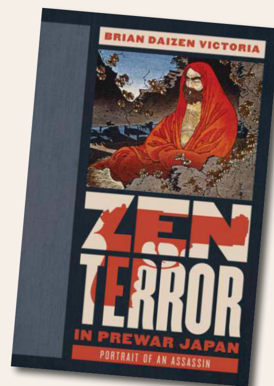
Book Review

Zen Terror in Prewar Japan: Portrait of an Assassin

By Brian Daizen Victoria

Rowman & Littlefield, 2020
392 pages.



Reviewed by Christopher W. A. SZPILMAN

Brian Victoria's book aims to expose the complicity of Zen in Japanese aggression and terrorism by focusing on the life of Inoue Akira (or Nisshō, 1886–1967), the mastermind of the notorious Blood Pledge Corps Incident of February and March 1932.

Inoue was a university dropout and former Japanese army spy in China who in the 1920s presided over a temple/academy in Mito as a self-styled Buddhist priest. Although uncouth, Inoue possessed the gift of the gab and a certain charisma. Early sponsors included Count Tanaka Mitsuaki, a former Imperial Household Minister, and General Banzai Rihachirō, the army's foremost China expert, while disciples were an incongruous mixture of elite Imperial University students and simple farmers from Mito. Right-wing activists, including radical junior army and navy officers, paid Inoue frequent visits and he radicalized them further. Yet little at the time set him apart from various other obscure right-wing figures.

Inoue suddenly gained notoriety when, dismayed by the failure of recent military and civilian plots, he decided he could do better. His plan was simple: his most devoted acolytes, retrospectively known as the Blood Pledge Corps, would assassinate twenty prominent politicians and businessmen, causing the collapse of civilian government and its replacement with a military junta. Inoue set his murderous scheme in motion in early 1932, but only two assassinations took place before the police arrested all the plotters. A lengthy trial ensued. Inoue and his two successful assassins received life sentences, but were pardoned and released in 1940.

While Inoue relished fifteen minutes of fame grandstanding at his trial, his post-prison career was lackluster. Prince Konoe Fumimaro allowed him to stay in his residence, but, contrary to the book's claims, Inoue played no significant role in the Pacific War. In 1946, American investigators concluded he was not important enough to prosecute in the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal. Having failed to gain control over Japan's ultranationalists in the 1950s, Inoue faded from public view and died in relative obscurity in 1967.

Victoria's is the first ever book-length work in English on this sinister figure. He corrects the prevalent misconception that Inoue was a Nichiren sect priest (p. 3), but his work suffers from serious defects.

First, Victoria seems confused about the role of Zen in shaping Inoue as a terrorist. While titling his book *Zen Terror*, implying Zen was at the root of Inoue's actions, he denies at one point that Zen motivated Inoue to engage in terror (p. 217). On the strength of Victoria's own evidence, Inoue emerges not as a Zen fanatic, but as an eclectic figure who cherry-picked from a variety of Buddhist creeds. Since countless adherents of Zen have shown no particular propensity for either violence or terrorism, it seems likely that Inoue's personality and his extreme political views shaped his terrorist proclivities more than any religious influences, Zen or otherwise. Victoria fails to consider this obvious possibility.

Second, the "life-history method" which Victoria uses is problematic in the extreme. This relies on "life story … as a primary source of the study of history and culture" to remedy "the overall lack of studies based on primary data" (pp. 3–4), a puzzling statement given the multitude of works on Japan's prewar terrorism. Victoria spurns archival research, not listing a single unpublished source in his bibliography, but also fails to cite relevant published primary sources, and disregards important secondary materials.[1] He also relies on sources that most historians would dismiss as inappropriate. For example, to explain Konoe's aggressive policy toward China, he cites Gerhard Weinberg's work on Hitler's foreign policy, though Weinberg, a distinguished diplomatic historian of Germany, is no authority on Japan or Prince Konoe (p. 286).[2]

Victoria's account leans heavily on Inoue's 1953 autobiography, accepting uncritically the words of a "man of exaggerated self-importance who consistently tried to write himself into history."[3] The book reproduces Inoue's absurd claims that he could converse with insects and animals and that he predicted the Great Kanto earthquake (p. 74). Inoue's assertions that he overawed the Americans who interrogated him in 1946 are also credulously reported. Hugh Barnett Helm, a counsel at the United States International Prosecution Section, apparently regarded Inoue as an "amazing genius" (p. 165), while whenever Chief Justice William Webb caught a glimpse of him, he "ducked into an office" for fear of humiliation (p. 166). According to Victoria, lawyers were not the only ones whom Inoue impressed. He writes that, on meeting Inoue, the journalist Mark Gayn exclaimed, "This is the first time in my life I have encountered thoughts as wonderful as yours" (p. 167). I looked in vain through Gayn's *Japan Diary* for confirmation of this extravagant praise.[4]

Third, sometimes Victoria makes claims that amount to conspiracy theory. For example, he contends that "Hirohito and his advisors" plotted to get rid of Minobe Tatsukichi's "organ theory" because it hampered "their efforts to take complete control of the government" (p. 22). Yet it is beyond dispute that the chief goal of the anti-Minobe campaign was to oust the relatively liberal advisors from their court positions.[5] Moreover, Victoria, without offering any evidence, lists the Shōwa Emperor as a "major Inoue-related figure" (p. 283). Not only does Victoria rely uncritically on Inoue's autobiography, but he also invents an imperial conspiracy.

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1 A key published primary source not utilized is Senshū Daigaku Imamura Hōritsu Kenkyūshitsu 1986–1992; important secondary ones would include Nakajima 2013.
2 Weinberg 1980.
3 Large 2001, p. 535.
4 Gayn 1981.
5 Chadani 2009, p. 143.

The book is also plagued with basic errors. Inoue did not save Baron Hiranuma Kiichirō's life by thwarting an assassination attempt (p. 147). Only good luck saved Hiranuma, who was shot six times by his assailant. Nor was Hiranuma responsible for the "creation" of the Imperial Rule Assistance Association; on the contrary, he opposed it, and that was why there was an attempt on his life. Ōkawa Shūmei was not a member of "the Blood Oath Corps" (p. 188), and Marquis Tokugawa Yoshichika was not involved in the formation of the Taikakai (Taika Reform Society) in 1920 (p. 290). The name of the well-known Japanese historian is Otabe Yūji, not "Ota Beyūji," as Victoria renders it (pp. 318, 337).

In fairness, Victoria does occasionally get it right. He notes, "Readers unfamiliar with Bergamini's work … are cautioned against accepting at face value the author's always flamboyant and sometimes inaccurate description of events" (p. 326).[6] It is advice that readers should follow when reading Victoria's book.

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6 Bergamini 1971.