

**The Farce of the “Great Russian Salvation Tour:”  
The Legacy of Aum Shinrikyo in Mother Russia**

*Daniel A. Metraux  
Mary Baldwin College<sup>1</sup>*

The Japanese religious sect, Aum Shinrikyo, and its leader, Asahara Shoko, gained worldwide notoriety at the time of the famous Tokyo sarin gas incident on the Tokyo subways in March, 1995 when Aum terrorists killed 12 innocent commuters and injured thousands more. The Japanese media overwhelmed the public with its coverage of Aum’s activities in Japan, where the sect never had more than ten thousand members, but made little mention of Aum’s initially surprisingly successful bid to transport its movement to Russia, where it is said to have gained as many as thirty to forty thousand adherents.<sup>2</sup>

Aum Shinrikyo’s experience in Russia is worthy of examination for two principal reasons. First is the fact that many thousands of Russians expressed genuine interest in a new Japanese religious movement and in the persona and supposed powers of a Japanese mystic in a country that had never heretofore expressed much interest in Japanese religion. The second factor involves the more sinister efforts by Aum leaders to acquire Russian weapons, military equipment and know-how to produce a crude nuclear weapon. Aum enjoyed immense support in Russia in 1992-93, but its sudden decline thereafter was as rapid as its ascent.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Metraux is author of six books and many articles on Japan’s Soka Gakkai “new religion” as well as two books (Aum Shinrikyo and Japanese Youth and Aum Shinrikyo’s Impact on Japanese Society) and an article in Asian Survey on Aum.

<sup>2</sup> Oki Kasha, “Doko e iku shinja sanmannin?” [What will become of the thirty thousand believers] in AERA, 25 May 1995, p. 35. The source for this figure is the chief Russian security office, the former KGB. Another scholar, Yulia Mikhailova, puts the figure at 40,000. Source: Ian Reader, *Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, (2000), p. 275.

### **Aum Shinrikyo in Japan**

Aum Shinrikyo has a short infamous history in Japan. When Asahara Shoko (birth name: Matsumoto Chizuo) founded Aum in the early 1980s, there was little to distinguish it from many of the so-called “new new religions” (*shinshin shukyo*) that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. These religions appealed to a wide variety of younger Japanese, young professionals, and middle-aged women who were disillusioned with or felt uncomfortable in Japan’s highly materialistic society during an economic boom period. Aum became famous for its isolation and its killing of approximately 30 people.

The centerpiece of Aum has always been the personality and teachings of Asahara himself. Asahara taught that much of the misery that we experience in life is due to the corrupt nature of the human world. Living in society means that we absorb much of its negative karma and impulses which causes us great suffering not only in life, but in death as well. Asahara promised followers that he could intervene on their behalf by personally absorbing their bad karma and giving them in turn transcendent powers through a variety of very costly initiation ceremonies. Followers would live strong and joyful lives and would have many extraordinary powers including the ability to survive a nuclear war.

Aum attracted up to 10,000 members in Japan including about 1000-1200 *shukke-sha* (followers who renounced society and lived in Aum communes). Aum and Asahara developed an increasingly paranoid view of society. Aum isolated itself from society and began to arm itself for a possible confrontation with society in the early 1990s.

### **Aum in Russia**

Aum Shinrikyo’s spectacular yet exceptionally brief plunge into Russian society in the early 1990s mirrors its meteoric rise and fall in Japan. Asahara and Aum attracted considerable media attention, access to several key political figures, and a rapid rise in membership in 1992 and 1993, but, as in Japan, it ran into trouble when some of the families of Russian Aum members who had renounced the world to join the religion, formed a pressure group to oppose Aum as a distinct threat to Russian society. Strong pressure and successful court action led to the revocation of Aum’s legal registration as a religious organization in 1994 and a police raid on one of Aum’s Moscow centers on 15 March 1995, just days before Aum’s fateful subway attack in Tokyo. Ian Reader aptly reflects that:

Aum's history in Russia was a troubled one in which the movement was beset by legal problems and in which, despite its initial smooth entry aided by bureaucrats and officials, it fell foul of the courts and official bodies. Again, the patterns of conflict paralleled those it had faced in Japan and centered on its demanding system of world renunciation and severing ties with one's family.<sup>3</sup>

Russia was Aum's sole success in its efforts to gain an overseas base. Aum also set up offices in the United States and Germany and sought to build a center in Sri Lanka in 1991, but these efforts met with very little success.

Asahara made three trips to Russia in 1992-93 accompanied by as many as 270 faithful from Japan on chartered Aerflot jets.<sup>4</sup> Aum ran a fully staffed main headquarters in Moscow and had eleven branches outside of Moscow and at least seven inside of Moscow.<sup>5</sup> Asahara and other Aum leaders were initially well received by various Russian leaders as well as by many curious Russian citizens. Asahara bought extensive blocks of time on Russian television and radio and broadcast many of Asahara's speeches and workshops throughout Russia as well as regular broadcasts to Japan beamed via Vladivostok. It is also known that Aum clandestinely bought a Russian military helicopter and other equipment from the Russian black market, but failed in its attempt to acquire materials for nuclear weapons.

Aum media reports that Asahara first visited Russia in March of 1992 with a large band of supporters from Japan in response to a November 1991 invitation from the Russian Republic.<sup>6</sup> Asahara gave lectures at

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<sup>3</sup> Reader, p. 177.

<sup>4</sup> A main source for this section is the English-language Aum publication, *Monthly Truth*, No 11, January 1994, hereafter abbreviated as MT11.

<sup>5</sup> Some of the other Aum headquarters in Russia were located in St. Petersburg, Kazan, Perm, Vorkuta, Tyumen, Samara, Vladivostok, Elista, and Vladikavkaz. Source: "Global Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction: A Case Study on the Aum Shinrikyo." US Senate Government Affairs Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, 31 October 1995, Staff Statement, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> MT11, p. 12.

Moscow University and six other universities,<sup>7</sup> made several appearances on Russian television and radio, addressed a few groups of several thousand Russians at “initiation ceremonies,” and met with a number of influential Russian politicians.

*Why Did Aum Appeal To So Many Russians?*

The fact that thirty thousand or more citizens of a country with a long and very strong Christian tradition would join a movement like Aum Shinrikyo has puzzled many writers in the West, but a closer look at economic and social conditions in Russia in the early-to-mid 1990s might provide some explanations.

Aum credits its radio and television broadcasts as well as the charisma of Asahara and the “greatness” of his teachings for its initial successes. Endorsements of Aum by Russian members indicate that an overwhelming number of them first heard of Aum through the media. Aum also credits its success to the disruption of life in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. An Aum publication in 1995 declared that so many Russians were “suffering mentally from the confusion of the collapse of Communism” that they could not resist the “promise of true happiness” that they found in the “practices and teachings of Aum Shinrikyo.”<sup>8</sup>

Anybody walking the streets of Moscow and St. Petersburg during this period could see isolated examples of new wealth – a fancy car or a new boutique – but the main sight was a sense of sadness in the eyes of most Russians. The fall of Communism had led to hyperinflation where the value of the Russian ruble fell from a few rubles to the dollar to five thousand to the dollar (mid-1996). People on fixed salaries and pensions saw their livelihoods destroyed.<sup>9</sup> A parallel breakdown in authority led to increased anxiety and considerable criminal activity. A dysfunctional political system, economic collapse, massive corruption, infectious diseases and a declining population had destroyed Russia’s power and spirit.

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<sup>7</sup> Oki, p. 35.

<sup>8</sup> MT11, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> I talked to one retired government functionary who had worked and saved all her life and had retired with what had initially been a sufficient pension, but inflation ravaged her savings account and the stamp used to mail her monthly pension was greater than the payment inside.

Dr. Vladimir Yeryomin, Executive Secretary of the Union of Japanologists of Russia, Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow, presented a Russian perspective to John McFarlane, who participated in the official Australian investigation of Aum in Western Australia.<sup>10</sup> Dr. Yeryomin portrays Russia as a nation and society in chaos, having suffered the acute trauma of a sudden shift from a state that was materialistic, autocratic and officially atheistic to one that was increasingly chaotic, anarchic and entrepreneurial in nature. Both the personal and national identities of the ordinary Russian was under severe challenge and the nation had become split by a series of secessionist elements and overpowered by criminal gangs. The average Russian had become frightened, confused, and without hope. One way to cope with this chaos and sense of hopelessness was a resurgence of a long-suppressed spiritualism, which at times exhibited itself in extreme forms.<sup>11</sup>

Russian churches I visited on Sundays in 1996 were packed with crowds of generally elderly Russians. Younger Russians grew up under a Soviet regime that strongly discouraged and restricted religious practices. Reports in the Russian media in 1996 reported that younger Russians, like their counterparts in Japan, rarely take part in traditional Christian activities, but are still seeking a new sense of spirituality.

Russians have often turned to mystics during periods of stressful transition. All students of Russian history are aware of the powerful presence of Rasputin<sup>12</sup> in the years prior to the Russian Revolution.

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<sup>10</sup> John McFarlane, "Record of Discussion with Dr. Vladimir Yeryomin, Executive Secretary of the Union of Japanologists of Russia, Institute of Oriental Studies, at the Australian Embassy, Moscow on 12/13 July 1995." Mr. McFarlane is currently (summer 2001) Executive Director of the Australian Member Committee of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (AUS-CSCAP) at the Strategic and Defense Studies Centre, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australia National University, Canberra, Australia. This writer wishes to thank Mr. McFarlane for providing a copy of this 1995 report. Mr. McFarlane stipulates that reference may be made to the report, but direct quotes are not allowed.

<sup>11</sup> McFarlane report, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> It is probably not a coincidence that Asahara's image as reproduced in Russian-language pamphlets was not that of a portly robed Asian mystic,

Rasputin, the “mystic from the East,” convinced many members of the royal family of his faith-healing powers. In recent years other “gurus” have drawn even bigger audiences in Russia and eastern Europe. A few years ago a faith healer, Anatoly Kashpirovsky, drew tens of millions of viewers in Russia when he promised to perform a live operation on a woman using his healing powers to keep her out of pain. Shortly before his fall, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev welcomed Korean Unification Church leader Sun Myung Moon to the Kremlin and allowed “Moonies” to perform a ritual in a Kremlin Cathedral. Several fundamentalist churches from the United States have had success when sending missionaries to Russia. Indeed, one scholar described the tremendous surge in interest in religious movements in Russia after the collapse of the national ideology, communism, as a veritable “rush hour of the gods,” thus using a memorable phrase used in postwar Japan to describe the sudden upsurge of many new religious movements.<sup>13</sup> Asahara was only one in a parade of foreign religious leaders and “mystics” that have met some degree of success in Russia since the mid-1980s.

Aum’s philosophy includes the idea that a true believer can rise above his current state of misery and become a virtual super-human with the physical strength to overcome all limitations and the wisdom to achieve great success in life and to look into the future. Dr. Yeryomin stresses that Aum’s challenging, disciplined, entrepreneurial and esoteric philosophy was appealing to Russians searching for an answer to the complexities, contradictions and downturns of Russian life.<sup>14</sup> Aum’s promises to uplift its followers from the misery of what is contemporary Russia had its appeal.

Aum’s connections with Japan also had some appeal. Japan in 2001 has endured a decade-long recession and is no longer the economic envy of much of the world, but in 1992 Japan was highly regarded as a wealthy and dynamic nation. The fact that Aum is a Japanese organization enhanced its appeal and it is possible that some Russians felt that if they somehow became associated with a wealthy Japanese movement, perhaps they could share in this prosperity. Dr. Yeryomin stresses that Aum deliberately employed its “Japaneseness” to attract members, implying that

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but that of a stripped, beaten Christ wearing a crown of thorns and hanging from a cross—and also bearing a striking resemblance to Rasputin.

<sup>13</sup> Reader, p. 176.

<sup>14</sup> McFarlane, p. 7.

members could learn a lot about Japan through Aum and, by inference, how to become wealthy and powerful like so many Japanese.<sup>15</sup> Ian Reader supports this notion, observing that Aum may well also have attracted some followers, amongst whom were a considerable number of people who had lost their jobs in the economic upheavals of the period or who were unemployed postgraduates because it was Japanese and hence associated in people's minds with the potential for economic advancement.<sup>16</sup>

There were other times when Aum cleverly used a humanitarian cover to convey the idea that it is a humanitarian and philanthropic organization that would do much to help the poor and aged of Russia and that any desperate Russian could find companion-ship, food, and comfort inside an Aum. With so many citizens in such distress and with no governmental agency or other humanitarian group to help them collapse of the Soviet system that had provided a sense of security to many Russians, Aum may have appeared to be a lifeline to survival for some of its recruits.

It appears that Asahara and Aum although appeared to a variety of disaffected groups in Russia, one of its prime targets was students. One source, citing Russian press reports, insists that a majority of Russian Aum members were disaffected university students.<sup>17</sup> Aum gained access to several elite Russian universities by providing generous amounts of computer hardware and technical training to schools that could not afford computers and whose personnel had fallen behind in their technical training.

Asahara's appeal to students or recent graduates possibly stems from his many speeches at leading Russian universities, where he was a welcome guest because of Aum's generous contributions of computers and even cash. His talks, using a blend of pseudo-science and his own religious beliefs, drew large audiences. One of his talks, "how do Mental Illusions Occur" focused on the lack of brain wave activity in enlightened beings such as himself, the Buddha and Jesus." Asahara tried to convince his audience that the way to perfect enlightenment is a complete transformation of personality because this changed person's once normally high brain activity would become calm:

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Reader, p. 176.

<sup>17</sup> "Global Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction," op. cit., p. 2.

My EEG record shows that my brain waves have a frequency below 0.05 hertz. Doctors say that it is an inconceivable phenomenon that I am alive and talking to you today. They say that I should be dead. But this is the state in which the primary projection of the deepest level of consciousness manifests in this world most accurately. In other words, I have the cleanest mirror. This state is described in Buddhist texts as “the state of a Buddha who has attained mirror-like wisdom...” I am leading a regular life deeper than what is normally considered deep sleep. This sense of calm is only found in Buddhas.<sup>18</sup>

It is also clear that some professionals were attracted to Aum for reasons that were not at all religious, including a number of desperate musicians seeking a way to make a living. Statements by Russian converts in Aum publications indicate that a Russian orchestra organized by Aum, “Chyren” (Sanskrit for “divine offering”), drew a lot of favorable attention from Russians. According to the Japanese news weekly *AERA*, Aum offered to pay up to \$1000 a month to skilled Russian musicians to join its new orchestra. A thousand dollars a month was a very high salary for a Russian musician and many rushed to audition for Chyren.<sup>19</sup> The new orchestra played Aum-derived “Astral music” as well as ore traditional fare at Aum convocations and on television and radio, but it collapsed quickly when Aum itself lost its hold in Russia. At first Asahara paid the musicians quite well, but shortly thereafter the flow of money ceased, in effect terminating their employment with Aum.

Aum offered other inducements to attract younger Russians. One scheme was to advertise on computer bulletin boards for young people who would be trained as Japanese interpreters and who would be paid \$US 1,000 per month for their services.<sup>20</sup>

#### **Aum’s Shallow Roots in Russia**

One must question the actual strength of Aum Shinrikyo in Russia despite its claims of tens of thousands of members. True conversion to another religion requires more than just signing one’s name to a piece of

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<sup>18</sup> MT12, p. 26.

<sup>19</sup> Oki, pp. 35-36.

<sup>20</sup> McFarlane, p. 11.

paper and attending a couple of meetings. Aum as a religion renounces society and teaches that one can only transform oneself through renunciation and active practice. The over 1,100 Aum *shukkeshai* in Japan gave it a somewhat strong membership base, but conflicting reports put the number of “monks” in Russia at only 50 or 170, a tiny fraction of the claimed membership.

Such a small core membership indicates that although Aum made a successful entry on the Russian stage, it failed to develop a strong base in its three years there. Aum in Russia seems to have been little more than a passing fad that quickly disappeared except for a small handful of members who seriously sought to devote themselves to Asahara’s teachings. The experience of one of Aum’s Russian “monks” (*shukkesha*), Marina Romandina, is recounted in Kaplan and Marshall’s *The Cult at the End of the World*.<sup>21</sup>

Marina was an eighteen-year-old student taking time off from a Moscow area music college when she first encountered Aum in 1993. She found Asahara’s teachings to be so fascinating and stimulating that she impulsively decided to become a *shukkesha*. She shaved off her hair, devoured books by Asahara, and moved into an Aum commune in Moscow. She repeated the vow, “I am happy to join Aum. I will always follow the guru. I will become a monk” every day. There were two three-hour breaks for sleep and a ritual called “sacrificing food to the guru.” “We had to eat until we felt sick. This was to make us understand that food caused pain. Anyone who threw up had to eat their own vomit.”

Marina gradually suspected that there was more to Aum’s daily regimen of two meals of macaroni and porridge. She remembers feeling strange after each meal. “After eating, I always felt sleepy and had vivid dreams.” She suspects that she was being drugged. Then there were the pills. “Every month we were given a package of small yellow tablets called “sattva vitamins.” We took one every day. Afterwards, I’d feel so lethargic. I couldn’t think...I didn’t want to think.” She has reason to believe that the vitamins were a type of prescription tranquilizer called Fenozepan.

Life in the Moscow Aum community center deteriorated rapidly. Russian Aum members suffered from chronic health problems. “Just about everyone was suffering from some kind of neurosis. *Shukkesha* beat each

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<sup>21</sup> David E. Kaplan and Andrew Marshall, *The Cult at the End of the World: The Incredible Story of Aum* London: Arrow Books, Ltd, pp. 195-198.

other up and women quarreled the whole time. There was a lot of talk of suicide.” Life in a supposedly utopian commune had become pure hell. “It was hard for me to think rationally. Nobody was in control of themselves anymore. Many of us had high temperatures and allergies. My throat ached and my eyes watered.” When Marina began smelling strange chemical odors and getting terrible headaches, she made a successful escape.

Marina survived her encounter with Aum, but others were not so lucky. A young male member hung himself from a tree branch in a Moscow park without any explanation. A thirteen-year-old who had joined with his mother jumped to his death from a balcony of a Moscow apartment after endless taunts from other *shukkesha* who criticized his “lack” of spiritual progress. A few other former Aum Russians simply disappeared.

When stories such as Marina’s became known, family members of many Aum members became very concerned. Some of these families, as early as late 1992, joined together and, under the leadership of a Russian orthodox priest, initiated a civil law suit against Aum.<sup>22</sup> Some families enlisted the help of an organization known as the Committee for the Protection of Youth from Totalitarian Religions, which had campaigned against a variety of other new/non-orthodox religious movements in Russia. The suits bore fruit in the summer of 1994 when Russia’s Ministry of Justice annulled the registration of the Russian branch of Aum on technicalities having to do with the registration procedure itself. A few weeks later Aum was re-registered by the Moscow Department of Justice as “Moscow’s Aum Religious Association.”

Penal suits demanding damages began bearing fruit by 1995. On March 15 1995 police arrived at one of Aum’s Moscow-area centers and confiscated property to be used to reimburse the families who had won a civil suit against Asahara’s band. After the Tokyo gas incident, President Yeltsin publicly ordered Russia’s Prosecutor General, the Federal Security Service, and the Commission for Religious Organizations to scrutinize Aum’s activities with great care. Soon thereafter the Russian court that had been hearing the lawsuit banned all of Aum’s activities in Russia. The court charged that Aum was inflicting great harm on young Russians and criticized domestic radio and television that had broadcast Aum propaganda. The court ordered Aum to pay the defendants 20 billion rubles

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<sup>22</sup> “Global Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction,” p. 2.

(four million dollars), confiscated its registration and banned further television and radio broadcasting. Aum was doomed as an organization.

There are interesting parallels between Aum's downfall in both Russia and Japan. Aum leaders in Russia did not launch gas attacks on the civilian population as they had done twice in Japan, but they did attract intense opposition and protest from the families of some members as well as from the media. While Russian leaders and courts at first did not act against Aum and, in fact in several cases actively courted Aum, but later, acting in response to public and media pressure, the government and courts acted quickly and forcefully to shut down the Japanese sect. As was the case in Japan, Asahara complained that Aum had been stalled in Russia because of an anti-Aum conspiracy led, among others, by the CIA and the Vatican.<sup>23</sup>

#### **Aum's Relationships with Russian Leaders and Talk of Arms Sales**

Aum Shinrikyo's extraordinary access to powerful Russian leaders must be regarded within the broader context of Japanese-Russian relations at the time. When the Soviet Union declared war on Japan in the waning days of World War II, it seized several Japanese-held islands in the Kurile chain north of Hokkaido. Japan has demanded the return of these islands as the basis of any normal relationship with the Russians and the issue remains unresolved to this date.

Russian leaders in the early 1990s appeared very anxious to develop better relationships with Japan. They wanted access to greater trade with Tokyo and to encourage substantial Japanese investment in Russia, but always the islands issue got in the way. It is apparent that when Aum and Asahara, who was well aware of the difficulties in the relationship between the two countries, promised to help the Russians find ways to overcome these problems, they found ready listeners in Moscow.

Asahara and other Aum leaders seemed to have had unusually close access to Russian leaders, but Aum was not the only Japanese religious group to enjoy such privileges. As previously noted, the Rev. Moon, head of Korea's Unification Church, once visited Moscow on an invitation from President Gorbachev. Japan's Soka Gakkai has enjoyed a cordial relationship with Soviet/Russian leaders since the 1970s, long before the Gakkai had become a mainstream movement palatable to Japan's

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<sup>23</sup> Reader, 177.

establishment. The Soka Gakkai has few if any members in Russia and has never launched any proselytization campaigns amongst the Russian people. Soka Gakkai leader Ikeda Daisaku and other Gakkai leaders have traveled to Moscow on many occasions to meet Kremlin leaders as well as other ranking Russian luminaries. Students at Soka Gakkai schools in Japan have had exchange visits with Russian students and Soka University in Tokyo has an active exchange program with Moscow University.

Since the Soka Gakkai has never actively sought many converts in Russia, one wonders what each side saw in the other. Officially, the Gakkai delegations are “Missions of Peace” to strengthen cultural ties between Russian and Japanese citizens. A cynic, however, might remark that a picture from Soviet days of Ikeda meeting Gorbachev at some important Russian landmark adds legitimacy and prestige to the Gakkai in the eyes of its members as well as the Japanese public. Russian leaders might utilize the Gakkai’s close ties with Japan’s political establishment for their own benefit. It is entirely possible that Russian universities and other institutions received donations from the Soka Gakkai, but this has not been documented.<sup>24</sup> The fact that the Soka Gakkai’s own political party, the Komeito, had many contacts in the Japanese government and had played a key role in the short-lived anti-LDP coalition governments of 1993-94. The Soka Gakkai and Komeito had also acted as a key liaison between the Japanese and Chinese governments were establishing relations in 1972.<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps Russian leaders expected Asahara to be another Ikeda. Aum’s entry into Russia was considerably helped by Oleg Lobov, then Secretary of the Security Council in Russia and a close confidant of President Yeltsin. Lobov was one of the most influential politicians in Russia in the early 1990s and was even entrusted with control of the

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<sup>24</sup> The Soka Gakkai’s close relationship with Gorbachev has continued long after the demise of both his presidency and nation. When I attended the Soka Gakkai’s annual World Peace culture festival in Osaka in November of 1997, I sat in the honored guest section a few rows behind Ikeda and Gorbachev and his wife. The Soka Gakkai has published a book-length dialogue between Gorbachev and Ikeda. Gorbachev has lost political standing at home and probably relishes any major source of outside income and public recognition he can receive.

<sup>25</sup> See Daniel Metraux, *The History and Theology of the Soka Gakkai* Lewiston NY: Edwin Mellen, (1988).

Russian government during the failed coup attempt of 1991. Yeltsin had instructed Lobov to establish a seat of government outside of Moscow if Yeltsin had been imprisoned by the coup leaders.<sup>26</sup>

Lobov was to be a key player in the enhancement of relations between Russia and Japan. The lynchpin was to be a “Russian Japanese University” in Moscow, which, among other things, was designed to facilitate business contacts between the two countries and to encourage Japanese investment in Russia.<sup>27</sup> The Russian government gave Lobov a large old Moscow building, but no staff, faculty, or equipment. When Lobov met Asahara in Japan, he probably felt that he had found a wealthy Japanese religious leader who might come to Russia with large wads of cash. Aum did indeed provide Lobov with some funds, but he soon discovered that it was impossible to get funds from other Japanese sources because of his Aum ties. Sadly, when Lobov died in 1995, so did his university.

Lobov, however, did facilitate matters for Asahara and other Aum leaders when they arrived in 1992. Asahara sought to convince Russian leaders that a relationship with an influential and high profile group such as Aum could really help Russia’s relationship with Japan. Dr. Yeryomin stresses that during this transitional period in Russian history, religious leaders, including those from overseas, were accorded great respect by Russian leaders and that it was a feature of Russian diplomacy to seek good relationships with them. Aum responded by sending generous funds to Russian hospitals and agrarian institutes as well as supplies of medicine and it is said that Aum bribed certain Russian officials to secure better contacts inside Russia.<sup>28</sup>

These tactics worked quite well. Asahara even managed to get an appointment to visit President Yeltsin, but Yeltsin eventually cancelled the visit and Asahara had to settle for Vice-President Aleksandr Rutskoi, who soon thereafter lost his power base. There were ties also with a number of parliamentary leaders in the State Duma.

Aum also spent lavishly to get time on Russian radio and television. Aum bought a three-year contract on one of the largest radio stations in Russia, state-run Mayak Radio, at \$800,000 per year. Aum

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<sup>26</sup> McFarlane, p. 9.

<sup>27</sup> Reader, p. 176.

<sup>28</sup> McFarlane, p. 10.

broadcast an hour-long program on a daily basis and had the program relayed to Japan via an Aum radio tower in Vladivostok to Japan every evening. It is said that Aum either leased or owned its own radio station in Vladivostok which was used to relay speeches by Asahara and other Aum programs back to Japan every day.

#### **Aum's Search for Russian Arms**

By the early 1990s Asahara and Aum experienced a series of public exposes, public humiliations and legal challenges that caused Asahara to look inward and to think that his group was under attack from outside forces that sought to destroy everything that he had worked so long to build. Asahara concluded that Aum needed an arsenal of weapons to defend itself against outside attack although it is not entirely clear what he intended to do with the weapons. It is also evident that he considered the possibility of Aum's scientists building their own crude nuclear bomb as the ultimate defense weapon.

Since guns are highly illegal in Japan and are very hard to come by, Asahara and other Aum leaders devised plans to procure weapons, military parts and technical know-how abroad. Aum's futile attempt to find uranium in Australia is well documented as are its attempts to procure highly technical equipment in the United States, but Russia was Aum's chief target.

Aum's chances of procuring both materials and technical know-how in Russia were enhanced by the chaos that had become endemic after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Ian Reader notes that "The collapse of values and the extremes of a free and unregulated market meant that those with money could have access to whatever they wanted, including military equipment, chemicals and other such materials. [I]t is clear that in Russia Aum found that it could acquire weapons and other materials, and its leaders, having already engaged in violent activities and displayed an interest in manufacturing biological weapons in 1990, certainly possessed the mindset necessary to follow up with interest any opportunities to acquire military technologies that presented themselves."<sup>29</sup>

The Russian military was in a state of virtual collapse in the early 1990s. Inflation and government cutbacks meant that officers and soldiers were received pitiful compensation and lived in apparent squalor.

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<sup>29</sup> Reader, pp. 177-178.

Discipline and standards had collapsed to such an extent that a high-level decision was made within the army to sell of surplus equipment and to offer other services to make money. Therefore, when Aum came knocking requesting the right to purchase military equipment and to have military training for various Japanese members of Aum, the Russians complied.

It is reported that Kiyohide Hayakawa, the alleged mastermind of Aum's attempts to arm itself, made twenty-one trips to Russia from Japan between 1992-1995.<sup>30</sup> He and other Aum officials managed to smuggle a Russian AK-74 rifle into Japan, which was to have become the model, which Aum would use to manufacture at its base at Kamikuishiki in Japan. There were also blueprints for rocket launchers and various other forms of military equipment. It is known that Aum also somehow managed to smuggle in a former Russian military helicopter (broken into separate parts) and perhaps much more, including, perhaps, blueprints for the manufacture of nerve gases such as sarin.<sup>31</sup> It was Masami Tsuchiya, Aum's top chemist, who, having learned a lot about sarin in Russia, succeeded in producing it in usable form in Japan as early as 1993.<sup>32</sup>

#### **Why Did Aum Go to Russia?**

Aum's expansion into Russia between 1992-95 involved tremendous effort, time and money, but its initial successes, however impressive, soon came to naught. It is clear that Asahara and Aum wanted both converts and weapons, but it is not at all clear which of these two objectives instigated Aum's move to Moscow. Did Aum come to Russia seeking advanced weaponry and only then discover that it had the opportunity to attract many new members? Or did it go to Russia seeking to expand its religious base only to find that it might have a chance to acquire weapons and nuclear technology.

Ian Reader, who has studied Aum intently for many years, speculates that Aum went to Russia as part of an effort to both expand and internationalize its movement,<sup>33</sup> but other scholars feel that the membership

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<sup>30</sup> "Global Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction," p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Reader, p. 178.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Jay Lifton, *Destroying the World to Save It: Aum Shinrikyo, Apocalyptic Violence, and the New Global Terrorism* New York: Metropolitan Books, (1999), p. 183.

<sup>33</sup> Reader, p. 178.

drive was only a smoke screen and that the hidden agenda was the procurement of weapons.<sup>34</sup> There is no conclusive evidence to support either view, but what is clear is that both the search for weapons and new members was very intense and that every effort was made to succeed. My only guess is that both efforts were equally serious and sincere whether or not one came before the other and one paved the way for the other. Aum went to other countries such as Australia<sup>35</sup> and perhaps the United States in

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>John McFarlane, who headed the official Australian government investigation on Aum activities in Australia, provided this writer with the following overview of Aum activities in his country. We had very little knowledge of the Aum Sect when they visited Australia in 1993. They came to notice when Customs observed that they had imported a huge amount of air cargo (some AUS\$30,000 worth) when they arrived in Australia. Included in this cargo were a number of items apparently to be used in assaying samples for uranium mining, including hydrochloric and perchloric acids, which was actually described in their Customs declaration as liquid soap. It was not until a Customs officer asked one of the party to pour some "liquid soap" into his hand, that he admitted that the substance was not soap, but actually acid, which was intended for chemical analysis purposes. As a result of this false Customs declaration and the fact that they had carried a dangerous and prohibited substance in the aircraft two members of the party were each fined Aus\$2,400. Even so, neither the Australian Federal Police nor Customs had any reason at that time to doubt that their claims that they were importing these items for reasons of mineral exploration. At that time, we had heard very little (if anything) of the Aum Sect. It was not until after the incident in the Tokyo subway that we were contacted by the people who bought Banjawarn Station in Western Australia from the Aum Sect, that the loose ends had been tied together. The new owners found a number of chemicals which had been left in a "laboratory" on their property, and, having heard the alarming account of what had happened in Tokyo, they contacted the AFP and, together with the Western Australian Police, we launched a major investigation into what had been going on at Banjawarn Station. As a result of this investigation the remains of a flock of sheep herded together in unusual circumstances were discovered, and two independent forensic tests of the carcasses and surrounding soil revealed a byproduct which appeared to be related to sarin

a search for technology or uranium without much if any effort to gain members, but it went to Russia for both the acquisition of new members and weapons technology.

#### **Is Aum Still Alive in Russia?**

Even though Aum was officially barred from proselytizing in Russia in 1995, the newspaper *Izvestiya* reported in February 2000 that Aum is secretly rebuilding there, gathering followers and training them at a village on the outskirts of Moscow in defiance of the ban. It was also reported that Aum's activities are being financed from Japan. It is said that after the imposed in 1995, Russian AUM followers acquired a 9-hectare plot of land in a village, about 300 kilometers east of Moscow, keeping their membership of the sect secret, AUM is said to have built a warehouse to store vegetables, a prayer facility, and two houses where cult members train.<sup>36</sup>

There are no further reports concerning Aum activity in Russia, but it would not be surprising if there were a few members. Aum continues to survive in Japan in a very truncated form even though many of the top leaders are in prison. Japanese members often say that they had given up their former lives and could not return and that they have no other place to go. A small number of Japanese have joined the movement since 1995 for a variety of reasons including feelings of isolation or attraction to the teachings of Aum. It would not be surprising if at least a handful of Russians either kept their membership or joined for very similar reasons, but there is no indication that Aum will grow to its former size in Russia. As is the case in Japan, there is a good reason to believe that Aum will limp along in Russia in a rather clandestine manner.

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gas was discovered. Retrospective investigations revealed that members of the Aum Sect had purchased Banjarn Station in September 1993, apparently for the purposes of exploring for uranium (which is found in the area) and, apparently carrying out tests of sarin gas against sheep. As far as I recall, there was no serious attempt by members of the Aum Sect to recruit members in Australia. John McFarlane, Visiting Fellow, Australian Defence Studies Centre, Australian Defence Force Academy

<sup>36</sup> Kyodo News Service, February 24, 2000.

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