



## The Japanese Red Army

The History of Terrorism  
as a Strategy of Political  
Insurgency

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Based exclusively on “Too Far, Too Fast, Too Bad”, a review by Dan Spalding on the book

Blood and Rage by William Farrell

# Japan after World War II

## US Occupation

- General Douglas MacArthur
- Major reforms of all Government and official administrative branches

## Educational reform was major goal

- Indoctrinate students in democracy
- Led to major student unions (Zengakuran)
- Significant influence of Japanese Communist Party

## Korean War (1950 to 1953)

- Crackdown on Communists
- Zengakuran/Communists split

## Student Protests peaked in 1960



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This is going to be a part of a series of short reviews of Terror groups of the later 20<sup>th</sup> century – the terrorists of my youth so to speak.

The goals are:

to show terrorism has been around and active throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but accelerating

Differentiate somewhat between terrorist groups, which can die out relatively quickly, and movements, which may have much more staying power

Provide a little more knowledge/context for the students in the event they ever read a newspaper or here a radio story referencing “old time” terrorists.

Following WWII, McArthur was put in charge of Japan and a major US effort to reorganize society was underway, including educational reforms that led to a shift of power from administrators to students and faculty, and a movement away from economic cartels

Many of these changes were interrupted by the Korean War. The economic cartels for example, reasserted their authority and retained or regained much of their influence. Unions were hampered/stomped on

The changes, combined with a US led roll-back of the communists and their power in Japan, radicalized many students. When the Communist Party renounced violence to

maintain its political position in the country, and following the arrest of a number of student leaders that left less experienced leaders in charge, the Zengakuran and the Communists split.

Other issues included the nature of the US Military relationship with Japan, and the increased use of Japan for both military bases and as a base for covert activities, spy planes, etc.

By 1960, the public was tired of the overly zealous students, and students were annoyed with the public. Student protests took on a general "anti society" theme, while becoming both smaller and more violent.

The Zengakuran would split over the course of the next few years, and one of these factions, allied to the Communists, would be the well from which the Japanese Red Army would emerge

## Japanese Red Army 日本赤軍

### 1969

- Japanese Red Army leaders meet at a radical Student protest
- Contacts SDS in US
- November planning meeting – “word of mouth” attracted police
- Movement moved to a cellular structure
- Lacked clear political manifesto (although Marxist)
- Global Agenda



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In 1969, 11,000 radical students meet, and achieve very little, except ... the leaders of the Japanese Red Army got together.

Later that year the leader of the new Red Army was in contact with the leadership of the United States' Students for a Democratic Society; the JRA spoke of 'The Osaka-Chicago-Tokyo wars' which would be the "beginning of a new revolutionary era." The JRA numbered approximately 400, about 150 of whom were core members. There were still large protests in 1969, for which the Red Army assembled crude improvised bombs and Molotov cocktails, which were not deployed.

The Japanese Red Army planned an intense training and planning retreat for November of that year. News of the conference was passed by word of mouth. Only 55 people came. Despite the smaller-than-planned turnout, plans were made to kidnap the Prime Minister; bombs were assembled, and dedicated members wrote out their wills.

The police, though, had easily learned of the event and arrested everyone present. Ironically, they found that this revolutionary group was organized strictly along class lines, with students from the most elite universities at the top, and the rest accorded authority in proportion to the prestige of their academic institution.

This fiasco “would mark the Red Army's last attempt at a large-scale public

activity. The move toward small-group, cellular terrorism was now complete.” A side-effect was the loss of clear politics. The imprisoned leadership had little sway with the remaining members of the organization: “The movement lacked an ideological core and respected theorists who could hold the group in line and indicate the true meaning of individual acts in terms of some ideological framework.”

## Propaganda in Action

### Actions

- First Hijacking was to North Korea
- Bank robberies, kidnappings, hijackings

### Internal split and deadly purges

### International Focus

- One Faction trained in Middle East
- Partnered with PFLP
- May 30 suicidal Attack on Tel Aviv airport killed 17 tourists
- Active in Singapore, Amsterdam, Malaysia



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### Politics and Action

In 1970, the JRA hijacked an international flight from Japan. Five members of the group—all the senior leadership and one minor member—took the plane to North Korea. There they planned to “establish an international base, receive training and guidance from those more experienced than themselves, and finally, bring the name of the Japanese Red Army before the world.” In what would be the case in every one of their future hijackings, all of the passengers and crew were released unharmed. One American traveler complimented the hijackers for their attentiveness to the needs of passengers.

The hijackers would spend many years in North Korea. The resulting leadership vacuum brought a virtually unknown member, Mori Tsuneo, to the helm. Mori changed the Red Army's political direction from an international focus to a domestic one. He also organized cells for Red Army support work. Some cells helped with publicity and support of arrested members; others carried out bank robberies. In 1971, close to 10 million yen—over \$100,000 dollars in today's currency—were stolen. Some of the group' imprisoned “old timers” disapproved, finding theft of farmers' savings—a significant portion of the banks' reserves—contrary to the group's aims. For better or worse, the Red Army would prove to be remarkable fundraisers. Hijackings and, in at least one case, a corporate kidnapping, made for lucrative ransoms in the future.

Despite Mori's organizational success, some members of the Red Army were disappointed in its direction. Where was the action in solidarity with oppressed people around the world? What was being done against "the forces of imperialism?" Among those dissatisfied was a woman named Shigenobu Fusako. Mori stayed in Japan and soon tore the group apart with a baffling and incredibly violent internal purge. Meanwhile, Shigenobu went to Palestine to spread terror in the name of the Japanese Red Army.

### The Japanese Red Army in Palestine

Shigenobu moved to Palestine to join an existing revolutionary movement. She quickly connected with various groups fighting for independence, ultimately working closely with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestinian (PFLP). (Farrell contends that the attractive woman slept her way to the top of the host organization.)

Shortly after Shigenobu's departure, Mori started purge of the remaining members of the organization. This brutal process resulted in the murder of several members in the mountains of Japan. Mori was arrested and ultimately hung himself in jail.

The purge received heavy coverage by the media in Japan. The killings hurt recruitment and fundraising; Shigenobu's allies in Palestine questioned the legitimacy of a group that killed its own members. By this time several other members had made their way to Palestine. Shigenobu planned a major attack against Israel. According to Farrell, the assault on the Tel Aviv Airport was as much to counteract the bad publicity from the purge as for any political or strategic reasons: "they had to overcome the mistakes that the other Red Army had made in Japan and 'show the world what the death of a true revolutionary meant.'"

On May 30th, 1972, three members of the Red Army attacked the Tel Aviv Airport, now the Ben Guiron Airport. Using automatic rifles and grenades, they killed 17 people and wounded 80 more. Most of the victims were Puerto Ricans planning on visiting Christian sites in the area. Two of the attackers killed themselves; the remaining one was caught before he could do so. This last member made a full confession to the police in the hopes that they would let him commit suicide afterwards. In 1985, this member, a younger brother of one of the North Korea hijackers, was released in a larger prisoner trade between the PFLP and Israel in 1985.

### Further Actions by the Red Army

The Tel Aviv Airport attack was a high-water mark of sorts for the JRA. It proved the Red Army was a serious terrorist group willing to kill and die for their cause. A number of actions followed, but none had a comparable impact. Embarrassingly for the Red Army, it was clear that they were most successful

when they had assistance from outside parties.

The Red Army's next action was the hijacking of a Japan-bound plane. In a tragi-comic turn, two of the hijackers accidentally blew themselves up with a grenade after takeoff but before the hijacking was scheduled to begin. The other four heard the explosion and sprung into action. Unfortunately, one of their recently deceased collaborators had all of the plans for the action. The result was challenged negotiations that ended with the release of the hostages and crew, and the hijackers landing the plane in Libya, where they destroyed the vehicle.

The hijackers also demanded a \$4,000,000 ransom from the Japanese government. It is unclear how much, if any, of that money was delivered. But if Japan's future actions were any indication, it seems likely a significant portion was paid out. This early action demonstrated the Red Army's facility for hijacking and successfully, if clumsily, negotiating for their demands.

In January of 1974, in another joint action with the PFLP, the JRA bombed a Shell Oil refinery in Singapore. After the bombing, the hijackers – two from each group – “commandeered” a ferryboat and made for international waters. They were intercepted by the authorities, but negotiated for their escape in exchange for releasing their hostages. The attackers were ultimately allowed to board a plane, but no country would give them permission to land.

Meanwhile in Kuwait, five PFLP members broke into the Japanese Embassy and held the Japanese Ambassador and 28 others hostage. After tense negotiations, all the hostages were released in exchange for giving the plane with the Singapore attackers permission to land in Kuwait, and letting the five PFLP members join them. The nine attackers were then flown to Yemen.

In September of the same year, in an action in Amsterdam, the Red Army successfully negotiated for \$300,000 and the release of another imprisoned member – this time in exchange for 11 hostages, including the French Ambassador to Holland. At one point the talks between the Red Army and the various governments involved broke down. Carlos “the Jackal,” who had supplied the JRA with their weapons for this action, expedited negotiations by tossing a grenade into a crowd of young people on Paris's Left Bank. Two were killed and 34 more injured. He threatened to continue attacks until the Red Army's demands were met.

While the Red Army's comrade was released, they had to give up their \$300,000 upon landing in Syria, as the Syrian government did not take kindly hostage-taking for money. In addition, “[t]he need to call on someone like Carlos was viewed by some as a bit of a comedown.”

In August of 1975, on the eve of an important trip by the Japanese Prime



Minister to the United States, five members of the Japanese Red Army stormed the American Consulate and Swedish Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. They took fifty hostages and “stole the headlines” from the Japanese Prime Minister. This time the Red Army negotiated for the release by the Japanese government of four of their members and a member of an allied group. These five were taken from prison in Japan and flown to Malaysia. They were joined by the five attackers, and they all flew to Libya. Although one guard had been shot and severely wounded, the hostages were released unharmed; the pilot who volunteered to fly the plane to Libya stated that the Red Army members unloaded their weapons on the plane, and asked permission before entering the cockpit. It is details such as these which make the contemporary reader almost nostalgic. There was a time (before some of us were born) when plane hijackings were almost routine; a time when terrorists made demands which could be met, and hostages were threatened but, at least a good portion of the time, ultimately released unharmed.

The final hijacking discussed in *Blood and Rage* took place in September of 1977. The Red Army's rhetoric returned to a focus on Japan, without mention of other oppressed people around the world. They stated that there had been “Enough with the false international propaganda praising [the] Japanese economic miracle. Present Japanese history is a pure and simple summary of treason, dishonor, avidity, and aggression.”

The Red Army demanded the release of seven imprisoned revolutionaries, and two convicted murderers whom they believed to have revolutionary potential. Japan had already sustained criticism for ceding to terrorists' demands and releasing convicted terrorists. This case was even more problematic, because two of the prisoners were initially arrested by other countries. What incentive would the international community have to arrest Japanese terrorists if the Japanese government, upon demand, would simply let them go?

After lengthy and heated debate among various Japanese agencies, the Prime Minister is reported to have said, “The weight of a human life is heavier than the earth.” The terrorists' demands were met. All 156 passengers and crew were released. While Farrell clearly frowns upon any negotiations with terrorists, he does a fair job explaining that many if not most of the Japanese public supported the government's actions. Perhaps curiously by American standards, surveys showed that Japanese people valued preserving human life more than obeying laws and following procedures.

Not incidentally, the Red Army also demanded a \$6,000,000 ransom. Again, it was unclear how much, if any, was paid out.

# Decline

Internal feuds

Attrition

- Few new recruits as student movements ended
- Combat a
- International Cooperation and arrests

Declining sponsorship and partnerships

Decreased relevance



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## Whither the Japanese Red Army?

In 1981 the Japanese Red Army faced serious internal struggle. They published a report stating that “they were considering giving up pursuing armed struggle to achieve their goals. The group had come to the conclusion that, “while only armed action could drive the international revolution, by undertaking such a road they had become isolated from the masses they sought to lead... [they] called for solidarity among the masses, but did not give any hint of what alternative plan it would undertake.” In 1983 Shigenobu stated that the Red Army had “left the way of absolute terror,” and would develop new, peaceful strategies. But within months the organization stated that, “after additional serious reflection, the JRA would once again return to their tactics of armed struggle since 'peaceful methods are not effective.'”

The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 briefly reinvigorated the Japanese Red Army. In a special issue of their publication, *Solidarity*, the JRA severely criticized the invasion: “In the name of the Japanese people, we, the Japanese Red Army, denounce Zionist Israel's savage genocide.” The next issue called for the people of Japan to rally around the Palestinian Liberation Organization, a coalition member of the PFLP.

In May of 1986, a Red Army member who had been involved in the 1974 Shell Oil bombings turned himself in to Japanese authorities. Another long-time member was

arrested in 1987.

The Japanese Red Army continued to suffer more arrests. They engaged in two attacks against Japanese and American targets, which employed primitive improvised rockets. Damage was minimal and no one was injured in either attack. There was also evidence that the Red Army collaborated with other terrorist groups, and possibly did contract work for Momar Qaddafi and Libya.

The last we hear of the Japanese Red Army depicts them as embittered and hard-drinking old-timers. Farrel's closing words were: "It is not time to count Qaddafi and the JRA out – not yet." A decade and a half has passed since then. The Japanese Red Army is no longer on the US State Department's list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations. With Qaddafi an official US ally in the war on terror, and with the daily attacks in Iraq overshadowing the Japanese Red Army's most ambitious actions, it is safe to say that their history. What lives are their prisoners.

#### Current status of Japanese Red Army members

Fusako Shigenobu, the woman who brought the organization to Palestine, was captured in 2000 in Osaka, Japan.

Kozo Okamoto, the lone surviving member of the Tel Aviv Airport attack, was granted asylum in Lebanon in 2000 for fighting against Israel. Four other Red Army members he was with were deported to Japan.

Ekita Yukiko, one of the prisoners released as a result of the 1977 hijacking, was arrested in 1995 in Romania, deported to Japan, and sentenced to 20 years.

A handful of other members remain in North Korea. The issue of their extradition to Japan is one of the stumbling points for reestablishing diplomatic ties between the two countries.