

**Bulletin of the GHI Washington**

**Supplement 6 (2009)**

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## JAPAN: “1968”—HISTORY OF A DECADE

**Claudia Derichs**

The history of the “1968” movement in Japan is really the history of more than a decade because the first radical political event of the postwar period occurred in 1960. The US and Japan intended to extend a bilateral security agreement that year that Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru had negotiated simultaneously with the peace treaty of San Francisco in 1951. Part of the prime minister’s “Yoshida Doctrine,” a political program that initiated Japan’s ties with the West, the security agreement firmly linked Japan to the US, giving the US special conditions. For example, it did not even need to consult the Japanese government if it chose to engage in military actions from Japanese territory. Opposing the proposed ten-year extension, the Japanese populace erupted in protests, which undoubtedly presented a test for the young democracy.

In the political Left that had developed in Japan since 1945, a tightly organized Communist Party as well as an effective union movement arose. Later, the Socialist Party of Japan also formed a part of this camp. In retrospect, this Left made up the “Old Left,” because in 1957, the “New Left” was formed, directing itself primarily against the stultifying hierarchy of the party organizations and their “Stalinism.” The early New Left derived most of its members from student circles; its groupings were understood as *tôha*—party factions. Over the course of a decade of splits and new foundings, four dominant, ideological strands emerged by 1967 in the whole New Left movement: the Trotskyist, structural reformist, Maoist, and socialist strands spawned in association with the Socialist Party. Common to all these New Left groups was a confrontational stance toward the Japanese Communist Party (JCP), which they believed could no longer claim to be avant-garde. Nevertheless, the “old” (JCP) and New Left worked together to fight the extension of the security treaty in 1960. Yet despite storming the parliament and forcing President Eisenhower to cancel a visit due to lack of security on June 14 that year, the New Left was not able to prevent the extension from being ratified.

The mass demonstrations of the 1960 movement suggest that 1968 was not the year that launched the Japanese student movement and the militant and terrorist groups that followed it. The late 1960s, to be sure, contributed to these developments, and especially, thereafter,

to the Japanese Red Army, but a dynamic shaped by events other than Japan's efforts to come to terms with its ultra-nationalist past had already emerged before that time.

### Loose and spontaneous: Beheiren and Zenkyôtô

The protest and organizational structures of 1960 had been dominated by established parties and unions. The well-rehearsed zig-zag

march—the *snake dance*—of the student umbrella organization Zengakuren, not only made it famous but virtually symbolized the group's rigid organization, for example. In the mid-1960s, however, spurred by the Vietnam War and later by the global wave of *student power*, protest structures were transformed. In civil society, a movement against the Vietnam



Masked and armed with wooden sticks, Zengakuren members participate on Oct. 21, 1968, in a demonstration on International Anti-War Day in Tokyo.

War developed that had a markedly loose organizational structure. Led by Oda Makoto (one of the most prominent social critics and peace activists in the country), this movement, known as Beheiren (Betonamu ni heiwa o! shimin undô [Citizen's League for Peace in Vietnam]), was non-partisan, emphasizing voluntary, non-binding participation in demonstrations. Zengakuren [All-Japan Federation of Student Self-Government Associations] and Zenkyôtô (Zengaku kyôtô kaigi [All-Campus Joint Struggle]) constituted the opposite poles of the student movement of the late '60s. Zenkyôtô members, unlike their Zengakuren counterparts, consciously avoided grouping themselves into party factions, calling themselves *non-sects*, or *non-poli*, to strengthen their apolitical stance. In fact, primarily concerned with particular demands of university students, they were principally geared toward the "Campus Struggle," which, nonetheless, was just as militant as the street fighting.

However, New Left groups tried to infiltrate the Zenkyôtô associations to recruit them for the political struggle. Consequently, in

1969, an all-Japan Zenkyôtô was founded in which eight New Left factions forged an alliance, although it didn't last long—despite dramatic and militant street and campus battles, the movement petered out by the end of the year. With the decline of the student movement in sight, controversial, ideological strategy debates erupted, resulting in a few, strong cadres, and later in the terrorist branch, the Red Army of Japan. The various cadres of the New Left thereafter competed with one another in recruiting new members and for the hegemonic leadership of the movement. Two prominent ones were the Chûkaku and Kakumaru factions, which continued to use violence to wage their ideological battles even after 1969.

Such violence was typical of the phase of *uchi-geba* [internal violence] that lasted from the late '60s and early '70s. In retrospect, *uchi-geba* can be regarded as one of the specific characteristics of Japan's New Left. In 1971, most cadres had begun to form armed “guerilla units,” whose activists went underground. They perceived themselves as being in a state of war against enemy cadres within their own movement, as well as against the Japanese state. The spiral of violence escalated after 1970, becoming a much-discussed topic among Japanese intellectuals. Professionalized mechanisms of retaliation were deployed, accompanied by ritualized self-criticism and the ideological justification of attacking and killing people.

Japan's “1968” took place within this mix of factors and factions. Students protested conditions at the mass universities but, for the most part, did not address the war generation's failure to deal with its past. For the Left, the emperor remained the symbol of the fatal, imperial war, yet even the large leftist parties did not succeed in dethroning him while he lived. Clearly, behavioral continuities with the prewar period contributed to this: even if the emperor had become merely human after the country's defeat in 1945, he still deserved respect and loyalty. The debate about his war guilt never evolved into a wide, public discussion during his lifetime (he died in January 1989); no historians' dispute (like the one in 1986 in Germany) was carried out in the national newspapers and journals to come to terms, vehemently, with past events.

### **The Japanese Red Army: Japanese perceptions**

As the student movement lost momentum in 1969 and “internal violence” reigned, protesters asked themselves, “What next?” Some chose the cadres mentioned above; others opted to take

up the armed struggle beyond Japan's borders; and, on activist Shiomi Takaya's initiative, the Red Army Faction (RAF) of Japan was founded. Yet when Shiomi was arrested, the group found itself without a leader. As political leadership in Japan is exceptionally personality-oriented—even in official politics—this circumstance had a profound effect on the remaining activists and sympathizers, whose views on how they should carry on diverged. Those loyal to Shiomi, who continued to call themselves the Red Army Faction, espoused concerted action in Japan. To this end, they allied themselves with a group within the so-called United Red Army that specialized in stealing weapons.

In the West, the conception of the Japanese Red Army primarily derives from a group, Nihon Sekigun [The Japanese Red Army], led by Shigenobu Fusako, which went to the Middle East. In Japan, however, the image is shaped much more by the United Red Army because of the dramatic and widely broadcast events triggered by this group there. Fleeing police persecution, about two dozen activists of the United Red Army had absconded to the Japanese Alps north of Tokyo in the winter of 1971 amidst ice and snow. They had to stay “underground” because warrants for their arrest had long since been issued for armed attacks, theft of weapons and money, and serious bodily injury to others. In this situation, the question of control and hierarchy within the group became more important than the revolution they strove for. To hold the group together ideologically, a system of ideas had to be created to give the group a *raison d'être* and lend legitimacy and necessity to its actions. At issue was the survival of the collective, which was to be preserved by a process of “communist transformation.” Although the details of the process were not given, all the members had to subject themselves to it, critically examining their own bourgeois attitudes and behaviors and eradicating them to become better revolutionaries. The collective investigated personal flaws and weaknesses, whereupon individuals tried to overcome them, yet no one managed to do this to the satisfaction of the leaders, who then punished them with increasing severity: fourteen members died from the tortures inflicted upon them, and all the others surmised that they would be next.

This internal murder ended in February 1972 when the police battled these Red Army members in a resort town in the Japanese Alps. As the conflict was broadcast live on Japanese television, the

images, above all, took root in popular memory. Five members of the United Red Army had taken a hostage, preventing the police squad from storming their hideout right away. On the tenth day, the police squad leader decided to proceed with water cannon and tear gas, freeing the hostage.

This episode left indelible traces in Japan's collective memory. The wave of horror over the murders and the armed conflict with the police washed all the way to the Middle East, where the Japanese Red Army was active. Its "reaction" to events at home consisted in planning and executing a suicide attack at Israel's Ben Gurion Airport in May 1972. Whereas the attack is commonly regarded as an expression of the Japanese terrorists' solidarity with the Palestinian liberation war, Shigenobu's personal descriptions emphasized its connection to the events in the Japanese Alps.

### **"Aftereffects" of the "68ers"**

The lynchings and the United Red Army's battle in the mountains paralyzed the entire New Left movement. This paralysis must have been at least partly to blame for the failure of sections of the New Left to become integrated into the "new social movements" of the 1970s. No political party arising from transregional, social movements—like the Green Party in Germany—was founded in Japan.

In short, the political influence of "1968" in Japan does not seem to have been very great. When asked about it today, most students consider the influence of the movement on later political occurrences "marginal" in comparison to the developments in Europe (such as the Green Party). Rather, it was the events and episodes themselves that continue to have aftereffects in Japan's collective memory: among others, the spontaneous protest against the Vietnam War (before 1968), the founding of Zenkyôtô to counter Zengakuren, internal violence, and especially the history of the United Red Army.

As some of the cadres from that time are still active—they have been "converted" to peaceful environmental NGOs and critics of globalization that now get along, by and large—it seems that no concluding evaluation of their early activities and influence can be made at this point in time. Late reconciliations and cooperative endeavors among them have nearly obscured their violence-prone phase from memory. Nonetheless, the '68 movement in Japan—1960,

Vietnam, and the 1970s, for example—certainly gave Japanese society a “shove.” However, ever since that time, the movement has been unable to prepare proactively for action but has only been able to react to events in society.

To be sure, Japan has movements—women’s, environmental, and anti-nuclear power ones, for example—that would see their roots in “1968,” yet with very limited causality. Consequently, the discourses on anti-authoritarian child-rearing, women’s emancipation, and other such themes have made their way into other contexts for which the direct descent from the events of the late ’60s can hardly be discerned. The members of the New Left were “conformist” in their organizational structures, and also in their lifestyles and value systems. These facts contributed to the comparatively low level of influence they exerted. At the same time, the events of that time may have had triggered impulses that will only be visible in the future.

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