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JAPAN POST-WAR ACTIVISM. A VIEW FROM FUSAKO SHIGENOBU

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Whenever they shall grow weary of the existing Government,
they can exercise their constitutional right of amending it,
or their revolutionary right to dismember or overthrow it.
Abraham Lincoln, First Inaugural Address, 1861

In October of 2021, an underwater volcano erupted off the coast of Okinawa near Henoko base, causing a mass of pumice stones to clog offshore waters. Fusako Shigenobu, the former leader of the Japanese Red Army, jailed in the Akishima' prison facility, took the event as an inspiration to write a haiku poem, whose English translation sounds like

> "Pumice stones buried in the waters off of Okinawa's Henoko base, nature, too, revolts against the power of the state",

where the volcano's eruption in her view, represents nature's revolt against the American militarization of Okinawa. Between 2016 and 2017, activism against American military bases in Okinawa gained international attention following the arrest of Hiroji Yamashiro on 17 October 2016. As chair of the Okinawa Peace Action Center, Yamashiro was accused of cutting a wire fence surrounding a construction site during protests against the construction of new U.S. Marine Corps facilities near Takae, Okinawa.

Civil society groups protesting in front of the Naha District Court criticized the conditions of his detention, particularly the restrictions on family and medical visits. Their concerns, alongside an Urgent

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Action campaign launched by Amnesty International in late February 2017, contributed to Yamashiro's release on bail in March 2017[1].

Despite Japan's widespread reputation as a politically passive society—often characterized by public quiescence or apathy toward protest—the environment has emerged as a key site of contemporary civic mobilization, particularly since the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster[2].

Yet the activism of Shigenobu and Yamashiro is above all rooted in criticism of the US military presence in Okinawa. Born in 1952, Yamashiro is seven years younger than Shigenobu, who grew up during the U.S. occupation of Japan. While Yamashiro came of age in the 1970s, both were shaped by the political memory of the Anpo protests, the death of Michiko Kanba, and the staged suicide (*seppuku*) of Mishima Yukio.

What do we refer to when we speak of "protests," "armed struggle," "activism," "civil society participation movements," or "freedom fighters," particularly in relation to generations born after the Second World War? The purpose of this article is not to delineate the essence of modern democracy or the means by which it should empower every member of society. Nevertheless, the opening quotation from Abraham Lincoln - widely acknowledged as a foundational figure of modern democratic thought - suggests that, in his era, revolution was considered a legitimate right of those committed to improving society and governmental institutions.

It is worth emphasizing that Hiroji Yamashiro was ultimately released on bail only after the intervention of a globally respected non-governmental organization such as Amnesty International. Despite this favorable outcome, the question arises as to whether the judicial system alone could have contributed meaningfully to his release. This apparent deadlock warrants further examination by political scientists, beyond the sphere of volunteer activism and humanitarian goodwill.

[1] https://samidoun.net/2022/06/fusako-shignenobu-in-her-own-words/

[2] worldbeyondwar.org/hiroji-yamashiro-okinawan-activist-facing-prison/ ; https://apjjf.org/ authors/ view/14811

1. *Democracy and activism in Cold War era*

It remains easier to define what democracy is not than to establish precisely what it is. The 2009 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Barack Obama, the 44th President of the United States, is also the leader who, while in office, authorized military interventions and bombings in Syria, Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia, and Pakistan[3]. Conversely, to identify a Nobel Peace Prize recipient whose recognition might be regarded as "fully deserved", one must look back to Nazi Germany and recall the remarkable yet forgotten case of Carl von Ossietzky[4]. As a journalist, Ossietzky began exposing Germany's secret rearmament as early as 1924. He was later arrested in 1934, shortly after Hitler's rise to power, and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize the following year, while still imprisoned.

The decision to open this article with a reference to Abraham Lincoln was motivated by the fact that his words resurfaced in a particular historical moment during the latter half of the twentieth century. In the early 1970s, specifically, amid the events described in this paper, the quotation was cited by Abbie Hoffman during the 1969 Chicago Seven trial. Hoffman, a member of the group of activists charged with conspiracy and crossing state lines to incite riots, invoked Lincoln's words while standing trial for his role in the protests that erupted in response to the 1968 Democratic National Convention, held in Chicago at the International Amphitheatre from August 26 to 29[5].

In a study focusing on Japan's contemporary political and social history, the quotation has been selected because "revolution"- understood as a strategy for demanding democracy that has often entailed the use of violence - became a central element of radical Japanese protest movements beginning in the latter half of the 1960s. As in the American and European contexts, these movements largely originated within universities. More recently, several scholars[6] have situated the

[3] https://harvardpolitics.com/obama-war-criminal/

[4] R. Tres, *The Man without a Party: The Trials of Carl von Ossietzky*, Beacon Publishing Group, 2019.

[5] L. Weiner, *Conspiracy to Riot: The Life and Times of One of the Chicago 7*, Cleveland,Belt Publishing, 2020.

[6] N. Kapur, *The Japanese Student Movement in the Cold War Crucible, 1945-1972*, in "The Asia-Pacific Journal", n. 1, 2022, pp.1-25; N. Kapur, *Japan at the Crossroads: Conflict and Compromise after Anpo*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2018.

Japanese movements within the broader political phenomenon known as the "New Left", which emerged from the countercultural milieu of the 1960s and extended into the 1970s, the same period during which the Chicago Seven were active participants.

Unlike the traditional left, the "New Left" tended to prioritize struggles for diverse forms of social justice rather than purely economic objectives. However, the broader the political movement became, the more internally diverse it grew. On one side were those advocating for the evolution, continuation, and revitalization of traditional leftist ideals; on the other, groups that rejected association with the labor movement and Marxism's historical theory of class struggle. Still others gravitated toward established forms of Marxism, such as the New Communist Movement - inspired by Maoism - or the K-Gruppen in the German-speaking world. In the United States, the movement was closely linked to anti-war protests on college campuses, while in Japan, it is notable that demonstrations against the Vietnam War had already begun as early as the mid-1950s.

In other words, to define the global context in which the story of the Japanese Red Army unfolded, one must consider that these events took place within the geopolitical framework of the Cold War during the second half of the twentieth century. At the same time, another major historical process was occurring parallel to the division of the world into the two opposing spheres of influence represented by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact, namely, decolonization.

The end of the Cold War world order is typically dated to November 9, 1989, the day the Berlin Wall fell. Significantly, that same year had begun on January 7 with the passing of Emperor Hirohito, who, in September 1945, appeared in a well-known photograph alongside General Douglas MacArthur. In that image, taken during the final months when Hirohito was still regarded by his people as a living deity, the Japanese sovereign stands as a symbol of "the man of the defeat."[7].

Decolonization, meanwhile, intersected with these geopolitical transformations. Its final stage in East Asia came one year earlier, when Hong Kong was returned to mainland China in July 1997.

[7] H. P. Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*. Harper Perennial, 2016; F. Pike, *Hirohito's War: The Pacific War, 1941–1945,* Bloomsbury USA Academic, 2015.

Amnesty International - the non-governmental organization that contributed to Hiroji Yamashiro's release - stands as one of the enduring legacies of Cold War - era democracy. Founded in 1961, the organization received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1977. Between 1962 and 1964, Amnesty International followed the trial of a man who would later become an icon of liberation from colonialism and a symbol of modern democratic ideals: Nelson Mandela. Arrested in 1962, twenty years after joining the African National Congress, Mandela faced charges of inciting workers to strike and of traveling without valid documents. His trial was attended by Sir Louis Blom-Cooper, one of Amnesty International's founders, who served as an official observer. While imprisoned under a five-year sentence, Mandela was adopted by the organization as a prisoner of conscience.

In 1964, when new accusations of sabotage and armed resistance against the apartheid government were brought forward, Mandela was again convicted. Only the high level of international attention surrounding his case spared him from the death penalty. At that moment, Amnesty International confronted a profound moral and political dilemma regarding the legitimacy of armed resistance and the use of violence. The organization maintains to this day that it adopts as prisoners of conscience only those activists who neither use nor advocate violence. This principle, however, was not easily upheld, as reflected in the words of General Secretary Peter Benenson, who declared:

> "We recognize, with great sympathy, that where a Government has shown itself contemptuous of the Rule of Law and impervious to peaceful persuasion, that those to whom it has denied full human rights as set out in the United Nations Declaration, may feel or find themselves forced into a position in which the only road to freedom is violence. Such people, though they cannot qualify for adoption as Prisoners of Conscience within the definition of Amnesty International, can be, and often are, our active concern on humanitarian grounds".

Activism subsequently shifted toward demands for fair trials and improved prison conditions.

In recent years, with the opening of the Umkhonto we Sizwe archives - the paramilitary wing of the African National Congress (ANC)-scholars have re-examined Mandela's case, emphasizing that his "long walk to freedom" from a regime of racial discrimination, inten-

tionally pursued through armed resistance, was part of a broader global strategy. Mandela had begun to discuss the turn toward armed struggle as early as 1952, and, according to the recollections of Oliver Tambo, later President of the ANC from 1967 to 1991, "the question of violence was raised but deferred"[8] in 1955.

That same year, in April, the Bandung Conference marked the first major gathering of leaders seeking an alternative path distinct from both the United States and the Soviet Union. Although many participating countries aligned ideologically more closely with Moscow than with Washington, the event symbolized a critical moment in the emergence of the Non-Aligned Movement. Among those present were Moses Kotane, the veteran General Secretary of the South African Communist Party (of which Nelson Mandela was a member); Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, a leading figure of Arab unity and anticolonialism; Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru; and Chinese Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai.

In 1963, one year before his final conviction, and with financial support from the World Federation of Democratic Youth, a Soviet front organization, Mandela traveled to China via Romania, Poland, and the Soviet Union. According to his companions on that trip, during their visit to Beijing the Chinese hosts commented on the question of armed struggle with characteristic pragmatism:

"You have to do it when the conditions are right.".

Nelson Mandela was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993[9].

The case of Fusako Shigenobu, however, has never been addressed by Amnesty International or by any other non-governmental organization. In fact, it remains almost entirely unknown to Italian public opinion, except perhaps for an event that occurred in Naples on April 14, 1988, when a powerful car bomb exploded in front of the United Serv-

[8] S. Dubow, *Where there political alternatives in the wake of the Sharpeville- Langa violence in South Africa 1960?,* in "The Journal of African History", n.1, 2015, pp. 119-142.

[9] S.J. Ndlovu - Gatsheni, *From a 'Terrorist' to Global Icon: A Critical Decolonial Ethical Tribute to Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela of South Africa*, in "Third World Quarterly", n. 6, 2014, pp. 905-921.

ice Organizations (USO), the recreational club of the US Navy, at Calata San Marco. The explosion killed five people, including one American, and injured fifteen others. The attack coincided with the second anniversary of the 1986 US bombing of Libya. Although no perpetrators were ever arrested or tried, the responsibility was attributed to two members of the Japanese Red Army.

Shigenobu joined the Red Army Faction around 1969, after several years of involvement in student protests. The group's first major operation occurred the following year, on March 31, 1970, when Japan Airlines Flight 351, a domestic Boeing 727 departing from Tokyo International Airport and carrying 129 passengers, was hijacked. Lacking sufficient fuel to reach Cuba, the hijackers forced the crew to land first in Fukuoka and later at Gimpo Airport in Seoul. All passengers were eventually released, and the aircraft was flown to Pyongyang, where the crew was freed. The hijackers were granted political asylum by the government of Kim Il-sung in North Korea, where several of them reportedly still reside today.

The origins of the armed group must be understood in close connection with the major transformations experienced by Japanese society since the end of the Second World War. The Japan in which Shigenobu spent her childhood, defeated and deeply impoverished, is vividly depicted in her autobiographical *work Hatachi no jidai* (The Time of Twenty).

> "I was born just after Japan's defeat in World War II. September 28, 1945. My sister once sent me a copy of an old newspaper from my birthday. The front page of the newspaper was titled "Emperor Meets with General MacArthur," and it was an article that symbolized the meeting between the emperor and MacArthur the day before, and the new American domination of Japan that followed. After the war, there was a food shortage, and people were not able to get enough food through rationing, so they went to nearby shops to buy food to survive. My father was a veteran, and he used his knowledge as a teacher to start a bakery, even though he was an amateur, and that's how our family got started after the war. In a time of food shortages, he got hold of yeast, baked bread every day, and sold it, and it seems that it sold like hotcakes."[10].

[10] F. Shigenobu, はたちの時代.60 年代と私 (The Time of Twenty. The 1960s and Me) , 太田出版、2023, p. 12.

By the late 1960s, bank robberies had become the preferred means of financing student activism. The names and faces of many members of the Japanese Red Army (JRA) were already known to the police; nevertheless, the group's ultimate transition to an explicitly violent and armed strategy made relocation outside Japan necessary. It was Shigenobu's decision to move to the Middle East, specifically to Lebanon, where the organization soon became involved in a series of internationally significant attacks.

On May 30, 1972, Lod Airport in Tel Aviv (later renamed Ben Gurion International Airport) became the scene of a massacre. A gun-and-grenade assault carried out by three JRA members, who had trained in a camp in Baalbek near Beirut, killed twenty-six people and wounded approximately eighty others. One of the assailants took his own life with a grenade, another was killed in the crossfire, and only Okamoto Kōzō survived. Among the victims were seventeen Christian pilgrims from Puerto Rico, a Canadian citizen, and eight Israelis, including Professor Aharon Katzir, an internationally renowned biophysicist specializing in protein research.

In July 1973, members of the Japanese Red Army (JRA) carried out the hijacking of Japan Airlines (JAL) flight 404 over the Netherlands. The passengers and crew were released in Libya, where the hijackers subsequently destroyed the aircraft.

In January 1974, the JRA attacked a Shell oil facility in Singapore, taking five hostages. At the same time, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) seized the Japanese Embassy in Kuwait. The hostages were released in exchange for a ransom and safe passage to South Yemen—an episode later known as the Laju Incident.

On September 13, 1974, JRA operatives stormed the French Embassy in The Hague, Netherlands. The ambassador and ten other individuals were taken hostage, and a Dutch police officer was seriously wounded by a gunshot that punctured a lung. After prolonged negotiations, the hostages were freed in exchange for the release of an imprisoned JRA member, Yatsuka Furuya, a ransom of $300,000, and the use of an aircraft. The hostage-takers first flew to Aden, South Yemen, where they were denied entry, and then proceeded to Syria. The Syrian authorities, who did not regard hostage-taking for monetary purposes as a revolutionary act, compelled the group to surrender their ransom.

In August 1975, the JRA seized more than fifty hostages at the AIA

Building in Kuala Lumpur, which housed several foreign embassies. Among the captives were the US consul and the Swedish chargé d'affaires. The attackers secured the release of five imprisoned comrades and left with them to Libya.

In September 1977, the Japanese Red Army (JRA) hijacked Japan Airlines Flight 472 over India, forcing it to land in Dhaka, Bangladesh. In response, the Japanese government released six imprisoned members of the organization and reportedly paid a ransom of six million U.S. dollars.

In December 1977, a suspected JRA member hijacked Malaysian Airline System Flight 653. Among the passengers was the Cuban ambassador to Tokyo. The hijacker fatally shot both pilots before taking his own life, causing the aircraft, a Boeing 737, to crash, killing all one hundred passengers and crew on board.

In May 1986, the JRA launched a mortar attack on the embassies of Japan, Canada, and the United States in Jakarta, Indonesia.

Later that year, in November 1986, the New People's Army (NPA)—the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP)—kidnapped Nobuyuki Wakaouji, the branch manager of Mitsui & Co. in Manila. A ransom of approximately 10 million US dollars was reportedly paid. According to CPP spokesman Gregorio Rosal, the party condemned the kidnapping; however, speculation persists that the JRA provided logistical support for the abduction.

Italy was targeted twice. In June 1987, similar mortar attacks struck the British and United States embassies in Rome. Less than a year later, in April 1988, a car bomb exploded outside the United Service Organizations (USO) recreational facility in Naples, killing five people—including one American—and injuring fifteen others. Witnesses reported seeing two individuals of East Asian appearance, a man and a woman, fleeing the scene moments before the explosion. Italian authorities later traced two travelers staying in a nearby hotel under false Taiwanese passports, identifying them as JRA operatives. It has been speculated that the woman involved was Fusako Shigenobu herself.

A review of these attacks reveals recurring patterns in the JRA's choice of targets. The Lod Airport massacre in Israel, for instance, intersects with later assaults on sites associated with nations within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) sphere, particularly those under U.S. influence, as well as targets located in Commonwealth countries such as Singapore and Malaysia.

One episode confirms that the Japanese Red Army (JRA) had established close associations with a broader network of Marxist–Leninist and anti-American armed groups as early as the beginning of the 1970s. In May 1972, only a few weeks before the Lod Airport massacre, Fusako Shigenobu convened representatives of several terrorist organizations at a meeting held in a Lebanese training camp. Among the participants were Andreas Baader of the Red Army Faction (RAF) in Germany; two Palestinian leaders from the Black September terrorist commando; members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Turkish Revolutionary People's Liberation Front; and a young Venezuelan, Ilich Ramírez Sánchez, who would later gain international notoriety as "Carlos the Jackal." Ramírez Sánchez had been introduced to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) by Wadi Hada[11].

For all these organizations, Muslim-majority countries such as Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Libya represented not only operational bases and training zones but also safe havens offering the possibility of political asylum.

Shigenobu's decision to affiliate herself with the Palestinian guerrilla movement immediately after her arrival in the Middle East was deliberate and strategic. She first arrived in Beirut in March 1971, having entered into a sham marriage with fellow militant Tsuyoshi Okudaira in order to assume his surname and travel under the identity of "Fusako Okudaira," thereby avoiding detection by Japanese authorities. Once in Lebanon, the two did not live as a couple but lived in separate residences. Shortly thereafter, Shigenobu established contact with George Habash, the leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, marking the beginning of a long-term collaboration between the Japanese and Palestinian terrorist movements.

After thirty-five years of militancy within the Japanese Red Army (JRA), Fusako Shigenobu was arrested on 8 November 2000. Years of clandestine living, multiple arrests of associates, and increasing international police coordination had gradually paralyzed the organization's network. Despite this, Shigenobu had managed to re-enter Japan several times since 1997 using a forged male passport. She was ultimately

[11] C. CAMORIANO, *Nihon Sekigun. L'Armata Rossa giapponese,* Roma, Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2005; M. PRAZAN, *Les Fanatiques: Histoire de l'armée rouge japonaise*, Seuil 2002.

arrested in a hotel in Takatsuki, Osaka Prefecture, and transferred to Tokyo for interrogation by the Metropolitan Police Department.

In April 2001, while awaiting trial in detention, Shigenobu issued a public statement formally announcing the dissolution of the Japanese Red Army. The statement, faxed to the press from prison, marked the symbolic end of one of the most internationally active militant groups to have emerged from postwar Japan.

Shigenobu was charged on three counts: use of a forged passport, assisting another JRA member in obtaining a forged passport, and attempted manslaughter for allegedly planning and directing the 1974 occupation and hostage-taking at the French Embassy in The Hague. She pleaded guilty to the first two charges but not guilty to the third, which connected her to the embassy incident.

The proceedings became one of the longest trials in Japan's judicial history. On 23 February 2006, Judge Hironobu Murakami of the Tokyo District Court stated that Shigenobu had "played an important role in requesting cooperating organizations to procure weapons and in coordinating with countries that accepted released compatriots." However, he also acknowledged that no conclusive evidence directly linked her to the armed occupation of the embassy or to an intention to commit manslaughter. Given her limited operational control as the group's leader, the court deemed a life sentence "excessively severe." The final verdict, delivered in March 2006, convicted Shigenobu on the lesser charge of conspiring with others to attack the embassy, and she was sentenced to twenty years' imprisonment.

Fusako Shigenobu was released from prison on 22 May 2022, after serving seventeen years of her sentence. Although her appeals for retrial were rejected three times, the term of imprisonment was effectively reduced due to good behavior and deteriorating health conditions. During her incarceration, she authored two books, reflecting on her life, political commitment, and the historical significance of the Japanese Red Army.

2. *Japan after scap'democracy*

The question of how and when Fusako Shigenobu's terrorist activities and career began can be approached through her own autobiographical reflections. In her writings, she traces her involvement in

social activism as the natural outcome of the harsh social conditions experienced by her generation during the years of Japan's postwar reconstruction and rapid economic growth. As the so-called "Japanese economic miracle" transformed the nation from devastation to prosperity, the state regarded education as a crucial tool for cultivating the human resources required by a new, American-sponsored capitalist system. Her own family, like many others, was deeply embedded in this process of modernization initiated under the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) occupation reforms.

Shigenobu was about three years old when her family moved to Setagaya, near the Gotokuji area of Tokyo. She later recalled being struck by a row of small black-painted houses and being told that their color signaled that the residents were ethnic Koreans.

A broader examination of the Shigenobu family background sheds light on the long historical trajectory through which Japan's "democratization" or rather, "Americanization", must be understood. By extending the view backward nearly a century and a half, to the Meiji era, one can trace successive stages of Westernization that shaped both the nation and the educational ideals in which Shigenobu was raised.

Her paternal grandfather had been a former samurai and a Chinese scholar, known for translating into Japanese the *Hekiganroku* (The Blue Cliff Record) , a seminal collection of Chán (Zen) Buddhist koans, compiled in China during the Song dynasty (1125) and foundational to the Rinzai school of Buddhism. Shigenobu's father, Soeo Shigenobu (born in 1903), spent his life within the same Buddhist milieu. During the Taishō and early Shōwa eras, he worked as a *terakoya* teacher in his native Kagoshima Prefecture, on the island of Kyushu. These temple schools (t*erakoya*) had long provided basic literacy to the population, coexisting with the newly established Western-style school system.

Although the Meiji reforms were aimed at modernizing education, they could not immediately displace such older institutions, which for centuries had offered access to reading and writing for common people. Historians estimate[12] that literacy rates in Japan during the Edo period (1603–1868) ranged from 50 to 70 percent, even in rural areas, with

[12] R. RUBINGER, *A Social History of Literacy in Japan*, Anthem Press, 2021. https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/37365427/ODONNELL-DOCUMENT-2018.pdf

somewhat lower rates for women. In major cities, the figures were even higher: in Edo (modern Tokyo), literacy is thought to have reached 70–86 percent by the late Edo period, and virtually all samurai were literate. By comparison, literacy rates in Great Britain at the same time averaged only 20–25 percent, while in Fascist Italy as late as 1931, approximately 21 percent of adults remained unable to read or write (17 percent of men and 24 percent of women).

In pre-modern Japan, rental bookstores flourished in urban centers, serving readers of all ages and social backgrounds. Education was not a privilege of the elite: children across the country attended *terakoya*, where they studied reading, writing, and arithmetic (abacus use), as well as more advanced subjects such as classical literature, Confucian ethics, geography, and history. By the end of the nineteenth century, attendance rates at such schools remained remarkably high — between 70 and 86 percent nationally. Although comprehensive statistics on the *terakoya* system are no longer available, isolated records, such as those from Hokujōmura village in western Japan, indicate that by the late Edo period 91 percent of residents had attended temple schools, with 89 percent of males and 39 percent of females over six years old able to write their names.

In the years following the First World War, during the Taishō and early Shōwa eras, Soeo Shigenobu, Fusako's father, became a student at *Kinkeigakuin*, a right-wing educational institution associated with the ultranationalist organization K*etsumeidan* ("League of Blood"), led by the Buddhist priest Nisshō Inoue, a prominent figure of Nichirenism.

Nichirenism, one of Japan's "New Religions" (*shin shūkyō*), emerged during the Meiji period amid the profound social turmoil and rapid modernization that followed the country's opening to the West in the 1860s. It drew upon the thirteenth-century teachings of Nichiren (1222–1282), who preached devotion to the Lotus Sutra and envisioned Japan as a spiritually chosen nation. By the early twentieth century, Nichiren-inspired movements had been adapted by nationalist circles to provide a religious and ideological foundation for state-led modernization, emphasizing moral discipline, agrarian virtue, and loyalty to the emperor.

The New Religion movements of this period, and the state elite's instrumental use of them, contributed to a growing nationalist reaction against what many perceived as a form of "cultural colonialism." West-

ern-style modernization, introduced during the Meiji reforms and accelerated after the First World War, was increasingly seen as incompatible with Japan's unique spiritual and cultural heritage.

From the early 1920s, Inoue Nisshō established a school in Ibaraki Prefecture dedicated to agrarianism and moral reform. Over time, this institution evolved into a training center for ultra-rightist militants, who viewed violent action as a legitimate means of achieving 'national renewal'. By 1931, following Japan's invasion of Manchuria, Inoue had become convinced that genuine reform could only be realized through violent confrontation with what he described as the "forces of evil"—namely, pro-Western liberal politicians and the *zaibatsu* industrial elite.

Soeo Shigenobu was not included among the commandos selected for the March 1932 assassinations, in which the *Ketsumeidan* conspirators murdered Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi and a leading industrialist. Although he avoided prosecution and imprisonment, Soeo subsequently entered the *Kempeitai*, the military police of the Imperial Japanese Army, and was later posted to serve in Manchukuo.

Japan's defeat at the end of the Second World War left him deeply shaken. For a man so closely tied to the prewar regime, living now in an occupied and economically devastated country, the only viable option was to begin anew on modest terms: he opened a small bakery. The values and convictions that had once been nurtured through his *terakoya* experience, particularly the sense of mutual aid and communal responsibility characteristic of rural life, re-emerged during this period. He extended help to anyone in need, including Korean residents, who often faced discrimination in postwar Japan. In his neighborhood, Soeo was reportedly the only shopkeeper who allowed Korean customers to eat inside his modest eatery.

Soeo was equally committed to instilling in his children a respect for those who were socially marginalized. Fusako recalled being scolded by her father, together with other local children, after they bullied a North Korean immigrant child, an incident that left a lasting impression on her sense of justice. She also remembered how, despite long working hours at the grocery, her father never failed to educate and entertain the family through readings of Japanese classical texts such as the *Kojiki*, *Nihon Shoki*, and *Konjaku Monogatari*.

These years of fragile economic recovery and social stabilization, however, were short-lived. Following the Korean War, Japan entered

a new phase of rapid economic recovery and development. With the introduction of American-style supermarkets, consumer habits began to change dramatically. The low prices and modern convenience of these new retail spaces undermined small, family-run businesses such as Soeo's grocery. Coupled with deteriorating health, these pressures eventually forced the Shigenobu family to close their store.

> "I thought it was only natural that I should go to a commercial high school, acquire skills in bookkeeping and arithmetic, and get a job"[13].

After completing her studies at a commercial high school, Fusako Shigenobu was hired in 1964 by Kikkoman Corporation, Japan's most prominent producer and exporter of soy sauce.

> "At the time, the manufacturing industry was the most popular after a period of boom in securities and banking. It was a time of rapid growth for manufacturing companies, and they were expanding their scale of operations by increasing production and sales. High school graduates and college graduates were needed in each company. […] From about the second semester of the third grade, the job application form will be pasted on the board"[14].

With the arrival of the Allied forces, democratization in Japan began with the release of prewar left-wing political prisoners, the legalization of the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) and the Socialist Party, and significant reforms to the educational system. The Imperial Rescript on Education was repealed, the administration of education was decentralized, and an American-style 6-3-3-4 school system was introduced, making at least nine years of education compulsory. The 1949 National School Establishment Law expanded higher education, consolidating local institutions into national universities and ensuring the presence of at least one state-supported university in every prefecture.

Until the late 1950s, admission to high school remained rare and highly competitive. However, standardization soon increased the number of students continuing to high school, prompting the Ministry of Education to authorize the establishment of numerous private institutions. By the 1960s, approximately 90% of students were graduating

[13] F. Shigenobu, はたちの時代. (*Hatachi no jidai*), p.17.
[14] F. Shigenobu, はたちの時代. (*Hatachi no jidai*), p. 20.

from high school, which created pressure for the further expansion of higher education.

Interestingly, this democratization process also sowed the seeds of social resistance. With the release of JCP leaders and the growing organization of left-wing teachers' unions, the educational system became an arena for ideological confrontation. Its deliberate effort to remove traces of prewar nationalism was met with growing political polarization.

The victory of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949 and the outbreak of the Korean War soon pushed SCAP authorities in the opposite direction. In response to the spread of communism across Asia, Japan was redefined as a strategic bulwark of the Western bloc. Under the emerging Cold War order, Japan became the principal outpost of the North Atlantic alliance in East Asia.

Alongside the Treaty of San Francisco, the U.S.–Japan Security Treaty—marking the military alliance between former enemies—was signed in September 1951. Protests soon followed: for many Japanese, the treaty symbolized not liberation from occupation, but a transformation into a military dependency of the United States.

Within a few years, anti-militarist sentiment coalesced into a broad national movement. On May 4, 1955, the mayor of Sunagawa was informed by the Tachikawa branch of the Tokyo Procurement Office of plans to expand the runway of the Tachikawa Airfield. The US Air Force deemed the expansion necessary to accommodate larger jet-powered bombers, which required the confiscation of farmland and the eviction of 140 families.

Local residents organized the Sunagawa Anti-Base Expansion Alliance, barricading their land to resist government surveyors. Their struggle soon drew nationwide attention, attracting regional and national labor unions affiliated with the left-leaning *Sōhyō* federation, radical student activists from the *Zengakuren*, and Socialist Party Diet members. The Sunagawa Struggle[15] continued until 1957, but the most dramatic episode of the anti-militarist movement occurred three years later, on June 15, 1960, during violent protests against the revision of

[15] J. MILLER, *Cold War Democracy: The United States and Japan*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2019; D. WRIGHTT, *'Sunagawa Struggle' ignited anti-U.S. base resistance across Japan*, in "The Japan Times", May 3rd 2015.

the Security Treaty outside the National Diet building. Michiko Kanba, a University of Tokyo' student and member of the JCP since 1957, was killed near the South Gate of the Diet after protesters broke through the barricades and clashed with police[16]. A year earlier, she had joined Bund, the radical faction within *Zengakuren,* symbolizing the rise of a new generation of politically committed youth.

In the aftermath of this tragic incident, the planned visit to Japan by US President Dwight D. Eisenhower was cancelled, and conservative Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi was compelled to resign; nevertheless, the Security Treaty was successfully revised.

3. *The students' protest movement*

In her book, Shigenobu offers a detailed account of the complex evolution of student protests in the 1960s, describing the early mobilization of those activists who, later in the decade, would go on to occupy major universities across Japan.

> "Bund was a new left-wing current that criticized the "parliamentarianism," "nationalism," and "officialism" of the Japanese Communist Party. This new left-wing movement advocated "violent revolution," "socialist revolution to overthrow Japanese imperialism," and adopted the banner of "nationalism" as a counterweight to the Japanese Communist Party's "constitutionalism" and "anti-American national democratic revolution." It also criticized the international communist tours that had been integrated into the Soviet movement as a "sum of revolutions in one country," and aimed for a critical revolution. This trend was later called the New Left. This was not a phenomenon unique to Japan but grew into a new left-wing force that criticized the existing communist parties, centered on capitalist countries. This was in line with the democratization movement in Eastern Europe, which was subservient to the Soviet Union. A new wave of revolution was occurring all over the world. After the collapse of the First Bund, which fought against the 1961 Security Treaty, a new Bund was rebuilt - the Second Bund"[17].

In 1965, Shigenobu successfully passed the entrance examination

[16] H. Hirakawa *Maiden Martyr for "New Japan: The 1960 Anpo and the Rhetoric of the Other Michiko*, in "U.S.-Japan Women's Journal", n. 51, 2017 pp.12–27.

[17] F. Shigenobu, はたちの時代. (*Hatachi no jidai*), p. 24.

for the night school of Meiji University. However, on the very day she intended to pay the enrollment fee, she witnessed a student demonstration that left a profound impression on her. The protest demanded the reinstatement of a fellow student who had been expelled for objecting to the university's decision to impose a mandatory building maintenance fee, a payment officially described in the university's statutes as voluntary rather than compulsory.

The students leading the protest were members of the Bund, the same radical organization which Michiko Kanba had belonged to. Beyond their political ideology, Shigenobu, raised by a father who had taught her compassion toward marginalized groups, including Korean, was deeply moved by the solidarity the group showed in defending their peer.

The mid-1960s thus marked a turning point for Japan's student movements, a period during which both domestic and international political developments gained heightened relevance.

> "With the Olympics in October 1964 as a turning point, 1965 could be said to be the starting point for the country to move from "post-war reconstruction" to the "path to prosperity". Social distortions and discord were becoming more prevalent. There was a justification for welcoming students in the quest for justice and a decent society. […] The Sato Cabinet was formed in 1964, and the Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea was signed in June 1965. This treaty gave companies that had been busy living and producing within the country a foothold to expand their economies overseas. It signaled the end of pre-war aggression in Asia and cooperation under the umbrella of America, on the path of anti-communism through the United States. The Japan-Korea Treaty would not have been concluded without the mediation and interests of the US's anti-communist strategy. It was a time when ordinary citizens were poor in terms of food, clothing, and shelter. Even so, from a time when only a few children could attend university, by this time there were probably many common people who made the effort to send their 10th child to university, dreaming of their children's future success. The ruling elite spoke of the "expected type of person" as a way of cultivating human resources suited to build a new nation and considered cultivating human resources that would be useful to industry in line with education administration. They were creating people who would serve companies, rather than soldiers who served the country. Furthermore, in order to stabilize university management, they promoted the mass production of university students and the raising of tuition fees. […]. In January of 1965, the US military bombing of North Korea began, and the international movement

against the Vietnam War and the Japan-Korea Treaty was gaining momentum at once. In addition, struggles against the increase of school fees had begun at Keio and Waseda Universities, and the student movement was forced to become more radical in conjunction with the real anti-war, anti-US, and anti-base movements."[18].

Each faction within the student movement reinterpreted its position in distinct ways.

"In this environment, both JCI and anti-Japanese Communist groups took turns coming into the classrooms before class to discuss current issues and hand out leaflets"[19].

Compared to the movements in the United States and Europe, by the mid-1960s the Japanese student movement had already undergone several stages of development, characterized by shifting ideological orientations, internal splits, and factional divisions that merit careful examination[20]. According to historian Nick Kapur, Japanese student movements were well known and widely discussed among activists on the American side.

"Around the world, New Left organizations such as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Student Non-Violent Organizing Committee (SNCC) began to take notice. In 1965, SDS president Carl Oglesby visited Japan at the invitation of one of the Zengakuren sects and would visit again in 1967. In various SDS publications, the Japanese student movement was singled out for the praise of its militancy and compatible ideological orientation. […] Two months later, in August 1966, Beheiren hosted the "US-Japan Two Nations Conference for Peace in Vietnam" in Tokyo. According to Beheiren president Oda Makoto, the explicit goal of the conference was "to provide an opportunity for…activists from the West to learn about Asian perspectives, opinions, and actions" and he told the invited participants, "You are not here to preach to us, but to learn from us." The conference was attended by several representatives from SNCC, SDS, the War Resisters

[18] F. Shigenobu, はたちの時代. (*Hatachi no jidai*), p. 27.

[19] F. Shigenobu, はたちの時代. (*Hatachi no jidai*), p. 28.

[20] K. Hasegawa , *In Search of a New Radical Left: the Rise and Fall of the Anpo Bund, 1955–1960* in "Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs", n. 3, 2003, pp. 75–92.

League (WRL), and the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE), among other American anti-war groups, as well as 15 "observers" from similar groups in Argentina, Britain, Canada, France, India, Pakistan, Mongolia, and the Soviet Union. Altogether 1,600 people packed the Sankei International Conference Hall in Tokyo for the three-day event, which was deemed such a success that a second "Two Nations Conference" was held in Kyoto in 1968."[21].

The aforementioned Beheiren (*Betonamu ni Heiwa o! Shimin Rengō* – Citizens' League for Peace in Vietnam) was an active participant in the global anti-war movement. Founded in 1965 and generally associated with the New Left, the organization sought to foster an autonomous Japanese citizenry capable of spontaneously forming grassroots movements independent of the hierarchical structure of the traditional, or "Old Left," political parties and organizations. Its principal objective was the abrogation of the US–Japan Security Treaty, although the movement was eventually dissolved in 1974 by its founder, Oda Makoto, following the conclusion of the Vietnam War.

The previous year, Fusako Shigenobu had joined students opposing the Vietnam War in the October 8th, 1967, protests, when demonstrators attempted to block Prime Minister Eisaku Satō from departing for South Vietnam via Haneda Airport.

At that point, student activism escalated into a large-scale strategy centered on campus occupations. A controversial reform approved by the University of Tokyo in late 1967—requiring six years of unpaid internship for medical students—triggered a major student strike in early 1968. On January 18–19, 1969, around 400 protesters occupied the university's Neo-Gothic Yasuda Hall, hurling stones and gasoline-filled bottles at riot police attempting to clear the building. The siege was broadcast in color on national television, leaving a powerful impression on the public.

More than 8,500 riot police officers confronted students armed with Molotov cocktails and marble fragments taken from the auditorium's interior.

Beginning in 1968, a far-left splinter group from the Second Bund

[21] N. KAPUR, *The Japanese Student Movement in the Cold War Crucible, 1945-1972* in "The Asia-Pacific Journal", n. 1, 2022, pp. 1-25.

adopted the name Red Army Faction (*Sekigun-ha*) and began formulating plans for a violent uprising in Japan by 1970, anticipating the expiration of the initial ten-year term of the US–Japan Security Treaty. From an international perspective, the abrogation of the treaty was viewed by the group as essential to ending Japan's semi-colonial status as a US military base. Domestically, the Red Army Faction (RAF) envisioned that a successful armed proletarian revolution in Japan would transform the country into the headquarters of a global revolution against the United States and its allies, with the RAF at its vanguard.

However, as the Second Bund leadership rejected the prospect of an immediate armed revolution, the RAF declared an open break from its parent organization by attacking the Bund's National Congress held at Meiji University on July 5, 1969, and briefly seizing control of the venue. The following day, Bund students from Chūō University launched a counterattack, abducting RAF chairman Shiomi Takaya and several associates, whom they detained for three weeks in a stronghold on the Chūō University campus, subjecting them to threats and physical coercion.

That same summer, the group was expelled from the Japanese Communist Party, and soon thereafter the RAF began planning a series of attacks on police and government targets, along with bank robberies to finance its revolutionary activities. The Daibosatsu Mountain area in Yamanashi Prefecture, northwest of Tokyo, became a preferred training site after the group officially adopted armed struggle as a central strategic principle. On September 21, 1969, RAF members hurled Molotov cocktails at three police boxes in Osaka, in an episode later glorified within the organization as the so-called "Osaka War."

On November 5, 1969, acting on intelligence from informants, the police raided an inn where RAF militants were staying, arresting fifty-three members, including several of Shiomi's key associates (although not Shiomi himself), and seizing detailed plans for future attacks. Recognizing that the group could no longer operate openly in Japan, Shiomi ordered the organization to go underground and began seeking ways to leave Japan to continue guerrilla training abroad.

Shortly before the hijacking of Japan Airlines Flight 351, Shiomi Takaya was arrested by chance on a street in Komagome, Tokyo, ap-

proximately two weeks before the attack, after being mistaken for a common thief. The unexpected arrest of the organization's leader represented a major ideological and strategic setback, compounded by a series of unsuccessful armed robberies targeting banks and post offices, which were quickly suppressed by the police and led to the arrest of several key members. The mounting pressure and loss of leadership placed a severe strain on the organization's cohesion, resulting in a new schism between members divided over whether to follow Shiomi's final directive to relocate abroad or to continue the revolutionary struggle within Japan.

As head of the organization's international relations since 1968, Fusako Shigenobu had already established contacts with Palestinian students who had arrived in Japan seeking support for their homeland in the aftermath of the Six-Day War. This encounter proved decisive. Interpreting it as an opportunity to implement Shiomi's strategic vision of relocation, Shigenobu resolved to move to the Middle East, where she could link the Japanese struggle with global revolutionary movements. Much like Vietnam, which had become a major battleground of the Cold War soon after achieving independence from France in 1954, with Japan serving as a critical US military base, Palestine appeared to Shigenobu as the ideal front for a new phase of revolutionary engagement. In her view, it embodied the contradictions of a postcolonial world, shaped by a "decolonization" process led by Washington and London, culminating in the establishment of the State of Israel.

Conclusions

It is worth noting that the charges brought against Fusako Shigenobu did not include direct involvement in any acts of violence. Her alleged participation in the 1974 French Embassy attack in The Hague was limited to accusations of acting as the "mastermind" of the operation. The prosecution made no mention of her personal engagement in violent acts during her years in the Middle East. Further investigation might be required into that period, particularly in light of the current resurgence of violence in the Palestine–Israel conflict, where, for the first time, the responsibility of Israel in the mass killings of civilians in Gaza has gained global acknowledgment.

By contrast, to understand the networks and evolution of revolutionary left-wing armed movements of the 1970s, the European context offers a more tangible field of inquiry. The organization Hyperion, officially described as a "school of foreign languages," was founded in 1977 by three members of the Italian extra-parliamentary left. According to testimony by Antonio Savasta, a former member of the Red Brigades who turned state witness (*pentito*) after his arrest in 1982, Hyperion functioned as a deep-cover coordination center for several armed organizations, including the PLO, IRA, and ETA. Savasta further claimed that PLO weapons were transferred to the Red Brigades through this channel as early as 1979, and that the Paris headquarters also served as a covert base for international intelligence operations, allegedly involving the KGB, Mossad, and CIA.

When Shigenobu was released in 2022, the Italian political theorist Toni Negri publicly expressed his admiration for her. Negri, often labeled a *cattivo maestro* ("dangerous teacher"), was one of the founders of the *Potere Operaio* movement in 1969 and had been controversially accused of acting as the intellectual architect behind the Red Brigades. With the support of organizations such as Amnesty International, he relocated to Paris, where he lived for fourteen years under the protection of France's lack of an extradition agreement with Italy. Shigenobu herself cites Negri on her official website, acknowledging his enduring influence.

> "Twenty years of prison are way too many. While rejoicing with Fusako for her release and praising her for her strength and resistance, I am still convinced the class struggle cannot be stopped and that a better world is possible.".

While in prison, Fusako Shigenobu authored two of her fourteen published books, along with several essays, pamphlets, and poems.

Postwar Japan underwent profound transformations following the defeat of 1945. The dismantling of the militaristic regime, deeply entrenched in nearly every sphere of the nation's economy, politics, society, and education, required the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) to implement reforms on an unprecedented scale. No domain was left untouched; even anthropology contributed to shaping occupation policy. The 1946 study *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword:*

Patterns of Japanese Culture[22] by American anthropologist Ruth Benedict, commissioned by the US Office of War Information, exerted a decisive influence on American perceptions of Japanese culture and informed key aspects of the postwar occupation strategy.

The history of the Shigenobu family exemplifies the dramatic social and cultural changes that Japan experienced over a century and a half. Across three generations, from Fusako's grandfather, born in the Meiji era, to her own entry into Meiji University's night school, the nation absorbed successive waves of foreign institutions and ideas. The Meiji period witnessed the abolition of the samurai class and the introduction of Western industrial and educational systems, while the postwar years brought the emergence of the American-style supermarket economy that undermined small, community-based enterprises. The combination of postwar deprivation, national humiliation under US military presence, and recurrent land confiscations created fertile ground for the rise of the new left and its protest strategies

The establishment of a democratic education system was intended to broaden opportunity, yet Fusako's own experience reveals the contradictions of a process externally imposed and fraught with inequality. After an initial phase of liberal reform, the occupation authorities' tolerance for left-wing activism waned once Japan's civil society began to demonstrate independent organizational capacity.

In this context, education—initially conceived as a means of social mobility—became increasingly competitive and exclusionary. For students from modest backgrounds, the inability to afford supplementary or "voluntary" fees symbolized the limits of equality within the new order.

Her employment at Kikkoman marked her entry into the expanding world of Japanese corporate capitalism during the years of the nation's so-called "economic miracle". At that time, the company represented a model of postwar industrial success and symbolized Japan's rapid reintegration into global markets under an American-influenced economic framework. Yet, for many young employees like Shigenobu, the rigid hierarchies of corporate life and the gender inequalities embedded

[22] R. Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*, Mariner Books, 2006.

Within it stood in sharp contrast to the democratic ideals and promises of social justice proclaimed during the early years of reconstruction.

It remains essential to assess what legacy these two transformative decades have left on contemporary Japan. Even today, protests against US military bases continue, led by long-time activists such as Hiroji Yamashiro, now seventy-two years old.

On the gender front, Japan's 2024 general election resulted in a record 73 women elected to the Lower House, approximately 16% of the chamber, still well below the global average of 27%. The 2022 elections, which saw 35 women win seats, had already been described as a milestone. Two years earlier, in 2020, the #KuToo movement gained momentum as working women denounced labor regulations that effectively compelled them to wear high heels or contact lenses rather than glasses in the workplace. The movement framed such mandates as a form of gender-based harassment, signaling a new wave of feminist consciousness in Japan's ongoing struggle for equality.

Riassunto - Il caso dell'Armata Rossa giapponese, giunto alla fine con la prigionia della sua leader Fusako Shigenobu condannata nel 2002, ha ricevuto scarsa attenzione tra gli autori italiani. Le analisi tendono a sottolineare parametri ricorrenti quali la storia dei movimenti di protesta della seconda metà degli Anni Sessanta e la loro sostanziale collocazione nel contesto universitario. La fase di dimensione internazionale delle azioni dell'Armata Rossa giunge all'inizio degli Anni Settanta con il trasferimento del gruppo in Medio Oriente associandosi ai movimenti antiamericani e filoarabi, tra i quali spicca quello di George Habbash. Questo contributo si concentra in particolare sulla figura di Fusako Shigenobu e sul periodo iniziale del suo coinvolgimento nei movimenti di protesta antiamericani in Giappone prima della decisione di spostarsi in Libano. L'analisi è svolta in riferimento ad uno dei suoi ultimi libri pubblicato nel 2023. Le fasi iniziali e le motivazioni cruciali che hanno fatto maturare la consapevolezza della Shigenobu di impegnarsi come attivista sono emerse attraverso la sua storia personale e familiare negli anni nel Giappone post-bellico stremato dalla sconfitta del secondo conflitto mondiale.