mumbai, India to study infectious diseases; started reading socialist books after observing India’s caste system
- 1902 introduced a policy of not insisting on payment from poor patients while charging wealthy patients double. (Cronin 46-47)
- 1904 gave an anti-war speech at the Shingu Church; his article in *Heimin shimbun*, criticizing Japan’s maneuvering in Korea. Gave a speech in Shingu in front of 400 people on socialism and pacifism
ŌISHI WAS ACCUSED OF DISCUSSING REVOLUTION ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS

- Feb. 1906: New cabinet formed under Saionji Kinmochi, more progressive than the previous Katsura. The Japan Socialist Party was established: in April and in June Ōishi donated a total of 40 yen to the party.
- October: Ōishi went to Tokyo and met Kōtoku Shusui for the first time

Nov. 3, Japanese Consulate in San Francisco found a billposter pasted on the porch, which read “An open letter Mutsuhito the Emperor of Japan from Anarchists-Terrorists (the title in English and the rest in Japanese)---Emperor was a man like any other, descending from monkeys. His ancestors had stole power. He now was the chief block to progress and an enemy of liberty. He must be opposed with violence. (Cronin 67-8) A few copies of the leaflet made it to Japan. Kotoku denied any knowledge of the letter. (Cronin 68)

- July 1908: Saionji Cabinet fell.
- July 25 Kōtoku arrived in Shingu from Kochi to Tokyo for the trial in connection with the Red Flag Incident. Stayed until August, giving a number of talks.
OISHI AND THE HIGH TREASON INCIDENT: 1909-1910

• April to August, 1909: Nishimura Tadao was in Shingu, worked at Ōishi’s pharmacy.

• Earlier in July: Ōishi provided Naruishi brothers one ounce of arsenic monosulfide and a small amount of potassium chlotate. The experiment had no success, Ōishi suggested to add Vaseline into the mixture.

• July or August: Miyashita Takichi sent a letter to Niiimura Tadao in Shingu, asking him a potassium chlorate which he needed to make a bomb. Niimura got it from Hatabayashi pharmacy located near Ōishi’s house. Ōishi denied having given permission for Niimura to order the potassium chlorate.

• August 20: Niimura Tadao left Shingu for Tokyo. He sent two postcard to Ōishi.

• June 3, 1910: the police searched Ōishi’s house; June 5 he was taken into custody

• June 8 & October 21: interrogated 12 times as part of the preliminary examination

• Dec. 13: Ōishi gave evidence for about an hour at court: He denied that he felt oppression from the government.
CONSOLATION SERVICE & UZAWA SŌMEI (1872-1955)

- Jan. 26, 1911: the body was handed over to the relatives. Torihisa, Mutsuyô and 4 others waited. Cremated on the same day. Jan. 27: brought to church

- 32 mourners; a number of plain-clothes police men kept watch over the proceedings.

- *Uemura’s speech*: Oishi was a baptized Christian; his brother TamaoKi Torihisa was a member of Shingu’s church; his sister Mutsu was Bancho Church’s member and her late husband was a clergyman. (Morinaga 329)

- *Uzawa Sōmei*, one of Oishi’s lawyers spoke. Uzawa was a Church member, a member of the Lower House, and later served as church elder:

  “Misunderstanding can be fatal. When a student of socialism did not clarify his exact alliance, being vague as to where he stood for, his indecision would easily be misinterpreted. This is a lesson that we need to learn from Ōishi’s case.”

  (Morinaga 178)

**ŌISHI IN PRISON:**

- In his time in prison Ōishi reread the Bible, something he said he hadn’t done seriously in more than 20 years. He was deeply moved with the Passion of Jesus, especially he was struck by Jesus’ humanity in the Garden of Gethsemane where he said, “My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even unto death.” (Matthew 26: 37)

- In his *Prison Fragments* he said that whole affair was “uso kara deta makoto” (Truth has come out of falsehood). (Cronin 110)
The prosecutor Hiranuma Kiichirō, 1867 – 1952 (later Prime Minister from January to August 1939), said that he had a meeting at 6 am every morning with the Prime Minister Katsura in which he communicated what had transpired in court the day before. --- if things went wrong, ready to commit harakiri.

The annexation of Korea (in August) and the High Treason Incident both occurred in 1910. Colonialism made it necessary to define the good subject. Radicals needed to be expunged from National polity (kokutai). (Middleton 223)
AFTER THE HIGH TREASON INCIDENT

- The Japanese embassies in **London and Paris** and the Consulate in New York were besieged by demonstrating socialists and anarchists. (Cronin 106)

- In Japan Natsume Sōseki, Mori Ōgai, and Nagai Kafū, some of **Japan’s writers** and finest thinkers, were rightly concerned that the incident marked a shift from the open intellectual environment of early Meiji to one of increased censorship and government control.

- *1967: A plea for a retrial was submitted after the end of World War but this was turned down by the Supreme Court.*

- The High Treason Incident created **A SHIFT in the intellectual environment** of the late Meiji period towards more control and heightened repression for ideologies deemed potentially subversive. It is often cited as one of the factors leading to the promulgation of the Peace Preservation Laws.

- There was a burst of growth of **CHRISTIANITY** in the late 19th century when Japan re-opened its doors to the West. Protestant church growth slowed dramatically in the early 20th century under the influence of the military government during the Showa Period.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY