

Political Assassination in  
Early Meiji Japan:  
The Plot Against Ōkubo  
Toshimichi

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Now that evidence of the success of Meiji Japan's experiment in modernization is abundant, it is customary to insert indices of economic growth and other proof of progress in papers on that era. But Japan's modernization had another side. It had a dark underside where social tensions erupted periodically in violence. Balanced consideration of the period, therefore, requires attention to the aims and frustrations of men left out of society as well as to the purposes of the ruling elite. It requires study of the patterns of violence which emerged when those disinherited by the reforms of the era rallied to the standard of rebel leader or took up the assassin's sword.<sup>1</sup>

Some assassinations are random acts by psychopathic individuals; others are carefully conceived plots based on the grievances of large social groups. The political murder under study here, the bloody attack on Home Minister Ōkubo Toshimichi on the morning of May 14, 1878, was the latter type. It was a confrontation by samurai traditionalists, who felt wronged by policies which destroyed their hereditary class privileges, with the minister who dominated the modernizing cabinet.<sup>2</sup> Ōkubo's charisma was the charisma of change, and this instance of violence against change provides a microcosm of broader social and political clashes of the period.

Some assassins strike from the shadows and melt into the multitude to conceal their crimes; others commit political murder with a view to maximum publicity and martyrdom. Ōkubo's killers, who surrendered at once, having given their apologia—their *zanġanjō*—to the press, belonged to the second class, the righteous lawbreakers. They aimed to "carry benevolence beyond the grave" and through their own deaths by execution to win widespread sympathy for their cause. In some measure they succeeded.

Ōkubo, like Lincoln, was murdered in the aftermath of victory by the central government in civil war. Unlike the American, Ōkubo did not become the martyred man of sorrows. Rather, his assassins won popular adulation. The real interest of the assassination, therefore, centers on the public sympathy given the attackers. This exposition, in addition to bringing together the threads of the assassination plot, will touch on the romantic tradition of the assassin as folk hero in Japan.

Let us consider now the attack of May 14, 1878, the motivations of the attackers, their rationale, and some responses to the attack.

### *The Attack: May 14, 1878*

The state business that preoccupied Ōkubo as he called his carriage to leave for the palace on the morning of May 14, 1878, was portentous. The matters that concerned him were internal security, economic development, and greater centralization of political authority—the very issues which inflamed the six assassins who lay in wait along his route.

The return of domestic order was scheduled for celebration in the council of state<sup>3</sup> meeting before the throne that morning with presentation of awards to army and navy heroes of the successful struggle against the counterrevolutionary forces of Saigō Takamori in the southwest the previous year. As councillor, Ōkubo was to be present when the Emperor Meiji elevated General Torio Koyata, for example, to the senior second court rank and conferred on him an annual pension of 600 yen.<sup>4</sup>

But a chance caller turned Ōkubo's mind to the national economic development program—even as his carriage driver waited at the front entrance. Governor Yamayoshi Morisuke of Fukushima prefecture, in Tokyo for the recent meeting of the assembly of local officials, came for final instructions from his administrative superior before leaving for the northeast. As the home minister completed dressing in his parlor, he conferred with the apologetic governor. Ordinarily taciturn, Ōkubo was now eloquent and optimistic as he outlined his plans to force the pace of economic modernization. Limited progress in the revolt-plagued decade since the Meiji Restoration marked but a beginning, he said. During the second decade, just ahead, when "we shall put internal administration in good order and make



national power a reality," he expected to direct an economic development program of unprecedented dimensions. Ōkubo admonished Yamayoshi to supervise the new Asaka land reclamation project in Fukushima with greatest care, for this effort to drain the upland swamps of the northeast was a model of its kind—a prototype for many similar projects that would expand the cultivated acreage and provide a livelihood for some of the declassed samurai. In his meeting with the prefectural governors at the Hama detached palace the previous day Ōkubo had observed that some displayed a notable skepticism about the 12,500,000 yen industrial bond program under which such local development projects were to be financed; and Ōkubo charged his departing visitor with responsibility for the success of this model effort.<sup>6</sup>

A desire to purge the rolls of laggard governors possibly lay behind the hasty note which Ōkubo dispatched to Itō Hirobumi that morning by messenger. Perhaps Ōkubo urged Councillor Itō to attend the morning's meeting to lend support on this personnel matter; for the home minister shared with the council of state the appointment and removal power over governors, some of whom, apart from lassitude, seemed politically unreliable. Itō, as president of the recent assembly of local officials, had encountered a direct challenge from these appointees; and he might be expected to lend strong support to his patron in eliminating these discordant voices. Ōkubo's critics assert that he was preparing this additional step toward political absolutism as he left for the palace.<sup>6</sup> The time was 8:10 A.M.<sup>7</sup>

The minister who rode in his English-style two-horse closed carriage was "the least distinctively Japanese" among the members of the ruling oligarchy and had "a strong dash of the European."<sup>8</sup> The home that he left behind was an expensive, two-story, painted, Western-style mansion, one of the first in Tokyo; and the sight outraged traditionalists.<sup>9</sup> Dressed in morning coat and trousers with cravat and high collar, Ōkubo, with side-whiskers and mustache aping the style favored by Occidental statesmen he had met abroad in 1873, had the appearance of the elegant European gentleman. His coachman took the usual route from the house near the present National Diet Building in Kasumigaseki to the temporary Akasaka palace, some distance west of the main palace, which had burned nine days earlier.

The six conspirators who waited ahead at a deserted spot along the road in Kioi-chō were dressed in a contrasting tradi-



tional manner that highlighted their quarrel with Ōkubo.<sup>10</sup> All carried swords, once the badge of samurai rank, but outlawed by imperial edict in 1876. The ringleader, Shimada Ichirō (1848-1878), who had gathered the conspirators at his Yotsuya lodgings at dawn to proceed to this lonely stretch of road, wore a padded black kimono of finest *habutae* silk with family crest. Most of the others wore the *hakama* divided-skirt, but tied their loose *uwagi* coats about their waists to allow freedom of arm movement. They presented (except for one incongruous derby hat) a picture of old-fashioned Japanese samurai gathering for a vendetta.

As they awaited the carriage they knew by sight, the two lookouts along the road, Shimada and Chō Rengō (1856-1878), played with flowering peony branches, a flower never afterwards used by the Ōkubo family. The conspirators' meticulous investigation had revealed that the vehicle would appear at this exact time and place, for the councillors always gathered at the palace on days ending in four and nine and Ōkubo's coachman invariably took this route.<sup>11</sup> Beyond a low earthen wall on the left-hand side of the road, concealed by an outbuilding amidst rank grass and mulberry trees on the property of the court noble Mibu Tomonaga, crouched their four confederates. The ashen-gray cloudy sky which threatened rain provided an ominous setting.

When the groom who stood on the platform at the rear of Ōkubo's carriage caught sight of the two loiterers, he dropped off to run ahead for a closer look.<sup>12</sup> A sword blow that barely grazed his hat let the groom know that he had encountered danger, so he sprinted through the ambush to call for help at the estate of Prince Kitashirakawa on the right. The time for help was past, however, for the carriage had already reached the ambush. Just as the coachman whipped his horses to make the sharp left turn that began the long steep climb up Kioi-zaka to the palace, Chō Rengō struck the foreleg of the horse on the right with his long sword. The glancing blow merely caused the horse to neigh loudly and surge forward. But the next blow, a clean one, delivered by Sugimoto Otogiku (1849-1878) who jumped over the low fence to join the attack, nearly severed the other horse's foreleg and halted the vehicle.

When coachman Nakamura Tarō leaped from the driver's box shouting and flailing his whip, Wakita Kōichi (1850-1878) dispatched the unfortunate man with a single deep cut across the left shoulder and chest. At the same time, Ōkubo, who had been

studying documents intently, looked up to find his carriage surrounded by conspirators who had swarmed out of the unkempt Mibu property, joined now by their leaders. "Wait!" he called, "Do you have some request to make?" "What! At this stage!" one responded. The home minister impassively wrapped his papers in a woolen *furoshiki*, after which he tried to escape from the carriage, or possibly was pulled. But at his first step down, Shimada's sword blow from above opened a wound from mid-forehead to eyebrow. As Ōkubo fell, blows rained on the back of his head, his spine, and his legs. A short sword thrust deeply into the side of his neck stayed fixed when the conspirators took hasty flight. Ōkubo, mortally wounded, rose twice to drag himself short distances across the dew-drenched grass before he collapsed for the last time, face up.

While the groom ran to the Akasaka-mitsuke police station to give the alarm, the six assassins hurried across the Mibu property to turn themselves in to the guard at the palace gate. There the commanding Shimada announced in a bold voice, "We have just now waylaid Ōkubo Toshimichi in Kioi-chō, while he was on his way to the cabinet meeting, and assassinated him. We have disposed of him properly and our purpose is done." In confirmation two companions wore blood-stained *hakama*. To an official of the imperial household ministry, Shimada handed their apologia, a strange dualistic statement of purpose, in which the conspirators proclaimed themselves both as avengers of Saigō Takamori, who died in defense of Japanese tradition, and as reformers calling for European parliamentarianism. Their faces were wreathed in smiles as they awaited the arrival of police officers for the arrest.<sup>13</sup>

### *Formation of the Conspiracy*

The man who brought Ōkubo to his death was Shimada Ichirō, *shizoku* of Ishikawa prefecture. "I conceived the idea of the assassination," confessed Shimada; and all evidence corroborates that his was no idle boast. Years of teahouse gossip jelled into a definite plot to strike down Ōkubo to aid the Saigō rebellion in April 1877. The plot, conceived in support of the Saigō uprising, became, as the march of events outdated it, a substitute for rebellion to check "mistaken" government policies. With rare singleness of purpose Shimada and his principal accomplice,



Chō Rengō, worked for more than a year to perfect their conspiracy, recruiting along the way several loyal disciples. By April 1878, Shimada's obsession had become an open secret in Ishikawa—so much so that the prefectural governor wired a warning to the chief of the metropolitan police in Tokyo to maintain surveillance over the dangerous man who had headed for the capital. What then were the sources of Shimada's blinding hatred of Ōkubo?

A sense of personal failure must have been the starting point for Shimada's venture in assassination. He attributed to the oligarchy in Tokyo his inability to achieve prominence in the military services. Shimada's promising military career flourished during the war of the Meiji Restoration in 1868 when he fought with the Kaga-han army during its triumphant march through northern Echigo province on behalf of the imperial cause. This was the high point of his life, and battlefield promotions allowed him to advance his hereditary status of *ashigaru*, the lowest samurai class of foot-soldiers. By 1871, Shimada was a temporary first lieutenant in the reorganized han army. However, his ambitions were shattered by the abrupt dissolution of the Kaga-han army at the time of the abolition of fiefs and the creation of the first national military force. Failure seemed final after his brief unsuccessful effort to study Western military science at private schools in Osaka and Tokyo in 1872.

Career frustration brought to the surface a psychopathic personality which seemed to account for Shimada's predilection for the more radical side of every issue in han politics. He joined the righteous faction (*Seigi-ha*) of lower samurai rebels against the villainous faction (*Kambutsu-ha*) of higher fief families in 1871; and in 1875 he led an ultraradical group of samurai protestors committed to "direct action" to restore lost samurai rights.<sup>14</sup> Moderate, mainstream leaders of samurai protest were a bit wary of this husky samurai of "tempestuous temperament," who was forever sending angry letters to leaders of rival factions and engaging in feuds of obscure origin.

Kaga sectional spirit provided a milieu that reinforced personal tendencies and stirred intense hostility toward the Satsuma-Chōshū oligarchy in Tokyo. Hardly a Kaga man gained membership in the new national bureaucracy, and it outraged Shimada that neither he nor any Kaga soldier obtained a commission in the new national army in these years. In 1874 several hundred politically minded Kaga *shizoku* formed the Chūkokusha (Ad-



monition Society) to restore the greatness that was Kaga's in the Tokugawa period when it had ranked first among *han* with a rated rice production of 1,027,000 *koku* and Lord Maeda had enjoyed a position of profound respect at Edo castle. The Chūkoku-sha was not a conspiratorial organization at first. It called primarily for a Kaga share in government through creation of a representative assembly. It charged that the Ōkubo-dominated oligarchy had forgotten the Meiji Emperor's promise in the Five Article Oath of 1868 to create "assemblies broadly convoked" and, thus, not freeze out any section. The Chūkoku-sha sent two delegates to Osaka in February 1875 for the first great national convention of liberal forces that organized the Aikoku-sha (Patriots' Society) under the leadership of Itagaki Taisuke. One of these delegates was Kuga Yoshinao, who later composed Shimada's assassination apologia, but Kuga was in 1875 part of the Chūkoku-sha mainstream leadership that regarded Shimada as a "rustic" and as too radical and erratic with his talk of physical force and direct action to be effective. Indeed, these leaders ejected Shimada and his numerous disciples from formal installation ceremonies for Chūkoku-sha members later that spring.<sup>16</sup> Still, Shimada breathed deeply of the spirit of Kaga sectionalism as preached by the Chūkoku-sha.

Loss of status as samurai added to the social strain which drove the Shimada group along its violent course.<sup>16</sup> His conspiracy was obviously the last bitter defiance of an anachronistic hereditary military class whose social and economic underpinnings had given way. Shimada rarely mentioned anything so crass, in samurai eyes, as money—or resentment over the loss he suffered with forced conversion of stipends to bonds; but he and his family lived a hand-to-mouth existence after 1876, saved only by the charity of a former high *han* official. Moreover, loss of status symbols figured as prominently as economic factors in stirring discontent. It was outlawry of sword-wearing that particularly angered Shimada, and he regularly defied this order from the central government.

These elements of social strain expressed themselves in violence partly because Japanese society accorded a measure of legitimacy to this kind of protest. Through the era of Tokugawa despotism, there developed a long romantic tradition of the assassin as folk hero who challenged an oppressive policy and, in his martyrdom, brought alteration of it.<sup>17</sup> More recently, the tradition had been reinvigorated by a series of assassinations that be-

gan with the killing of Great Elder Ii Naosuke in 1860. Ironically, Itō and perhaps others now in the oligarchy had molded in the 1860's the pattern which inspired Shimada; but they had already seen it turned against their colleagues earlier in the post-Restoration era when three major modernizers died at the hands of traditionalists: in 1869 Councillor Yokoi Shōnan, who expressed interest in democracy and Christianity; later the same year Vice Minister of War Ōmura Masujirō, who Europeanized the armed forces; and in 1871 Councillor Hirozawa Maomi, whose centralization policies angered his former Chōshū clansmen. The incidence of assassination rose with response to a pattern as one political murder suggested another. Ōkubo's killers were steeped in traditions of these earlier "martyred patriots" whose actions, therefore, triggered the 1878 affair.<sup>18</sup>

Another contributing element was the complete politicization of *shinōku* society in Ishikawa prefecture. *Han* schools of late Tokugawa created a "passionate concern with politics" among samurai, as R. P. Dore has demonstrated, and instilled in them civic responsibility for the fate of the nation. Beyond that, students read the romanticized histories which glorified the military exploits of the early feudal age and popularized the cult of the sword. Finally, they absorbed the Confucian doctrine that duty to principle superseded the duty of personal loyalty to a superior who might need to encounter defiance for his own good. This amalgam encouraged private individuals to resort to violence, particularly in the absence of alternative means of protest. The unusually high level of literacy in Ishikawa (85 percent literacy among conscripts from that prefecture in 1887) only intensified the degree of political involvement.<sup>19</sup> With the breakdown of older social and political controls immediately after the Restoration, before the authority of the home ministry really penetrated into the prefectures, such political activity sometimes burgeoned out of control. Indeed, minor police officials who were nominally home ministry officials were among Shimada's staunchest supporters.

Within this context the Ishikawa conspirators came together, angry men, involved politically and on the lookout for a cause that would support strong opposition to the Meiji leaders. Each man had his favorite cause. Chō Rengō responded to Saigō's plea to rebuild national power by reviving the pure untarnished samurai spirit in the private schools, and the young Ishikawa disciple returned from his two visits to Kagoshima imitating Saigō's



simple pleasures as he took two hunting dogs into the mountains near the Ishikawa castle-town of Kanazawa to seek fox and badger. The unproved allegation that Home Minister Ōkubo sent an undercover agent into Satsuma to assassinate Saigō was the precipitating incident that moved Chō to plot with Shimada. By contrast, Wakita Kōichi was attracted to the representative assembly issue, and the summary rejection of his petition on behalf of an elective parliament by the prefectural office led him to resign his position as a middle-school teacher, ultimately to join the conspiracy. Shimada had still another ideological grievance. A howling expansionist, he regarded Ōkubo's moderate course in opposing invasion of Korea in 1873 and in arranging prompt evacuation of Taiwan in 1874 as an unpardonable weakness in foreign policy.<sup>20</sup> All three men were preoccupied with politics and fixed upon Ōkubo as the thwarter of their divergent causes.

That Shimada should emerge as the ringleader of the group plotting against Ōkubo was something of a curiosity. He belonged to the lowest stratum of samurai. At least three of his followers were from upper samurai families: of the 200 *ko* level (Chō and Sugimura) or of the 300 *ko* level (Wakita). Shimada was barely literate—a man who wrote his ideographs in a childish scrawl, while Chō was regarded as brilliant—"a jewel of a youth"<sup>21</sup>—and Wakita taught school. Apparently Shimada gloried in post-Restoration Ishikawa's freer atmosphere that allowed him to mingle with men of good family. They in turn were captivated by the charismatic, slightly older man with his jet-black, bristling beard and penetrating eyes. He was cut in the *shishi* pattern.

In the autumn of 1877 the plot thickened as Wakita went to Tokyo in advance of the rest, ostensibly to enroll in the new government Technical Institute (*Kangyō Gijyū*). In a few weeks Chō Rengō, a sort of associate director of the assassination enterprise, followed Wakita to the capital to scout the situation. The sensitive Chō, his solemn, thin face ornamented by a tiny mustache, was the brains of the group; and in several letters he analyzed the problem for Shimada back in Kanazawa. The Tokyo force was augmented in December 1877 with the arrival of Chō's personal disciple, Sugimura Bun'ichi, to enroll in the same Technical Institute as Wakita. Sugimura was very young, notwithstanding his premature baldness, and this fact may explain his role as a shadowy figure, a follower not a leader. His



submissive character was akin to that of Shimada's lackey, Sugimoto Otogiku, who reached Tokyo in April 1878. Sugimoto was an odd, dwarfish man, nicknamed "The Buddha" because of his curly hair. The only non-Ishikawa conspirator was Asai Hisaatsu (1853-1878), a former policeman from Shimane prefecture. Asai literally forced his way into the plot. As a policeman on duty in Tokyo he had been mobilized to fight against the Satsuma rebels in 1877 and decorated for bravery, but he spent much of his two-week leave granted as a reward in a house of prostitution. For this breach of regulations he was dismissed from the police force with the approval of the home minister. Asai joined, therefore, for the narrowest kind of personal revenge. Meantime, his band assembled, Shimada left Kanazawa on March 25, 1878, paused to pray at the shrine of imperial loyalist Kusunoki Masashige near Kobe, and reached Chō's lodgings in Tokyo on April 7 or 8.<sup>22</sup>

It was Shimada who commanded the band that appeared at the palace gate on May 14. In his confession Shimada explained, "We surrendered to the guard at the palace because we had recorded our principal objectives in doing this deed in our Assassination Apologia which we carried. We wished to hand this over (to His Majesty, the Emperor)."<sup>23</sup>

### *Assassination Rationale*

The apologia which the six handed over was in fact addressed to the masses as much as to the emperor. This became evident as Shimada played out his role melodramatically before an official of the imperial household ministry. Aware that the difficulty of the ideographs and the elegance of the calligraphy did not tally with the rustic manner of Shimada, the official asked, "Who is involved in this besides you?" The assassin avoided answering directly that the Ishikawa journalist Kuga Yoshinao had composed the statement for Shimada. Rather, he proclaimed grandly, "Our thirty million people—all are our allies as we eliminate the tyrannical officials." To make doubly sure that the document came to the attention of the people, Shimada arranged for a confederate to leave copies of it at the offices of two newspapers at the hour of the assassination. One of them, the *Chōya Shimbun*, a Tokyo daily, published extracts from it.<sup>24</sup>

The main thrust of the argument in this document was that laws of the time were derived neither from the emperor's will

nor from the people, but were the arbitrary creations of a few self-appointed leaders. Elimination of these men who had come between the emperor and his people was justified, the statement continued, now that the fear of Saigō no longer kept corruption within bounds. But those who deserved to die were so many and the conspirators so few that the six could not dispatch all of the "evil officials." They selected Ōkubo as the chief symbol of mistaken government policy, believing that his murder would overawe the rest and somehow restore a desirable state of affairs.<sup>28</sup>

Their strategy of revolution consisted almost entirely of a few powerful phrases. "If the root and trunk be eliminated, the branches and leaves will wither away." Changing imagery, the rationale evoked an apocalyptic vision of a single dramatic act that would "stir the public spirit in all corners of the land, and restore the fallen fortunes of the nation." This revolutionary strategy did not embrace planning beyond the assassination plot. Its instigators assumed that, thenceforth, things were automatically going to happen to bring an imperial restoration, popular government, or some other desirable end.

A strange mixture of traditionalist and modern objectives ran through the apologia. In the list of charges against Ōkubo, the assassins condemned him, on the one hand, for economic modernization policies which ruined the samurai class, but on the other they denounced him just as vehemently for delay in political modernization which would have allowed representative institutions to vent their grievances.

The language of the five formal charges preferred against Ōkubo has a force and directness which makes quotation worthwhile. Ōkubo's first crime was that he had blocked the move for representative government, contrary to the promise given in the Five Article Oath and made more definite in 1875. To quote the exact words, "He has ignored public opinion, suppressed the people's rights, and, thereby, seized absolute power for himself." So-called crimes two and three related to Ōkubo's use of tax money for corrupt or frivolous purposes. "His second crime: he has conducted the administration for private ends, openly countenanced corruption, and extended his influence and fortune as he pleased. His third crime: he has carried out low priority construction projects, put up useless buildings which are mere ornaments, and, thereby, exhausted the nation's finances." Corruption, in the minds of the conspirators, had made the government



into a kind of a merchant house from which officials started their own companies or exerted public influence for private ends—Inoue Kaoru's manipulations in copper mining, for example. Lavish expenditures drew censure as Ōkubo put up expensive public buildings, furnished the palace luxuriously, installed gaslights in Tokyo, and spread railways and telegraph lines through the land. The vigor and bustle of Europe during his visit in 1873 has deluded him into believing that these visible ornaments created national strength. The fourth crime was the reverse face of the spendthrift policy: "He has alienated patriotic samurai, causing rebellions." Not only had samurai stipends stopped; in Shimada's inverted world, the government had precipitated the Saga rebellion of 1874 by striking against a minor samurai protest meeting. Next, in 1877 the government tried to assassinate the Great Saigō, and—when he started his march on Tokyo—declared him a criminal and rebel without a hearing. Ōkubo's fifth and final crime derived from all the others. "He has blundered in foreign policy and lost the national rights." The expansionist-minded Ishikawa assassin had in mind "humiliations" to Japan in Korea, Karafuto, the Ryukyu Islands, and elsewhere.<sup>26</sup>

This apologia represented Shimada's effort to use the imperial institution, the central myth of the state, to promote his own cause. He identified his political dissidence with imperial loyalism, and touched a responsive chord in the nation.<sup>27</sup> Ōkubo, the subject who was guilty of "subordination of the imperial line," was also responsible for "impoverishment of the masses." Ōkubo's elimination, therefore, would effect imperial restoration and end samurai poverty, Shimada reasoned.

Shimada also invoked the *shishi* tradition of the brave and loyal defender of principle, who goes to death defiant and unrepentant, thus proving his sincerity. In his last exhortation to his eight-year-old son, Shimada explained that "loyalty to principle (*meibun taigi*) bears little relationship to victory or defeat." Often the righteous fail—Saigō for example; whereas traitors to the imperial house succeed—Hōjō Yoshitoki (who crushed Emperor Go-Toba in 1221) and Ashikaga Takauji (who deserted the cause of Emperor Go-Daigo in 1336), both sinister prototypes of Ōkubo. Had Shimada been successful, like the United States revolutionaries against England, he would no longer be considered a rebel but a hero, he told his son in a farewell evocative of both his limited vision and his sense of righteousness.<sup>28</sup>



### Responses to the Assassination

On July 27, 1878, Shimada and his band received the capital punishment that they expected and invited by confessing before the justice ministry's special court established to try them. Judge Tamano Seiri sentenced them to death at 10 A.M., and executioners beheaded the six in the yard of Ichigaya prison in Tokyo at 11:30 A.M. the same day. Shimada played out his role as *shishi* to the end, encouraging his comrades to die bravely and leading the way without flinching. He requested only that his bonds be loosened. Asked if he had last words, he merely said, "Nothing."<sup>89</sup>

As the men had anticipated, Ishikawa prefecture virtually canonized them for their deed and their deaths. Ishikawa men reclaimed their remains, and in 1879 buried them with honor in a scenic spot beneath the pines at the foot of Mount Noda on the outskirts of their old castle-town of Kanazawa. In time, the myth of the heroic assassins received the official imprimatur as it appeared in the prefectural history, hardly diluted. This official publication devoted more than a hundred pages to the conspiracy, providing a long, sympathetic account that turned it into an epic. It may not be coincidental that Kuga Yoshinao (1843-1916), author of the apologia, on his release from life imprisonment in the Emperor Meiji's general amnesty of 1889, became archivist and historian for the house of his old feudal lord.<sup>90</sup>

The nation as a whole was less enthusiastic than Ishikawa, but not altogether condemnatory. Those who mourned Ōkubo were chiefly his acquaintances. Even in Tokyo there was glorification of the assassins, as in Yoshikawa's 1879 biographical novel on Shimada. The author portrayed the assassin as a sentimental patriot and stirred sympathy for the brotherhood of conspirators by relating their Robin Hood exploits. To be sure, some newspapers condemned the action forthrightly, mostly government papers such as the *Nichi Nichi Shimbun*. Opposition papers said little in the face of tight government control under the Press Law of 1875; for the *Chōya Shimbun* received a ten-day suspension for publishing part of the assassination apologia, an action "injurious to the peace of the country." The flourishing foreign-language press, whose editors were shielded by extra-territoriality, had freedom to say what opposition Japanese editors only felt. Typical was the *Japan Daily Herald*, which scored the "morbid and perverted feeling of patriotism" that provoked the

violence but expressed grudging praise for men whose act was "redeemed by unselfish sacrifice." The *Herald* then identified the source of the plot with the "faulty method of government" that brought "despotic suppression of expression of opinion through the press—the safety valve of nations" and "denial of representative government."<sup>81</sup>

In what degree did such veiled sympathy move government policy toward the assassins' stated aims—toward representative government, less state support for economic enterprise, and a strong foreign policy? Immediate policy changes were imperceptible, except for assignment of police guards for cabinet ministers. Shortly afterwards, perhaps there was some official response in the edict of July 22, 1878, implementing the earlier proposal of the assembly of local officials for election of legislatures in both urban and rural prefectures. Moreover, reduction of government support for economic modernization commenced about this time and culminated in the sale of many government enterprises in 1881. Professor Tsuchiya Takao regards the assassination as one factor, a subordinate one, in the policy change. No immediate foreign-policy shift resulted; but the long-range significance of the assassination lay in the fact that the conspirators of 1878 revived and popularized a behavioral pattern that twentieth-century members of the radical right used to move the nation toward war, expansion, and defeat.

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## NOTES

1. American studies of social change "tend to lack the elements of violence, revolution, class, and ideology," concerned as they are with "continuities and the role of tradition in stabilizing social change." For this bias Japanese scholars frequently criticize American writings on their nation's history. John Whitney Hall, "Reflections on a Centennial," *Journal of Asian Studies*, XXVII, 4:718 (August 1968).

2. All six participants in the attack on Ōkubo were *shiso*ku, a class that included a substantial portion of the old samurai retainers. One of them signed the group's apologia as a commoner, or *heimin*; but, in fact, Wakita Kōichi sprang from an important 300-*ku* samurai family. He had only recently removed his name from the family register to protect his relatives from the consequences of the plot. Hioki Ken, ed., *Ishikawa-ken shi* (History of Ishikawa prefecture), 5 vols. (Tokyo, 1939-40), IV, 1159.

3. Ōkubo held the position of councillor, or *sangi*, in addition to his ad-



ministrative post as home minister. The council of state, a policy-making body, met at the palace six times monthly.

4. Tokyo *Nichi Nichi Shimbun*, May 15, 1878, in Nakayama Yasumasa, ed., *Shimbun shūshi Meiji hennen shi* (Documentary history of the Meiji era in newspapers), 15 vols. (Tokyo, 1934-36), III, 390; *Japan Weekly Mail*, May 18, 1878.

5. Katuda Magoya, *Ōkubo Toshimichi den* (Biography of Ōkubo Toshimichi), 3 vols. (Tokyo, 1910-11), III, 769-70.

6. Discussions at Itō's house that morning between Itō and Takasaki Seifū, Ōkubo's close associate, plus Sasaki Takayuki had centered on the possibility that Ōkubo might take charge of the chamberlains of the palace while Itō moved up to home minister. *Ibid.*, III, 770-74.

7. There is a family tradition that the departure was delayed slightly by the cries of Ōkubo's two-year-old daughter, whom the father normally carried to the *genjūm* before handing her back to her mother, but on this occasion only the baby refused to leave her father. To quiet her crying Ōkubo took the girl into the carriage for a ride around the circular drive before handing her out at the back door. Interview with Mrs. Ijūin (the daughter) by author, Tokyo, August 23, 1957.

8. Editorial, *Japan Daily Herald*, May 22, 1878.

9. Cricket grounds were even laid out on the lawn. This structure had created controversy from the start, and legend has it that Saigō in Kagoshima allegedly decided on the final break with his boyhood friend Ōkubo in 1877 on seeing a photograph of the costly home.

10. Ironically the mansion of the Great Elder Ii Naosuke, victim of the spectacular assassination plot of 1860, stood near this spot. The very name of the place, Kioō, was derived from the names of the daimyo whose estates were located there in the Tokugawa era: the lord of Kū, the lord of Owari, and the Ii family.

11. *Ishikawa-ken shi*, IV, 1124.

12. Ōkubo was virtually unguarded despite one earlier serious attempt on his life and numerous threats. Futaki Chūzaku, Kagoshima *shiroō*, had been sentenced to prison for the 1876 assassination attempt. On the minimal plans for Ōkubo's protection see the 1929 interview with the groom Odaka Yoshikichi (who was then eighty) by Ishiguro Tadamori as published in Murobuse Tetsurō, *Nihon no terorisuto* (Japanese terrorists; Tokyo, 1962), pp. 85-86.

13. Ironically, it was Councillor Saigō Tsugumichi, younger brother of the Great Saigō, who hurried to his fallen colleague Ōkubo and accompanied the remains back to the Ōkubo mansion.

This account of the assassination is based on the following primary and secondary sources: Murobuse Tetsurō, *Nihon no terorisuto*, pp. 83-88; *Ishikawa-ken shi*, IV, 1124-30; Katuda, *Ōkubo Toshimichi den*, III, 768-74; Tokyo *Nichi Nichi Shimbun*, May 15, 1878, in *Meiji hennen shi*, III, 389-90; *Japan Daily Herald*, May 15, 1878; Tanaka Sōgorō, *Ōkubo Toshimichi* (Tokyo, 1938), pp. 440-44.

14. Members of the righteous faction maintained close ties with Satsuma, which displayed traditionalist and separatist tendencies; the villainous faction sided with the central government, which was committed to policies of modernization and political unification.

15. Sugimura Bun'ichi (1860-78), younger brother of Chūkoku-sha chief Sugimura Kansai, joined the assassination conspiracy of 1878.

16. Reference is made on this and the following pages to Neil J. Smelser, *Theory of Collective Behavior* (New York, 1962), *passim*.

17. The incidence of assassination in the Tokugawa period was not great by modern Japanese standards, but a few celebrated deeds of violence gained wide public approval. In 1684 the "able but arbitrary" Great Elder Hotta Masatoshi had been killed by one of the junior elders. Edwin O. Reischauer and John K. Fairbank, *East Asia: the Great Tradition* (Boston, 1960), p. 620. More sensational was the assassination of the Junior Elder Tanuma Mototomo by an infuriated palace guard who believed that his own genealogy was being used by the parvenu Tanuma to forge his aristocratic credentials. Hereditary aristocrats all approved; moreover, conservative forces generally welcomed this as a censure of Tanuma's father, innovationist head of government. John W. Hall, *Tanuma Okitragu 1719-1789: Forerunner of Modern Japan* (Cambridge, 1955), p. 39, pp. 42-43.

18. Information about Shimada comes primarily from *Ishikawa-ken shi*, IV, 240-82. For a revealing account of the motivation of Tsuge Shirōzaemon in assassinating Yokoi Shōnan see Mori Ōgai, *Ōgai senjū* (Complete works of Ōgai; Tokyo, 1936), VI, 36-74. Professor David Aboach of Northern Illinois University called my attention to the latter.

19. R. P. Dove, "The Legacy of Tokugawa Education," in Marius B. Jansen, ed., *Changing Japanese Attitudes toward Modernization* (Princeton, 1965), pp. 100 fn., 117-19.

20. Shimada had met Saigō at the time the Satsuma leader was prominent as advocate of an attack on Korea, and Shimada was charmed by the great man. Even when overseas expansion took place, however, Shimada was denied glory; for, though he volunteered for the Taiwan expedition in 1874, he was not invited to join.

21. Judge Tamano Seiri, who conducted the trial of the conspirators, was reputed to have given this praise. *Ishikawa-ken shi*, IV, 1157-58.

22. *Ishikawa-ken shi*, IV, 1156-62.

23. Shimada's Confession, signed July 6, 1878, reprinted in Katsuda, *Ōkubo Toshimichi den*, III, 779-83.

24. *Chōya Shimbun*, May 15, 1878; *Ishikawa-ken shi*, IV, 1125.

25. In the apologia the conspirators asserted, "Kido Takayoshi, Ōkubo Toshimichi, and Iwakura Tomomi—these were the ringleaders. Nor could we tolerate Ōkuma Shigenobu, Inō Hirobumi, Kuroda Kiyotaka, or Kawaji Toshiyoshi. In addition, if we consider Sanjō Sanetomi and corruptionists of his stripe, the number of small-time hangers-on is countless." Kido had received consideration as the target of the assassin. "Unexpectedly Takayoshi died of illness. This must have been the will of Heaven, that one of the great corruptionists should come to his end thus." Apologia text in Katsuda, *Ōkubo Toshimichi den*, III, 777-78.

26. Ōkubo's effective personal negotiations in Peking in 1874 received short shrift in *Ishikawa* on the grounds that the government tried to pass off China's payment for roads and repairs in Taiwan as an indemnity. For text and supplementary explanation of the apologia see *Ishikawa-ken shi*, IV, 1125-43; Katsuda, *Ōkubo Toshimichi den*, III, 776-80.



27. The rationale for this is traced in Herschel Webb, *The Japanese Imperial Institution in the Tokugawa Period* (New York, 1968), 247-59.

28. Text of the farewell message in *Ishikawa-ken shi*, IV, 1152-55.

29. *Ibid.*, IV, 1145-49. Seventeen other Ishikawa men received sentences ranging from life to one hundred days for involvement. In addition, a luckless Tokyo policeman from Ishikawa wrote his brother in Kanazawa in praise of the assassins' "glorious deed," for which expression of sentiment he received thirty days.

30. Before the assassination, on May 9, 1878, Kuga fled Tokyo; and he was employed as editor of the *Ise Shimbum* when he was arrested on May 22 at a public bath in the city of Ise. Employees of the paper subsequently gave a banquet in his honor. *Ishikawa-ken shi*, IV, 1162.

31. Editorial, *Japan Daily Herald*, May 17, 1878. Ōkubo was given the first state funeral in modern times, and thousands participated in the procession to Aoyama cemetery, where his remains were interred. Behind his tomb were buried the coachman and the horse who had been in the home minister's service. On the horse's stone marker is an image of the faithful beast as if for a T'ang emperor.