

The politics of locating violence: on the Japanese nationalist critique of American racism after the First World War

Steffen Rimner

Abstract: This article addresses the process of locating global violence as a project of politicisation through the example of early Japanese-sponsored critiques of American racism. Forged in the First World War, anti-racist critiques carved out a new space for global political debate, consciously defying and counteracting conventional geographies of liberal international influence from the West to ‘the rest’. Offering an alternative to Atlantic critiques of Japanese social defects, critics mobilised by the Japanese Kokuryūkai took aim at racism as an essential defect of American society and world-views. The article probes to what degree the exposure of violence triggered coalitions of critique between Japanese diagnosticians and African-American victims while simultaneously spurring the radical perception of Asian social life as ethically and spiritually superior to liberalism. As such, the publicity of anti-racism invites fresh avenues of transnational, less US-centric history to identify long-term repercussions of racism at the intersection of local social abuse and global politicisation.

Keywords: Anti-racism, First World War, global history, Japan, Kokuryūkai (Black Dragon Society), lynching, nationalism, protest, racial equality, racism, United States, violence.

Note on the author: Steffen Rimner is Ad Astra Fellow and Assistant Professor in the History of International Affairs at University College Dublin. After obtaining his PhD in History from Harvard University, he held positions at Yale, Oxford, Columbia, Waseda, and the University of Tokyo. He is the author *Opium’s Long Shadow: From Asian Revolt to Global Drug Control* (Harvard University Press, 2018), of ‘Chinese Abolitionism: The Chinese Educational Mission in Connecticut, Cuba, and Peru’ (*Journal of Global History*, 2016, 11(3): 344–64) and a chapter in *Global Publics: Their Power and their Limits, 1870–1990* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming). He is currently working on a second book on the historical reconfigurations of US–China relations for Harvard University Press.

Steffen.Rimner@ucd.ie

This article delineates the politics of locating racist violence globally by examining why and to what effect Japanese nationalists and their foreign supporters began making American racism a mainstay of global political diagnosis in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. What united the group of journalists, poets, pundits, and occasionally politicians was their support for the little-known, English-language house journal of the Kokuryūkai, a pioneer amongst Japanese nationalist associations, starting in 1920. In 1901, the Kokuryūkai had been founded by Uchida Ryōhei (1873–1937)¹ who advocated violence in many hues: as figurehead of Japanese military expansionism, as war lobbyist, martial artist, theorist of imperialism, and suspected and failed assassin of Prime Minister Katō Takaaki. In turn, the Kokuryūkai gained notoriety in the United States and elsewhere in the Atlantic world as the ‘Black Dragon Society’ passionately promoting Japanese militarism throughout Asia—against Russia, Korea, and China—up to the end of the Second World War.²

Although a misnomer, the English translation of its name and its presumed status as a ‘secret society’ have hardened the image of the Kokuryūkai as having only one face: the steely commitment to imperialist conspiracy, clandestine political lobbying and warmongering as its only major public activities. Its record in this respect ranged from the Sino–Japanese War ending in 1895, the Russo–Japanese War ending in 1905, the second war against China ending with US atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 and Japan’s surrender, to the dismemberment of the Kokuryūkai by the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP). But the emphasis on this face has come at the expense of understanding, or even noticing, its second face: that of a Tokyo-based but globally engaged, public outlet for trenchant, anti-liberal criticism, with a keen eye on quotidian perpetrations of violence in Western societies.

The Kokuryūkai’s operations launched campaigns of political persuasion not exclusively across the Japanese nation and the Japanese empire but also on the ill-defined transnational front that appeals to world public opinion.³ As far as alliance-building is concerned, the Kokuryūkai’s pan-Asian support for staunch Asian revolutionaries and nationalists like Sun Yat-sen, the revolutionary leader and first president of the Republic of China, has attracted greater interest than its non-governmental lobbying.⁴ Why would the Kokuryūkai seek evidence of racist violence with the purpose of winning hearts and minds of civilian populations in the West that held no promise of political leadership positions? Why were they made a target audience? This article focuses on the means of persuasion that the Kokuryūkai sought

¹ Following convention, in the text Japanese names will be given with family name preceding first name.

² Jacob (2014).

³ On Asian regional activities, see Saaler (2014).

⁴ For Uchida’s correspondence, see Uchida (1994), Hatsue (1980).

and found in order to address Anglophone readers worldwide. The near absence of an overarching ideology, like pan-Asianism or other missions of Japanese political hegemony, makes the case all the more intriguing. Although behaving within Asia not unlike fascist communities of violence in Europe, the Kokuryūkai managed to appeal to European collaborators broadly: to disenchanted Irish, French, German, and other supporters, strategic and unwitting participants in the first major propaganda drive on global themes of politics, injustice, and violence.

Many characteristics of ideological outlook, conceptual proclivities, and promotion of imperial violence were shared between the Kokuryūkai and nationalist organisations like the Genyōsha, its predecessor, the Yūzonsha, its contemporary, the Dai Nippon Seisantō, or the Ketsumeidan.⁵ But in its overseas reach, it seemed to be singularly positioned. It appears that no other nationalist Japanese organisation presented itself, variously, as a sounding board for anti-imperialist grievances outside the Japanese empire, as a launch pad for unabashedly political critiques of an imperialist United States, and as an outpost for diagnosing social and political malfeasance worldwide. Amidst older, coeval, and younger peers competing for voice and leverage in Japanese nationalist publicity, the Kokuryūkai's English journal protruded like a watch tower on the coast, eager to glimpse the horrors ready to appear on the horizon.⁶

Virtually forgotten today, the *Asian Review* launched in February 1920. In contrast to its Japanese-language publications, including the Japanese house journal *Ajia jiron*, that easily provoked American suspicions of wilful secrecy, the *Asian Review* published exclusively in English. Although a most unlikely candidate for sustained criticism of violence, the Kokuryūkai adopted this role to present a second face of intellectual internationalism, which appeared at odds with its more prominent, first face of aggressive imperialism. In the first issue of the *Asian Review*, the journal had already become preoccupied with a controversy that would sustain itself in full force until the end of the Second World War. The leitmotif of American racism loomed large for political reasons: 'The racial equality proposal which was placed before the Peace Conference at Paris by the Japanese delegates was not, as our readers are already aware, carried into effect', an editorial note explained.

The rejection by the great powers of racial equality as a principle of the international community, however, did not mark the end of the story, but rather the beginning of a new one: "Racial equality" is a life and death question not only for Japan but for all

⁵ Large (2006), Norman (1944), Supiruman [Szpilman] (2014), Szpilman (2011).

⁶ On communities of violence, see Speitkamp (2017, especially Haslinger *et al.*). On fascist applications in an Italian–German comparison, see Reichardt (2009).

coloured races of the globe.’ The *Asian Review* did not shy away from explaining the political duty that now fell to subjects and citizens far beyond aloof Paris summitry:

With the solitary exception of Japan, practically the whole of Asia and Africa is under the domination, partial or complete, of the whites, with the result that the people of those countries had no facilities offered them to voice their feelings in connection with this momentous question at the Peace Conference.

The initiative of the Japanese delegation, then, appeared in hindsight like an effort at global representation, as an expression of opinions and interests far beyond imperial Japan. The *Asian Review* editor denied that Japan had interventionist designs:

Of course, Japan will be glad to see her coloured brothers strong enough to assert their birth-right. But she cannot allow herself to be mixed in the politics of other non-white countries.

But only one paragraph later, the objective was spelled out:

The chief cause [for the failure of racial equality in Paris], in our opinion, was the absence of unity among the coloured races, although their material and spiritual strength also contributed not a little to its failure. Consequently we call upon all our coloured brothers of all shades of opinion to present a united front in regard to this question and cultivate what is understood, in the modern sense, as ‘real’ strength.

As the purpose of nationalist revolutions remained implicit at best, the universalist mission was unequivocal:

Humanity and justice, unless meanings vary with the change of the colour of the skin and the exigencies of the situation, demand that the racial discrimination be abolished once for all; otherwise the real and permanent peace so eagerly solicited by the statesmen of the Allied and Associated powers will never be established on earth.⁷

If the settlement of the First World War was open-ended, that was not by design but by mistake. Along the same lines, the Paris Peace Conference came to embody a cross-roads where all major empires, including the American one, had missed their turn.⁸ Disillusionment gave way to frustration over what appeared as a thinly veiled defence of racial inequality. The League of Nations, certainly, appeared in a different light to the Japanese proponents of racial equality and to the likes of Jamaican protest figure Marcus Garvey, who called for a competitor, the ‘Racial League’.⁹ In fact, even before the conclusion of the peace conference, Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) learned through *The New York Times* that ‘Japanese newspapers

⁷ *Asian Review* (1920: 28).

⁸ Rhett (2014).

⁹ Onishi (2007: 198), Ewing (2014).

are suggesting that Japan and China raise the race question', a point taken with much enthusiasm into Garvey's weekly, the *Negro World*.¹⁰ When in January 1919, joint lobbying between the UNIA and invited Japanese publicists emerged, the US Bureau of Investigation swung into action to surveil the meetings between the Tokyo-based newspaper *Yorudo Chōzō* and the International League of Darker Peoples that had predicted a 'war of the races'. Whether the Civil Rights Movement some forty years later would have met or exceeded their expectations cannot be answered here. What is certain is that both African-Americans and Japanese had recent experiences that compelled them to join in a cause of shared resistance. On the one hand, the East St. Louis race riot of 1917 played its part in exacerbating the urgency of the problem on the US domestic front.¹¹ On the other hand, the Paris Peace Conference gave way to Japanese nationalist narratives of a traumatising defeat—one which kept Japanese people internationally and many others as second-class persons on the basis of their race until the United Nations Charter of 1945.¹²

Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen of *The Messenger* had less praise for nearby pan-Africanist Garvey than for the Asian empire in the East: 'Japan raised the race issue and threw a monkey-wrench into the league of nations which well-nigh knocked the peace conference to pieces.' It was the diplomats in Paris who helped forge the bond between pan-Africanists and pan-Asianists through their official and public rejection of racial equality:

This question would not bear the slightest examination by the American peace commission which has its vexatious Negro problem and which excludes Japanese immigrants by a gentleman's agreement. Nor could Great Britain face the issue with her West Indian colonies and her India. Australia, a British dominion, excludes both Negroes and Asiatics.¹³

Across social movements and their individual agendas, pan-Africanists and pan-Asianists found common cause in the shared ordeal endured, they imagined, in Paris.

So far, the African-American and the Japanese offence paralleled each other, stimulating interracial solidarity and some level of joint lobbying. But it took Japanese nationalist initiative to target American racism in a more global manner, to treat it not simply as an American domestic problem but as a defect that concerned observers and witnesses everywhere. Stepping up its anti-racist critique, the *Asian Review* unravelled diagnoses of racism that sought to explain Anglo-American racism in Paris. Critics made domestic root cause and historical, social, and cultural developments within the

¹⁰ Onishi (2007: 199).

¹¹ Onishi (2007: 191).

¹² Lauren (1983).

¹³ Onishi (2007: 201).

United States responsible for the American rejection of racial equality in Paris. The discovery was not far from the pan-Africanists' demand, but pulled the prospect of a 'war of the races' from the future into the present. Although the *Asian Review* did not refer to the 'Red Summer' of 1919, the 'race riots' in Chicago and elsewhere in April 1919 certainly demonstrated the crisis around President Woodrow Wilson's rejection of racial equality—and its immediate provocation of racial violence on the streets of Chicago.¹⁴

The shock of 1919, specifically the Japanese perception of American foreign policy principles as inherently racist, stimulated Japanese nationalists to search for an American domestic explanation by scrutinising racism's sociological scope and ideological depth within the United States. The Japanese nationalist search yielded results, with the discrimination against and the lynching of African-Americans as the most extreme and endemic expressions of violence in American society, complementing and exacerbating the predicaments of Asian immigrants. It was not clear whether those trying to get into the United States were worse off than some of the minorities already there.

'Race-War in the United States', announced a new article in the *Asian Review*. The reference was to a series of reports on 'the gruesome story of the burning alive at the stake of a negro on an alleged charge of murder [...] that nefarious crime—lynching—which was carried out by white Americans' on 31 May 1920 in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Informed by US press reports of the 'horror-provoking chapter of the vile deed', the Kokuryūkai in Tokyo understood that:

a serious race riot broke out in that place as a result of attempts made by black people for releasing from the county jail a negro held for maltreating a white girl. The furious white mob attacked the negro quarters, shot at all negroes on sight and fired into the houses of the negroes. Several airplanes circled over the quarters in which the coloured people lived.

It was difficult to decide where to set limits to the imagination:

The despatches do not mention whether the blacks were bombed and machine-gunned from the air. But they say that the entire negro district of the city, including sixty blocks, were burned down. Sixty negroes barricaded themselves in a church and thereby succeeded in repulsing the mass attacks of the whites. The latter's frequent attempts to break through the barrier having failed, they set fire to the building.

The immediacy of the *Asian Review* report certainly benefitted from American news providers, just as it reflected a strategic choice not to distance readers from religious symbols of Christianity, because the *Asian Review* was based in Japan, a largely

¹⁴ Wisseman (2010).

non-Christian country. On the contrary, it is reasonable to assume that Japanese critics anticipated Christian opposition when reporting incidents of lynching.

Likewise, the drama was balanced with figures:

The latest estimate of casualties places the number of dead at 77 negroes and 7 whites and the injured at more than 200 negroes and 60 whites. The facts stated above prove clearly that the whites were the guilty party. Let us see what deterrant [sic] punishments are inflicted on them by the government authorities who are *at least* expected not to have one standard of justice for the whites and another for the coloured people.¹⁵

The example illustrates how seamlessly the *Asian Review* fitted incidents of American local violence into the theme of global racial inequality.¹⁶

‘Lynching in America’, announced another *Asian Review* article in 1921, based partly on a report by the Department of Record and Research of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Today a National Historic Site, in 1921 it was part of Tuskegee University, established by Booker T. Washington in 1881 and headed since 1896 by the agriculturalist George Washington Carver. The *Asian Review* had again received reports of escalating violence and chose to report them globally: ‘There were thirty-six lynchings in the United States during the first six months of this year, that is, twenty-four more than during the same period in 1920.’ A particular point was the effort to display accuracy and exact knowledge from on the ground:

The victims included two white men and thirty-four negroes, two of the latter being women. By States the lynchings were divided: Mississippi [sic], 10; Georgia, 9, Florida and Arkansas, 4 each; Louisiana and N. Carolina, 2 each, and Alabama, Kentucky, Missouri, South Carolina and Tennessee, 1 each.

Where the agenda of the Kokuryūkai shone through, however, was not in facts but in its conclusions. Again, global civilisational implications conveyed the sense that these incidents concerned far more victims than those unfortunate enough to be caught up in the reported events:

We have much to learn from the West so far as the defence of our country from outside attack is concerned. We have also much to learn in the field of material science

the report continued.

¹⁵ *Asian Review* (1921b).

¹⁶ Quite apart from Japanese nationalist propaganda, the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) has counted more than 4,384 lynchings by white people of people of colour between 1877 and 1950, concentrated in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia (<https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/> accessed 26 April 2018). The EJI memorial is located in Montgomery, Alabama, and has recently attracted international press attention (Pilkington 2018, Wells-Barnett 2018).

But we must not swallow all that comes to us of western civilisation as superior to that of the Orient. The whites would make us believe that they are more democratic, more advanced, but when we read the above report and many other reports of the western lust for human massacre, we feel that the East has much to teach the West. The East has yet a mission to fulfil—the mission of civilising the West. The East must assert itself politically to fulfil its mission.¹⁷

Was this anything more than a political and cultural tactic of criticising America, a counterpart to what is today known and deplored as ‘Japan bashing’? Investigating the Kokuryūkai’s earliest, transnational charges of racism helps us to analyse the politics of locating violence as a dependent practice. Successful politicisation required the erasure of historical comparison and normative reciprocity. The Kokuryūkai’s own calls for violence had to be marginalised or left out altogether, if American violence were to carry the story. It mattered little that members inducted into the Kokuryūkai were not sworn to Gandhian non-violence but rather worshipped Hachiman Daibosatsu (the deity of archery and war), alongside Amaterasu Ōmikami (the deity founder of the imperial line) and Kasuga Daimyōjin (deity of the house of Fujiwara).¹⁸ None of them represented an abrogation of violence or a promotion of racial equality. The connection might appear too far-fetched, were it not for the fact that the only missing piece between the cause of racial equality and its realisation was the absence of a political plan. Even so, it was a political choice to read into lynching in America the reasons for overthrowing Western dominance.

Gaps between credo and practice aside, the Kokuryūkai’s own calls for expansion changed the causation between them. The pan-Asian conquest of Korea, Manchuria, and China acquired the character of imperial pacification as violence and aggression grew into global excess outside of Asia. What divided America could pull Asia together, what made Americans ‘them’, helped make Asians ‘us’. In terms of causation, outbursts of resistance within Asia, whether sponsored by the Kokuryūkai or like-minded partners, then appeared less proactive than reactive. The Kokuryūkai’s accusations of American violence could maximise their persuasiveness on the essentialised premise that Japanese society and Japanese individuals had no such penchant for oppression and cruelty.

Through Japanese nationalist critiques, anti-racism became a core tenet of the *Asian Review*. Tracing this pedigree of Japanese critique back to an early period of sustained, transnational information warfare serves several explanations. First, existing

¹⁷ *Asian Review* (1921c).

¹⁸ Iwai (1963: 146–50, 160–1; quoted in Siniawer 2008: 212–13, n. 96). There is no evidence that the fantastic renderings of the Kokuryūkai inauguration conveyed by Hugh Byas are historically accurate (Byas 1942: 193–4).

approaches in the intellectual and social history of Japanese nationalist propaganda have featured three main foci: Japanese nationalist demands for domestic political change, Japanese expansionist demands for imperial political change, and, in both cases, domestic and Asian regional audiences as primary targets of propaganda.¹⁹ Many historical approaches to race in Asian international relations and Asian–Western relations have emphasised Asian racial victimisation through Western images, actions, and policies, and inter-Asian racial hierarchies between Japan, Korea, and China.²⁰

Less understood is the reverse direction of influence: active Asian accusations of Western racism, not only in relation to Asian victimisation, but more globally as a generic defect of societies and states outside Asia. Amongst the candidates for Japanese nationalist accusations of endemic racism, the United States ranked first. American racism as thought and practice also appeared very early on the Japanese nationalist agenda, almost two decades prior to Pearl Harbor. The reasons for our unfamiliarity with nationalist critiques stretching across the Pacific and with this earliest manifestation of civilisational critique may deserve greater attention than they have received so far. The construct of American violence for the political purpose of global opposition pointed to the precarity of the transition from the Paris Peace Conference into a world peace with yet uncertain outcomes and vague outlines concerning interracial readjustments. To cope with this interpretive dilemmas, political analysis and critique broke out of national frameworks of explanation, showing instead how permeable local and national problems had become to global information exchange and their radical reinterpretation.

But even if local violence was easy prey to global politicisation, there were signs that the Kokuryūkai was just as aware of liberal competition at home as of the strategic necessity to wage information warfare overseas:

Our local contemporary of the *Japan Advertiser* has fallen foul of us

another article mocked with sharp cynicism,

because we had the temerity to call a spade a spade. Its ire has been aroused over the fact that the *Asian Review* does not hesitate to expose the imperialistic activities of the aggressive white nations. Of course our friend would have lavishly bestowed praises on us if we could take a leaf out of its book and indulge in anti-Japanese effusions.²¹

If we take as a given that violence begets violence and if information warfare harbours dangers of escalation, what were the concrete consequences of the Kokuryūkai's

¹⁹ Akami (2012, 2014), Kushner (2006).

²⁰ Kowner & Demel (2013).

²¹ *Asian Review* (1921c).

investigations and exposures of American racism and of America's damaged reputation? The first major loss of human life contradicted the Kokuryūkai's insistence on interracial harmony. Ironically, the first lives claimed as a result of interracial violence were scores of Koreans, killed by Japanese mobs to pre-empt a rumoured uprising in panicked persecutions right after the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1 September 1923.²² In revenge for anti-American reportage in the 1920s, Hugh Byas, a British *Times* and *New York Times* journalist in Tokyo and later Japanese-language lecturer at Yale University, chastised the Kokuryūkai for publishing a fictional report on Korean and Socialist crimes and for petitioning for the amnesty of Japanese 'murderers'. Published one year after Pearl Harbor in 1942, Byas's account certainly matched the *Asian Review* in sensationalism and virulence.²³

A second incident brought the Kokuryūkai an opportunity to accuse the United States itself. Uchida himself used his position at the helm of the Kokuryūkai to write an extended exposé. The initial offence and onus to act fell squarely on the US side: In early summer 1924, he explained, US congress had passed the 'anti-Japanese immigration bill', hence 'the feelings of the Japanese people ran high against its injustice and implication of inferiority'. No stranger to initiative, the Kokuryūkai 'took the lead in conducting a campaign against the bill, by organising a national league in co-operation with the political parties. Every demonstration meeting we held overflowed with enthusiastic and indignant audiences [...] an overflow of demonstrators who could not gain entry extended over 600 yards, four abreast', resulting in the 'temporary suspension of traffic in that busiest part of Tokyo'. Surely such a state of exception was worth boasting about.

But the sobering occasion for the demonstrations was the loss of one human life. 'In the early morning of May 31, a man committed harakiri [sic] with a sword in the compounds' of Admiral Inoue Yoshika, next door to the American Embassy in Aozaka in Tokyo's Akasaka. The man of 'about forty-five years' and 'well-dressed' had left notes addressed to Silas E. Woods, the US ambassador and to the chief of police in Omote-cho. As Uchida put it, the 'unknown citizen' had 'immolated himself on the altar of a better relationship between America and Japan, urging the Americans to reconsider and Japanese to get mobilised. Kokuryūkai members rushed to Omote-cho police station, claimed the remains and held a vigil at the Entsuji temple at Hitotsu-gi.²⁴

²² Yamada (2011).

²³ Byas (1942: 202).

²⁴ Uchida (1933: 12–13).

The Kokuryūkai let the victim speak for himself, documenting his critique:

An Appeal Left by the Unknown Hero. Addressed to the People of the United States Through Mr. Silas E. Woods, Ambassador to Japan. 'I am going to commit harakiri to urge the American nation to reconsider their attitude. [...] It is my earnest request made with my death that the American nation should strike out the anti-Japanese expulsion clause in the new Immigration Act.

It was followed by a historical, even theoretical, explanation of why the audience was the proper one:

That I make my request for the elimination of the anti-Japanese exclusion clause of the new Immigration Act is due to the fact that the United States has been the champion and guide of peace from the humanitarian point of view. It is a rude shock to us to hear that the United States which has been highly esteemed and respected by the outside world as the standard-bearer of peace and justice should enact anti-Japanese immigration legislation in defiance of humanity.

He continued with the briefest possible account of introspection:

Many are the occasions on which mankind feels resentment. The most unbearable resentment to be felt, however, is that over insult. When one is insulted with justification, one must bear and forbear to mend one's ways. When one is insulted without justification, however, one can not help resenting and feeling indignant over it.

Subsequent arguments connected the plight of the individual with the might of America: 'I am a Japanese. Now the Japanese are insulted by your country with the eyes of the world on them.' American exceptionalism was to be blamed for a politically mismanaged immigration strategy: 'And that without the slightest shadow of justification. If you adduce any justification, that is for your own home consumption, never admitted by the other nations.' The consequence, and the only one imaginable, was violence directed against himself. 'I prefer an immediate death to a long life with grudges harboured against your people', not without adding:

I am going to study the doctrines of philanthropy introduced by your nationals into Japan beyond the grave, where Holy Christ will sit in judgment upon me. I pray to Holy Christ that He may make your people reconsider and add to their happiness and also that the anti-Japanese expulsion clause may be struck out of the new Immigration Act which has insulted the Japanese nation without justification.

And with those words, the appeal closed.²⁵ The press response to the harakiri next to the US ambassador's residence in Tokyo did not lag behind. National papers and local papers in Nagano reported in detail. In turn, Uchida joined up with the political

²⁵Uchida (1933: 14–15).

thinkers Uesugi Shinkichi and Koizumi Matajirō to organise an ‘anti-American national rally’ at the Kokugikan, one of the most monumental halls for martial arts in Tokyo. Organised by the Kokuryūkai, the rally drew an estimated 30,000.²⁶

The social scope of Japanese–American polarisation on the transnational, non-governmental level, as distinguished from the ‘inter-national’ governmental level, continued to enlarge and attract. On 15 May 1932, Japanese nationalists not affiliated with the Kokuryūkai almost threatened the life of none other than Charlie Chaplin. The celebrated actor narrowly escaped the assassination attempt that killed Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi. Later accounts construed that Chaplin had been rescued, alongside the Prime Minister’s son, Inukai Takeru, by another show of force: a sumo wrestling match. But, in fact, the assassins had ultimately dropped Chaplin from their hit list and with it their plans to drag the United States into war, nine years before Pearl Harbor and less than one month before the Nazis’ seizure of power in Germany.²⁷ Still, the will to Japanese domestic violence was considerable: The protagonists of the May 15 incident carried a hit list of more than eighteen targets, an attack on the Bank of Japan, hand grenades for the Mitsubishi Bank headquarters and the backing of an association on whose behalf they acted: the Ketsumeidan, known in English as the League of Blood. In this comparison, the Kokuryūkai did not represent or no longer represented the most radical of Japanese nationalist associations.²⁸

When Japan entered the 1930s, Japanese nationalism reached its first apogee fuelled not only by domestic but also by global forces, by a global debate gone wrong. Japanese charges of American endemic violence, visible above all in race relations, were emboldened by their sheer age. By the early 1930s, Japanese anti-racism looked back on more than ten years of frustration and critique. Throughout, Japanese nationalist observers had seen no effort by Washington to modify Anglo-American opposition to racial equality as an international political principle. They had discerned little if any improvement in anti-immigration laws directed at Chinese, Japanese, and Indians. And they had witnessed no major amelioration of racial hierarchies within American society or on American soil.

These dynamics suggest that the perception of American violence, through discrimination, legislation, and physical assault, played a part in Japan’s nationalist self-elevation as it moved toward open conflict in the 1930s, fuelled by ambitions for a historic usurpation of liberalism globally that started with objections of social ethics. Addressing Anglophone audiences on the central issue of racial violence had narrowed the communication gap. This achievement of global interdependence served to add to,

²⁶ Chow & Chuma (2016: 192).

²⁷ Brendon (2000: 224).

²⁸ Takeuchi (1935: 382–3 n. 177).

rather than lessen, nationalist frustration. In these ways, the *Asian Review* provides small glimpses into a large world of Japanese criticism, one that gained further momentum by marrying Japanese nationalism with a less prominent strain of universalist anti-racism.

The speed and sweep of Japanese nationalist critiques of American racism as endemic violence were not as exceptional to Japanese radicalisation as might appear. As with most forms of transnational and international criticism, it was certainly out-paced by national and imperial introspection, exercises which could have complicated accusations of racism as inherently and solely confined to American or Anglo-Saxon societies. Instead, racism became a global expression of Anglo-American injustice, perpetrated at the state and non-state levels, and historically counterpoised to the mission of theoretically every Japanese to resist, criticise, and condemn.

The means for this mission, as deployed by the *Asian Review*, indicated the perceived promise of early information warfare. Politicisation worked through highly selective reportage of the most outrageous incidents of racist violence. Discussions of representativeness—how much racist violence it took to *characterise* a society as racist—had no place in this task. Neither did the politics of locating violence in a foreign society ever reveal what those politics actually were and how the process of locating violence, in the form of information gathering, justified its operations. The Kokuryūkai quoted extensively from American and other newspapers that would be considered open source today. This problematises historical analysis of politicisation of the reportage itself, necessitating a focus on the exact work that news interpretation does, as opposed to news as simplistic fact-finding along historicist lines.

The tone of *Asian Review* interpretations defies their analysis as a moderate news source. The Kokuryūkai's projections across the Pacific to the United States featured some of the darkest visions of its time. Albeit with strategic intent, the *Asian Review* demonstrated how perpetrations of violence with local aims triggered long-distance fallouts. Japan's nationalist radicalisation was one example of how vitriol and violence could replicate themselves in word and deed across vast spaces via international news reportage. Contrary to the mythology that has haunted the Kokuryūkai as an evil, even conspiratorial, brotherhood sworn to cruelty, the darkness of its trans-Pacific critiques emerged less from its self-positioning in the shadows of secret Japan. Instead, its English publications conjured up an equally haunting global posture, reflecting the journalistic passion for exposure as an exercise in politicisation.

Showcasing Japan's anti-racism as an essentialised national position elevated Japan's normative, ethical, and spiritual status above the United States as a newly essentialised perpetrator of racism. But to see the process of essentialisation at work, the act of global communication was key. Anti-racism became a core tenet of the Kokuryūkai's diagnoses of American society in the immediate aftermath of the Paris

Peace Conference, with each diagnosis explicitly pitched to an international audience. It helped that Britain and the United States had rejected the Japanese government's proposal to enshrine racial equality as a guiding principle of world politics under the League of Nations. This provocation is well known for the diplomatic and ideological turmoil it caused. But, equally, the Japanese disappointment of 1919 outlasted the war itself and created new transnational channels of anti-racist criticism, bringing to the fore a method of Japanese nationalist publicity which garnered sympathies not only among Japanese but among international Anglophone audiences around the world.

Simultaneously, the worldwide propagation by Japanese nationalists of American racism as symptomatic of the American character revealed global sensitivities to racism and a global public openness to Japanese nationalist revisionism. In an early illustration of information warfare, the Kokuryūkai appealed, like preceding liberal publicity, to international public opinion as the global arbiter of social endemic violence and systemic injustice. Racist violence in the United States became a new, transnational, impetus for turning nationalists in Asia and elsewhere away from the promise of a liberal future.

Racial politics can be studied by scrutinising globalising processes beyond the 'Western' gaze. Especially in English-language scholarship, more has been written on the British imperial politics of race and colour than on Asian, African, or other non-Western politics that counteracted, criticised, and drew on it for new and perhaps alien purposes. By and large, readers and thinkers of the Anglosphere are better versed in the history of racial exclusion, practised through legal, political, and social power, from the viewpoint of white solidarity, of those engaged in excluding others rather than those being excluded. For the same reason, the global past of racial exclusion conveys a sense of power ostensibly owned by perpetrators.²⁹

Opponents of racial inequality, however, found their own means of transcontinental mobilisation. They criticised and countered the logic of racial inequality as an ethical problem permeating all politics and added to universalist frustration a specific study of crisis areas. Socio-political domains that featured and problematised the politics of race rose to prominence through acts of transnational representation: It took publicity beyond borders to forge a discourse capable of indicting perceived injustice globally. Exposing violence as an organising principle of the age of imperialism required global methods of critique and exposure.

In the process of uncovering racist violence, the Kokuryūkai used the *Asian Review* to make not territorial, but affective, gains. Were it not for the lack of political

²⁹ Compare the scholarship following, on the one hand, Lake & Reynolds (2008) with that following Shimazu (1998).

intentionality, we might define these advances as discursive interventionism. But beyond discourse, the political motive was avowedly one of disruption: to break through the existing thought system as monolithic, self-enclosed, and circular, to break free from political orthodoxies espoused particularly in the interpretation of world events, to throw off the shackles of intellectual serfdom that smacked of subservience to the liberal mind. Here, the creative move beyond received wisdom pivoted almost ineluctably into aggressive revisionism. If those recurrent incidents of violence against a broad range of African and Asian populations signalled anything, it was that liberalism's credibility was wearing increasingly thin. This, in turn, justified nationalist reassertions by Japan in Asia and beyond.

Was the *Asian Review* itself engaged in instilling more violence into the perceptions and mutual images between Japan, the United States, and the readers of the *Review* elsewhere? The political ideas and arguments aired in the *Review* were by no means less aggressive or interventionist than those aired within Japan or coveted territories of East Asia. The Kokuryūkai had honed its publishing skills with inflated histories of its role and exploits in expansionism into Korea, in the early 1920s it turned systematically, in thousands of pages of a continuing journal, to the new task of criticising America with the same ambition for maximum effect.³⁰ The *Asian Review* delineated a new terrain of influencing opinion overseas, harnessing critiques and stimulating opposition that took advantage of violence as proof of universal political guilt.

So artful was this universalisation that it camouflaged a nationalist agenda which historians now need to restore, correlating words and actions beyond isolated statements of opinion. The *Review's* political indictments suggest that the Kokuryūkai was acting akin to a non-governmental precursor of influence campaigns. Even without the technological prowess available to politicised news outlets today, the analogies confound: violations of human dignity, inflaming incidents of social violence and political accusations of wilful perpetration served as credible arguments for the expansive identification with victimhood, then and now. The premise of one's own innocence preceded the charge of the other's guilt. Both images constructed a polarity necessary for claiming a moral high ground. It was to be either proportionality or politicisation, either comparison or polemic, but never both at once.

To conclude, the Kokuryūkai, far from a stagnant or parochial organisation, developed a globalist agenda of exposing American racist violence, presenting it as an enduring point of contention between America and the world at large: African-Americans within the United States, non-White peoples within and outside the Atlantic world and simply any reader of the *Asian Review*. This globally enlarged

³⁰ Kokuryūkai, *Nikkan gappō hishi*, discussed in Conroy (1960: 370).

agenda was one of interpretation as well as mobilisation. Widening the portfolio of activities suggests that the Kokuryūkai's brand of nationalism was more variegated than hitherto assumed and hardly hampered by positing American racism as a global, rather than solely Japanese, problem.

American racism even in its most appalling practices did not gain a global audience on its own. A constructed, targetted, and strategic vision by Japanese political players created a global audience for perpetrations that could otherwise have remained cloistered in the Midwest, the American South or the California of Asian immigrants. Instead, the *Asian Review* insisted that racial violence had become an inextricable characteristic of the global age of empire—a very high order of extrapolation. The Japanese nationalist publicity that brought this effect into being never elaborated on its own role in making the message sound true. Without an aggressive and encompassing change in global norms and political practices, this suggested, oppression and injustice as twin aspects of violence would keep asserting themselves.³¹ Ultimately the Kokuryūkai resolved to advocate one remedy which epitomises violence like little else: the means of war.

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³¹ On contemporaneous techniques of imperial and inter-imperial repression, see Thomas (2015).

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