

Shoko Asahara's Profile

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To begin with, in modern times, people face numerous catastrophes that have not been typical for humanity in the past. One of such critical phenomena is terrorism, which takes on various forms, may have different aims, and leads to the deaths of innocent people. Due to the critical danger of terrorism, this phenomenon is actively studied from different sides, and knowledge is used to predict, prevent, and stop potential attacks. As a result, this information can save human lives. What appears to be among the most significant and actively researched are the personalities of terrorists, their individual characteristics and motives. Such information becomes a useful tool in the investigation and prevention of terrorist acts due to the fact that it contributes to the understanding of the psychology of terrorists and their behavioral patterns. The figure of Shoko Asahara should be carefully observed in this context, since this man committed a number of major crimes, including the terrorist act that took the lives of twelve people. The accurate study of this character can become a basis for further prevention of similar crimes.

### **Theoretical Basis**

First of all, it is necessary to focus on the criminal activity of Shoko Asahara—whose real name was Chizuo Tatsumoto—that has made him an object of psychological and criminological study. He was a leader of the Japanese cult organization named Aum Shinrikyo, and has committed a number of crimes, influenced and convinced people, while proclaiming himself to be a new reincarnation of Christ. Asahara's most critical crime is the gas attack that took place in the Tokyo subway in 1995, which led to the death of twelve people ("Flashback: Tokyo Subway Sarin Attack," 2015). Asahara was arrested soon after the event, trialed, and sentenced to death. The trial process was outstandingly long; it went on for more than seven years due to the fact that new details of Asahara's criminal activity were disclosed, such as his direct participation in such

events as the Matsumoto incident and Sakamoto family murder. Being the leader of Aum Shinrikyo, Asahara was believed to be a mastermind and organized these criminal acts to inspire his followers to commit them. Altogether, the man was introduced to 17 charges, with 13 being found valid, and several of them leading to the death sentence. Such a decision was taken in 2004 during the trial that the local media in Japan proclaimed to be “the trial of the century,” but it was not prosecuted immediately due to the numerous appeals and the study of Asahara’s mental state (Sommerlad, 2018). In 2012, when all re-appeals had already been resolved and declined, the court made a decision to postpone the execution due to his usefulness in numerous cases of the members of Aum Shinkuro. After that, Shoko Asahara was executed by hanging only on July 6, 2018 (Sommerlad, 2018).

### **Aum Shinrikyo**

As it was pointed out previously, Shoko Asahara was the leader and the founder of the cult organization named Aum Shinrikyo. It was established in the 1980s as a “spiritual group mixing Hindu and Buddhist beliefs, later working in elements of apocalyptic Christian prophecies” and was built around Asahara, who appeared as both Christ-like and the “first enlightened one” since Buddha (“Who is Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo,” 2018). The activity of the organization was introduced as religious; in fact, in 1989, it even gained an official status from the government. After that, Aum Shinrikyo reached an international level and appealed to the global community. What is more, Asahara became considerably famous and acknowledged as he started actively displaying his religious conceptions and ideas on television, introducing lectures in universities, and writing books. This activity gave him global recognition and a great number of followers. The main target audience and followers of the organization in Japan were students of high-class universities who were deeply impressed and convinced by Asahara’s ideas

("Who is Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo," 2018). These individuals were under the critical pressure of becoming successful and meeting the expectations of their families and communities. So, the idea of a greater and more meaningful life, displayed by Asahara, resonated with them. Notably, the organization's members were not only following the leader's ideas, but also supporting him financially, as it was reported that numerous rituals and procedures involved payments from members—sometimes of significant amounts of money. With the increased number of followers, acknowledgement, and financial support, the organization gradually transformed into a cult that appeared in the chaotic ideas and principles imposed on the organization's members, more critical ideas and aggressive aims, and as follows, in the resulting crimes such as kidnapping, murder, and finally a terrorist attack ("Who is Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo," 2018).

After the international disclosure on the crimes of Aum Shinrikyo that took place right after the Tokyo subway Sarin attack, the organization gradually stopped being active. Its numerous members, apart from the leader Shoko Asahara, were arrested with some of them being imprisoned and some being sentenced to death; the last widely known episode of Aum Shinrikyo's member's arrest took place in 2014 ("Who is Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo," 2018). Nonetheless, it would be wrongful to say that the activity of the organization and ideas of Asahara have been halted. Members of Aum Shinrikyo have formed other smaller organizations. One of them is Aleph, which is an underground group of Asahara's followers that has appeared after the original organization's demise. Another one is Hikari no Wa, which was formed in 2007, and was introduced as distanced from Asahara's views and harmful ideas ("Who is Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo," 2018). It should be noted that these organizations are legal in Japan, even though they are not considered as having a positive impact on society in general and its members

in particular. What is more, Aum Shinrikyo operated outside of Japan as well and has spread its impact on other countries as well. To be more precise, it is known that the organization's followers are in post-Soviet countries such as Russia, Belarus, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine. The biggest Aum audience is observed in Russia with, presumably, 30 thousand followers; in this country, the organization is illegal and prohibited ("Who is Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo," 2018).

### **Sakamoto Family Murder**

One of the most widely discussed crimes that was masterminded by Shoko Asahara is the Sakamoto family murder. It was in 1989 and took the lives of three people who were a family: a husband, a wife, and their child. Tsutsumi Sakamoto, who was the main target of the group murder, was a lawyer of mainly anti-cult cases ("Supreme Truth," 2017). The case of Aum Shinrikyo was one of his most popular cases; Sakamoto actively stood against the organization by organizing the corresponding campaign aimed at proving that its members did not join the group voluntarily. The lawyer used examples of members of Aum Shinrikyo who were manipulated and made to stay and work in the organization, and he also displayed that religious objects were being sold for much higher prices than market ones ("Supreme Truth," 2017). The success of Sakamoto's arguments would have led to great financial losses for the organization and to its poor public image. As shown by the details of the Sakamoto case, the lawyer's murder was organized in order to prevent these unwanted outcomes. The man and his family were cruelly murdered, and their bodies were separated and buried in three different regions of Japan so the police would be unable to find and identify them until the Tokyo subway attack and the following arrests ("Supreme Truth," 2017). The trial proved the fact that this murder was masterminded by Shoko Asahara. It should be noted that this case cannot be observed as a terrorist act due to the fact that it was not public and did not attract public attention to a specific

topic. This case appeared rather as an act of protecting the organization from the disclosure of its criminality.

### **Matsumoto Incident**

The Matsumoto sarin attack was another major crime related to the figure of Shoko Asahara. This catastrophe looked more like a terrorist act because it was public and aimed at conveying a certain message to a wide audience. The incident took place in Matsumoto located in Nagano Prefecture, Japan, in 1994, and took the lives of 8 people. It led to numerous injuries and affected about 600 individuals in total ("Matsumoto sarin attack," 2018). It was an attempted assassination with the use of sarin gas that was produced by Aum Shinrikyo and revealed in the subway. It is necessary to mention that the attack was not aimed at just terrifying people, but had particular targets that were the judges of the region that did not allow the organization's leader, Shoko Asahara, to build several institutions for the organization's activity in that area. What is more, this attack appeared as a trial before the next, even more dreadful terrorist act in the Tokyo subway, as it provided the possibility to test the effectiveness of sarin gas ("Matsumoto sarin attack," 2018).

### **Tokyo Subway Sarin Attack**

It was mentioned previously that the most well-known terrorist act by Aum Shinrikyo and in particular, Shoko Asahara, was the Tokyo Subway Sarin Attack that took place in 1995 and became the beginning of the active official investigation of the organization's and its leader's criminal performance ("Flashback: Tokyo Subway Sarin Attack," 2015). This terrorist attack led to the death of 13 people while harming thousands due to the poisonous quality of sarin gas and the fact that it was released at the peak time of subway movement in Tokyo ("Flashback: Tokyo Subway Sarin Attack," 2015). Notably, 20 years after the attack, its harmful outcomes still are

evident, as the individuals who were exposed to the gas suffer from numerous health issues. As displayed in further research, the aim of the terrorist act was to distract the attention of the police that was actively investigating Aum Shinrikyo. To add more, the organization's members had a strong belief in the apocalypse that was to come to humanity, and this act could have been their attempt to simulate its coming ("Flashback: Tokyo Subway Sarin Attack," 2015). After the Tokyo subway attack, the investigation of the organization's activity became even more active, and its leader Shoko Asahara was arrested for masterminding this and numerous other crimes.

### **Relevant Literature**

It was already pointed out that the psychological profile of a terrorist is a strong base for the research, prevention, and stopping of similar acts. In order to create the profile, it is necessary to consider already existing studies on the topic and the typical characteristics that are observed in criminal profiles. First of all, there is not much open-access research about terrorist profiles, and authors that address this topic prefer to approach it from a general point of view. Nonetheless, their assumptions still may appear to be considerably useful, such as the claim of M. Gottschalk & S. Gottschalk (2004) on the nature of modern terrorism. The authors note that "rather than using violence against innocent civilians as a means to accomplish rational political ends, today's terrorists use rational political goals as a convenient means to inflict violence against innocent civilians" (M. Gottschalk & S. Gottschalk, 2004). Notably, despite the fact that this idea was presented almost 10 years after Asahara's terrorist acts, one can still consider it as applicable to his personality. This conclusion can be made from the fact that none of the covered terrorist attacks was conducted to deliver a certain message or to attract public attention to a specific issue or idea. On the contrary, they were focused on the direct protection of the organization itself or at revenge aimed at individuals who were considered as opponents.

Additionally, as shown in the case of Sakamoto, Asahara gained a significant economic profit from selling religious objects and ritual services to the organization's members, and this can be seen as another motive of his.

As follows, Hudson notes that "the mindset of a terrorist group reflects the personality and ideology of its top leader and other circumstantial traits, such as typology, a particular ideology or religion, culture, and nationality, as well as group dynamics" (1999). From this and the previously considered information, one can conclude that Asahara was latently aggressive, with an unclear political and religious position, self-centered, and profit-oriented. In order to get a wider and more inclusive profile of Shoko Asahara, it is necessary to study his interviews, lectures, and interrogation materials and get relevant information from people who have met him personally.



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