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‘Trust Me, I’m a Terrorist’: Aum Shinrikyo Ascension and Trust in Government

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To the bebê. We can't wait to finally see you.





‘Trust Me, I’m a Terrorist’: Aum Shinrikyo Ascension and Trust in Government

Abstract

This research addresses the question whether low levels of trust in government can embolden Violent Extremist Organization. (VEO) To that end, this paper will focus on the history of the group Aum Shinrikyo. The timeline will be from its early years in the 50’s until the fatal attacks with sarin gas in the Tokyo subway in 1995. The aim is to recognize the correlation between the trust in the Japanese government and ascension of the group. The justification for ascensions of VEOs can be narrowed into several causes, but the common catalyst to eradicate or impede them is the trust of the citizens in their government. Thus, if the government lacks legitimacy, it is fated to ineffective policies with citizens that don’t comply to general rules and laws. To answer the research question, process tracing methodology has been adopted to parallel between the theory of Transformational Delegitimation and the timeline of Aum Shinrikyo culminating to the gas attack. The conclusion drawn here is that Aum Shinrikyo took advantage of the low level of trust that the Japanese population had towards their government and that made it feasible to Aum to compete for legitimacy with the Japanese government.

Introduction

Are Violent Extremist Organization¹ (VEO) emboldened by low levels of trust on their government? This study will address this question through Ehud Sprinzak’s theory of Transformational Delegitimation applied to the root causes leading to the emergence of Aum Shinrikyo until the group attack on the Tokyo metro station in 1995. The case of Aum Shinrikyo in Japan proves to be not only fascinating, in terms of organization and planning, but puzzling for scholars who wish to understand the root causes of terrorism. Scholars have found but weak links to poor economic performance and terrorism, and other general factors, arguing that there is no one main root cause for terrorism (Gupta, 2005; Bjørge, 2005). What this study offers is a reapproach to this allegation by bringing a possible missing variable that might be weakening the economic/religious/political/social link and terrorism: trust.

¹ The term VEO is used here to describe terrorist groups. The need to have a different nomenclature rises from the adopted definition of terrorism of this paper, as it will be explained that it is a strategy rather than a characteristic of a person/group. VEOs can also be described simply as ‘groups’ in this thesis.



The effects of trust in society can range in many ways as will be shown in the following chapter, but before dwelling into the core independent variable it is vital to lay the pieces in the board- e.g. how Aum came to ascend. During the ascension of Aum Shinrikyo, the Japanese society was living the “economic miracle” boom through 1954 to 1972, where Japan has seen consistent and continuous growth. However, public opinion surveys by the Public Relations Office of the Japanese government have shown that this growth has not directly translated to improvement of lifestyle. In fact, majority of the Japanese households saw themselves stagnated as middle/lower-middle standard of living compared to the general public, and in addition, to that the citizens have a persistent perception of this stagnation in their lifestyles since 1968. (Public Relations Office, 2016) From 1972 and 1979 the same public opinion surveys have shown a switch between the preference for material and spiritual wealth, where after '79 the Japanese society has been looking to gain spiritual wealth year after year.

Furthermore, this scenario became something that can be called by scholars in terrorism studies as ‘breeding grounds’ for VEOs, an opportunity that groups such as Aum take advantage of. Going back in history, after the World War II, Japan had most of its territory destroyed and occupied by American forces that formed the government, a fact that was likely to invigorate Japanese nationalism through the American occupation. (Edelstein, 2008, p. 11) The revanchism caused by the occupation did not result in insurrection against the Americans, but it left a mark in the Japanese history that was later used by Asahara Shoko, founder of Aum Shinrikyo. Asahara took advantage of the American bombings during war to promote the cult of apocalyptic ideals connecting them to discontentment rooted in pre-war sentiment (Metraux, 1995, p. 1141).

Subsequently, this sentiment has persisted in Japanese society since the end of the II World War, and it was augmented later by a nationwide scandal that made Japan into a breeding

ground for mistrust toward the government, and a breeding ground for terror activity as it will be shown in the posterior sections. As the group grew larger in numbers through the dissatisfaction of the Japanese people with the many failures of the Government, it is possible to identify more than one possible trigger for the ascension of Aum.

Even though there are many root causes for terrorism groups to ascend, (Club de Madrid, 2005) this study will propose that (lack of) trust is the common catalyst that funnels the causes into recruitment and violent acts. Throughout this paper the concepts “trust” and “legitimacy” will be interconnected, even more when in reference to specifically trust in government because it is a solid foundation for its legitimacy. (OECD, 2013) Not only legitimacy is quintessential for a government to enact laws and policies that should be complied with, but it is an asset for crisis management, too. After a terrorist attack, the expectations from the citizens towards their government are affected by previous experience and how it is dealing with the crisis the moment of the attack. These expectations can be either high or low, depending on previous experience in the past. In the former we expect that society will be more prone to wait for the government to address the situation, while in the latter situation parts of society tend to withdraw given legitimacy from the State.

Moreover, this shift in legitimacy is a window that VEOs tend to capitalize *ex-ante* the attack. This capitalization is made possible by low levels of trust prior to the use of political violence. While levels of trust are low, VEOs will use this as an opportunity to build up legitimacy by radicalizing its members, shifting their allegiance from the Government to the VEO, finally turning the Government into an opponent, therefore illegitimate. At this point, what marks the ground zero of active delegitimation is the use of terrorism, and after the first attack, what should dictate if the citizens will continually lose trust *ex-post* terror attacks is the previous level of trust in government.

In this way, it is essential to bring attention to the effect of trust against terrorism so states can be able to employ policies more efficiently and have stronger, non-coercive tactics. (Fjelde, 2009) The effects of how trust is formed will be dissected through a later chapter. In the following chapters, this research will narrow down and explain how the low levels of trust in government of the Japanese people made it a recruitment *bacchanalia* for Aum Shinrikyo.

Literature Review

There is a wide range of literature on trust and terrorism, but the studies that relate to both variables go through extensively about the relation of trust-building and characteristics of state capacity against terrorism (Blomberg, Hess, & Tan, 2011). Trust itself is a variable that requires a multi-sector and multi-actor approach to develop and maintain (OECD, 2013) relating to economic, political and societal aspects, such as unemployment, governmental institutions, crime, income, and representative satisfaction. (Chanley, Rudolph, & Rahn, 2000) Some of the studies that use trust as a variable utilize it as an effect after a terrorist attack, as it is the case for Geys and Qari. They evaluate the trust of the citizens of Stockholm after the bomb attacks in 2010, where the Minister of Foreign Affairs Carl Bildt was killed in the process, and the levels of societal trust² rose after the incident. Another study has shown trust as an effect after the World Trade Center attacks as the Bush administration issued warnings and decreased general terrorism fears, increasing trust in government. (Sinclair & LoCicero, 2010) That said, even before the WTC and Stockholm attacks, general trust was stable at around 60% for Sweden and 37% in the US between 1998 and 2014. (Inglehart, et al., 2014; Institute for Economics & Peace, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2019) These studies show evidence of different behaviors toward terrorism and trust. However, considering that they are

² Societal trust is the type of trust that members of society hold for each other.



case studies, it means that their purpose is limited for generalist assumptions of trust effects in the international level. Specifically, as stated before, Sweden saw a short-term improvement in their societal trust (Geys & Qari, 2017), just as the Americans increased their trust for the government after the WTC attack. Even though short-lived, this evidence is reasonable to consider a correlation between previous levels of trust, which were and are still high in Sweden. (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2019) Nevertheless, the WTC and Stockholm attack papers debate about the *ex-post* factors, however this paper is not focused in evaluating the *ex-post* consequences of trust deficit but the *ex-ante* conditions—that is, trust deficit before terror incidence. This study does not aim to contest these studies, but to add them to Transformational Delegitimation Theory to understand the mechanism behind trust as an independent variable. Furthermore, the field of terrorism research has been growing in past recent years, but many subfields are still understudied. The subfields of terrorism research, more specifically the psychological theories of terrorism that study the traits of the individual level on terrorism, show that terrorists are not guided by an abnormal psychological pattern, but they are driven by a pursuit of collective goals and not influenced by individualistic traits. (McAllister & Schmid, 2011) Not only this group mentality is rather more rational than it appears according to Gupta's model³ that adds a group benefit characteristic to the simple equation of benefits against costs⁴, shows that those who participate weigh in benefits and costs of participating or not in a group. The model previously mentioned is quite elegant in describing this rational choice in the group thinking of the individual, however something that might escape the quick look over this equation is that there are two kinds of participants, one is the (a) *true believer* who wishes to enhance the group welfare (group benefit), and another is the (b) *captive*

³ Participant = Personal benefit + Group Benefit - Cost

⁴ Benefits – Cost > 0

participant who is likely to be fearful of not tagging along (cost) with the group. (Gupta, 2005)

Even though we consider that a group such as Aum will look for members wide and long to gain manpower and funds, it is in the best interest of the group to have more true believers than captive participants, because the benefits that are shared between members in the group are improved, and better shared with the membership of those participants. However, true believers' membership is hard to come by, thus the group cannot rely only on this kind of membership because of scarcity, demanding a heterogeneous composition of captive participants and true believers. (Kydd, 2011)

The formation of a group does not necessarily entail into automatic radicalization. Groups can refrain from using violence and remain moderate depending on the escalation of violence, but in doing so it might not show or achieve satisfactory results for its ranks. (della Porta, 2018) Therefore, the use of violence will depend on a chain of choices made by the group, but this approach to the choice of using violence differs from each group in its escalation to radicalization.

Accordingly, the literature points that terrorism is a gradual process of group radicalization, where an opposing group passes from healthy critique in the first stance to questioning legitimacy when critiques were not sufficient and/or were ignored, the next part of the process would be the legitimacy crisis of the regime. (Sprinzak, 1991) This phenomenon is more common in democratic states where opposition faces fewer obstructions to their displays of discontentment. However, the radicalization of opposition groups is gradual, (della Porta, 2018) following a trend of continuous discontentment to a breaking point of great disappointment, and later followed by contesting the legitimacy of the acting regime (Sprinzak, 1991). Not only in Sprinzak's theory in his seminal work trust is not directly cited, but there are cues to the presence of distrust on the psychological gradual process of a social/political

group in becoming a terrorist group. Specifically, the last step of the evolutionary stages is the crisis of legitimacy, where members of the group are induced to complete disbelief in any kind of reconciliation with the regime. This type of behavior of the group has evolved from critiques to small-scale political violence before the actual radicalization, which is a continuous process of loss of trust, leaving little to no space for any support to the government in any way. Observing nuances between terrorism and trust to identify pre-radicalization in groups requires a more fine-grained observation, as the conditions before the escalation of terrorism may be a consequence of negligence and poor institutional performance, resulting in a low trust, (OECD, 2013) culminating in the reshaping of groups that abandon critique to follow more violent methods.

Moreover, the abandonment of critique not only is followed by more violent methods, it is also followed of denial of legitimacy of the opponent, which in this case is the government. Denying the legitimacy of political opponents is dangerous to democracies, because it is basically adopting a long-term gradual process of turning your opponent into an enemy, denying future possibility of settlements between the diverging parties. (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018) For VEOs, this escalation is key to adopting terrorism, since the group can use narrative to tolerate the use of violence against their enemies. This stage is described by Transformational Delegitimation as the Conflict of Legitimacy, where it is possible to observe political violence taking shape, and less use of democratic critique. (Sprinzak, 1991)

Notwithstanding, the abandonment of critique for the use of political violence is a strategic choice of the VEOs, and this is not the only strategic choice they make, because they are not irrational in their decisions whatsoever. The actions of the VEOs are guided by meticulous calculus in every step they take. (Crenshaw, 2011; Jones & Libicki, 2008) Therefore, it is necessary to address pre-stages of radicalization before violent methods replace critique. One

way of regaining a grasp of community ties is to have trust-building policies. One notable example is Spalek's study (2010) on counterterrorism, police, and Muslim communities in the United Kingdom. Public policies focused on Muslim communities are not a result of discrimination, rather it is focused to successfully address a new significant demographic percentile of asylum seekers and migrants that fled war and autocratic regimes. Although, these dislocations from asylum seeker and migrants have a heavy cost in some asylum seekers and migrants, putting them in a vulnerable position in a new country where they can receive help from their fellow communities, but they can also be targeted by jihadists groups that may feed from grievances of newcomers facing adversities and poor public policies. Furthermore, to force out jihadist's recruiters, police must work on trust-building to get closer to these communities and gain legitimacy from them. (Spalek, 2010) The use of policemen instead of the military is strategic, since police can work closer and continuously to communities, developing an implicit trust, and gaining an informational network, which has a more relevant results than using the army. (Jones & Libicki, 2008) Evidence of the link between police enforcement and trust-building is also exemplified in Australia where simple routine traffic stops have led to more willingness of the general population to cooperate with the police. (Murphy, Mazerolle, & Bennett, 2014)

However, the police force is one of many different institutions that composes a government. A society has different expectations, appraisals, and past experiences from the other institutions such as education, political parties, and parliament altogether forming what is called *political trust*. (OECD Public Governance Reviews, 2017) Political trust is different from the social trust, which represents trust between citizens. Both forms of trust can be independent of each other when taking into consideration the context in which they are being studied. In the case of Japan, the focus lies on political trust in the Japanese government and more specifically the

executive branch. In conflict studies scholars have pointed out that the capability of a State to safeguard institutions generates trust from its citizens to the State, (Fjelde, 2009) this type of trust (*trust in government*) is the one variable that will be evaluated in this study. Literature on trust has shown that trust in government is a two-way street, to be trusted by its citizens the government needs to show decent overall performance in many areas, and in exchange citizens trust their government. (Blomberg, Hess, & Tan, 2011; Blomberg, Hess, & Orphanides, 2004; Chanley, Rudolph, & Rahn, 2000; Fjelde, 2009; Geys & Qari, 2017; Hutchison & Johnson, 2011; Sinclair & LoCicero, 2010; Murphy, Mazerolle, & Bennett, 2014) Differently from what it may look, this ‘transaction’ between citizens and government is not static, the citizens take into account previous successes and failures, the outcome of the present transaction, and the perception of the future transactions between them and the government. (Bauer, 2019) In the next section, trust and trustworthiness will be conceptually addressed at the theoretical framework.

In conclusion, much of the literature has focused on the causal mechanisms of trust in the economy, or how trust was affected after terrorism, but there is a gap when considering trust as a causal element, which is something that should be brought to attention. If trust is proven to be a strong predictor of radicalized political violence, such as terrorism, a state should address the choking points of trust, since sectors and areas that are being ignored or neglected and can become breeding grounds for radicalized opposition. Academically, if the correlation of trust proves true and strong, terrorism theories focused on community-level psychological factors can be stimulated to find common roots of distrust in different countries, making more comprehensive or applicable theories.

Theoretical Framework

In the first part of the theoretical argumentation, I will delve into the definitions of the two key concepts of this research: trust and terrorism. First, trust is an umbrella concept that can lead us to many controversial mishaps. For this paper, ‘trust’ refers to trust in government, more specifically, the trustworthiness of a government in face of its citizens. The trustworthiness of the government can be measured when the expectations of citizens in a given past time (t_{-1}) have been satisfied to a near present (t_0), generating a perceived image of the government, followed by continuous, or higher, expectations to a near future (t_1). The management of this trustworthiness is made by fulfilling the expectations or creating positive perception from action in t_{-1} and failing to fulfill expectations can decrease trustworthiness over time. Failure to meet expectancies is bound to happen, perhaps because citizens are expecting too much of the government, or the matter cannot be addressed sooner. Although, again, failure to address such matter will push back the positive perceptions of the citizens toward the government’s capability to address the same matter in the future, and this will become the standard perception of government in t_0 . To better maintain positive perceptions, consequently maintaining trustworthiness, a government before facing terrorism, and other challenges, wishes to attain trust in t_{-1} to avoid the loss or stabilize trustworthiness in t_0 . (Bauer, 2019) The following table will help the reader to better visualize the difference between trust and trustworthiness:

Figure 1 - Trust and Trustworthiness

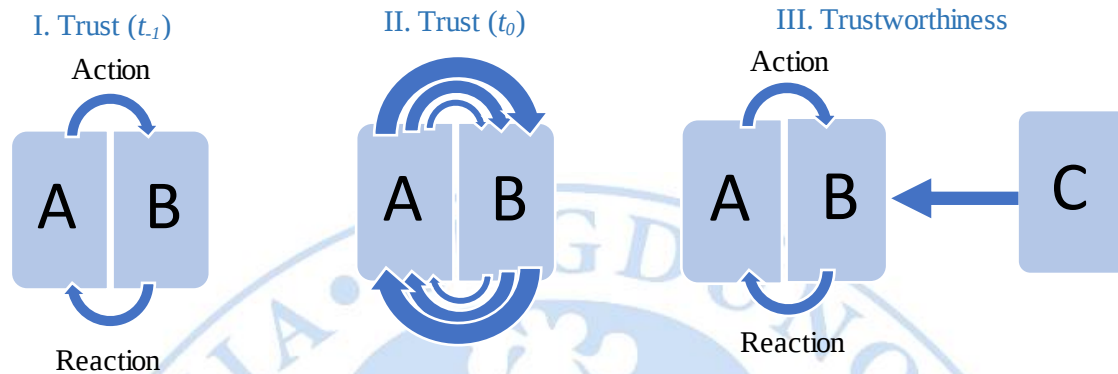


Figure 1 is an example of a trustbuilding relationship between A (random citizen), B (Government), and C (another citizen). In the first figure, A and B have engaged in an interaction in the past (t_{-1}) where both have formed a chain of action that makes future interactions between A to B, and vice versa, predictable for both. The second figure still shows the same interaction from A to B and after successful interactions, new forms of interactions may form, some more intensive and regarded as important by any of the two. In the third figure, a new observer C has not met B beforehand, but C's willingness to interact with B is higher because it has seen that B complied with the expected reactions to A in their interactions.

Moreover, holding a positive perception is key to build a relationship with a community, individuals, specific social cleavages, etc. However, it is important to emphasize that this trust is an essential element to compliance with public policy and laws. When this perception is low to a certain level, it is expected that people will stop following rules, compliance is seen as having no payoff in the long-term and some individuals start looking for short-term gains considering that the risks are worth in this trade-off. This kind of behavior is enabled when a group encounters laws that in normal conditions with a stable economy would seem just and fair, but due to negligence or simply poor public performance, they start seeing that the same rules are unfair. For example, a social group that has increased in numbers, but is still a minority in the state they are in, has a habit of using a specific substance that is outlawed by the state. Other parts of society also use the substance, but the police focus anti-substance operations on that specific social group. In the short-term, trust will be lost due to a negative perception of the efforts from the government, the group understands that they are targeted by the anti-substance operation, while other parts of society do not experience the same problem; in the long-term, the loss of trust is greater due to negligence of the government in correctly



addressing these discriminatory operations. Compliance to laws, or policies is a worse trade-off than abiding to them, leading them to promote and practice political violence.

Before going further, another point to consider is that this evolution has not yet culminated to terrorism. Before focusing on the radicalization of the group, it is necessary to have a definition of 'terrorism'. Here, terrorism is defined as a tactic, meaning that no group is inherently a terrorist group, which leaves conceptual space to understand that even radicalized groups can refrain from using terrorism while still being a group. However, differently from other tactics, terrorism always has a direct and indirect target, where the former is characterized as the victims of political violence and conduits of a message of fear, while the latter is the actual recipient of the message of fear. Furthermore, the main difference between terrorism and other forms of political violence is that terrorists are not restricted to conflict areas, nor need to engage in active combat, while even in a peaceful context it has more impact than other forms of political violence in protests. In terms of political violence, it is plausible to say that not all political violence is terrorism, but all terrorism is political violence, the difference resides in how it is applied. If the group would choose to protest and commit some minor acts of vandalism, that would hardly qualify as a case of terrorism. However, a group that targets something other than the real target—e.g., the government—is aiming to sow fear to prove the inefficacy of the government to deal with the terrorist acts, consequently decreasing trust of society in the government, means that this can be an air-tight case of terrorism.

Furthermore, a group that becomes radicalized follows a three-step process into finally adopting terrorism. As mentioned before in the literature review, the theory of Transformational Delegitimation foresees that the three-step process is constituted by a crisis of confidence, a conflict of legitimacy, and a crisis of legitimacy. (Sprinzak, 1991)

Table 1 - Sprinzak's Theory of Transformational Delegitimation



Source: Sprinzak (1991, pp. 52-59)

The theory of Transformational Delegitimation shows that one is not simply born as a terrorist, but environment and neglect are part of this process that we see. (Sprinzak, 1991) Applying Sprinzak's theory to the Japanese case, the poor economical perspectives in the early 1950s and 1960s drew members to the *shinshukyo*. (New Religions) When the economy started finally reshaping itself in the 1970s, the *shinshinshykyo* (New New Religions) became more influential in gathering members not only from the poor layers of society but also from the rich and well-educated section of society. (Metraux, 1995; Reader, 2000) The adoption of these New and New New Religions by some Japanese are both tainted by the poor economic performance, and the rework and revitalization of traditional beliefs. (Lifton, 1999) These revitalizations were made attractive mainly by newly found "gurus" and "prophets," such as Shoko Asahara. Asahara in turn formed Aum Shinrikyo with an apocalyptic buddhist philosophy. Through his philosophy, Asahara gathered the revanchist idea against the U.S. and the Japanese government allied to the North Americans (Metraux, 1995; Lifton, 1999; Reader, 2000). In the words of one of the group members:

I had always felt the end of the world is close at hand. With the incredible amount of environmental destruction, there is no way we can survive it unless we change our lifestyle [...] The environmental destruction that is happening today goes far beyond the level of regional pollution. (Metraux, 1995, p. 1145)

Importantly, this member attributed the collapse of society to the trade relations of the U.S. and Japan, bringing forth a flood of hedonism into the Japanese society. So far, the member testimony already shows that the legitimacy of the Japanese government is questioned, as he does not mince words to expose what he believes is a devastation of the old Japanese glory. The definitive post-war Japanese alignment with the U.S. was an important factor that can explain the rise of Aum Shinrikyo. In this section, more features from Aum will be brought below.

By 1987 the group has changed its name from Aum Shinsen to Aum Shinrikyo, and by that time, they reported 10,000 members in their network (Metraux, 1995). It was not much after the founding of the group that they have killed lawyer Sakamoto Tsutsumi who was engaged in a public campaign against the group. (Reader, 2000) Moreover, the police were able to counter Marxists, terrorist groups, in the past, since the Japanese Self-Defense Forces had a legal ground to focus its efforts against threats aligned to the Soviet Union. As the Détente period passed and the efforts of Marxist groups have faded, it left the police with a supposedly calm environment. However, this was not true at all, as Japan became a breeding ground to dissatisfaction and revanchism where Aum Shinrikyo could recruit thousands of members until the 1990s. The fact that the police encountered constitutional limitations for preventive surveillance can be pointed as a crippling phenomenon against counter-terrorism actions, considering that the police have higher effectiveness against terrorist groups. (Jones & Libicki, 2008) These limitations became a safe passage to Aum Shinrikyo to exploit for years, hence the growth of affiliated members.

The difficulty and limitations of the Japanese police on dealing with Aum can be blamed on the previously mentioned constitutional limitations for preventive surveillance, but also the political scandals around the Japanese government. The biggest scandal between 1985 and

1990, time where Aum has acquired a crescent number of members, was the Recruit scandal, named after the company that owned the subsidiary Cosmos. The subsidiary share prices rose absurdly after 1986 and the involved members of the Diet had millionaire profits, while other members did not have this direct involvement, it was found that they were favoured in other ways. (Nester, 1990; Taro, 1990) It is natural to imply that the citizens start to lose their trust for the government after such scandals, and losing trust can easily spiral into a vicious cycle of negative effects. (Chanley, Rudolph, & Rahn, 2000) Therefore, I have hypothesized the following in regards to this phenomenon:

H1 - Constant loss of trust evolves into delegitimation of the government, consequently emboldening VEOs.

Considering the previous stated hypothesis, the loss of trust from the general population to the Japanese government is marked on years of poor economic performance with structural unemployment. At the eve of economic ill-fate, many Japanese found comfort in narratives that could explain their misfortunes. Asahara was successful in describing some of the society's problems with a simplistic but elaborated apocalyptic forecasting using the United States and the Japanese government as a scapegoat. The less privileged cleavages of society became easy targets for Aum Shinrikyo to recruit members to its ranks. The average Japanese that joined the group did so based on a lack of legitimacy given to the Japanese government, which in turn gave the group a window of opportunity to radicalize its member. The constant delegitimation of the government is a powerful tool for terrorist groups. Not only a group can use this opportunity (low trust in government), but the same window is used to take emboldening steps to further defy the legitimacy of the government by attacking its citizens. For Sprinzak, (1991) this window of opportunity is presented by a 'great disappointment' during the conflict of legitimacy, where Aum Shinrikyo has presented itself as a viable alternative for its prospective

members looking for stability. (Mitani, 2011; Metraux, 1995; Merriman, 1991) To better illustrate this process, table 2 demonstrates a three-folded timeline of factors fitted in the theory of Transformational Delegitimation. The great disappointment of the Japanese people was the Recruit Scandal that was made public in 1986, following the resigning of prominent Japanese politicians in 1988. (Taro, 1990; Nester, 1990)

Furthermore, the stages of the process of delegitimation were charted together with the levels of trust in Chart 1. Both scenarios are hypothetical, but they follow the premise of this paper that the lower levels of trust tend to embolden the VEOs. This emboldenment can be materialized by either a single ‘big hit’—e.g. the Tokyo metro nerve gas attack—or a series of small attacks⁵. Moreover, this next step of the process, after the great disappointment, is the landmark when political groups and VEOs are separated. While the former avoids using further violence, the latter intensifies the use of violence, the justification for this is because VEOs offer a structured organization with hierarchy that tries to parallel the government. In the case for Aum, the group had physical structures like hospital and laboratories, trying to form an ‘alternative government’ where they even had ministries⁶ that answered to Shoko Asahara. (Reader, 2000) This sort of organizational ability does not derive exclusively from Aum, although the group had the advantage of the cult dynamic.

Finally, Sprinzak’s theory has shown to be a solid theoretical base to further on evaluate the case of Aum Shinrikyo through the established timeline. In the next section I will explain my methods on how this paper will be conducted.

⁵ The emboldenment of a VEO is characterized here as a ‘ex-ante’ factor.

⁶ In total, there were 22 ministries under Shoko Asahara.

Chart 1 - Transformational Delegitimation in Different Trust Levels

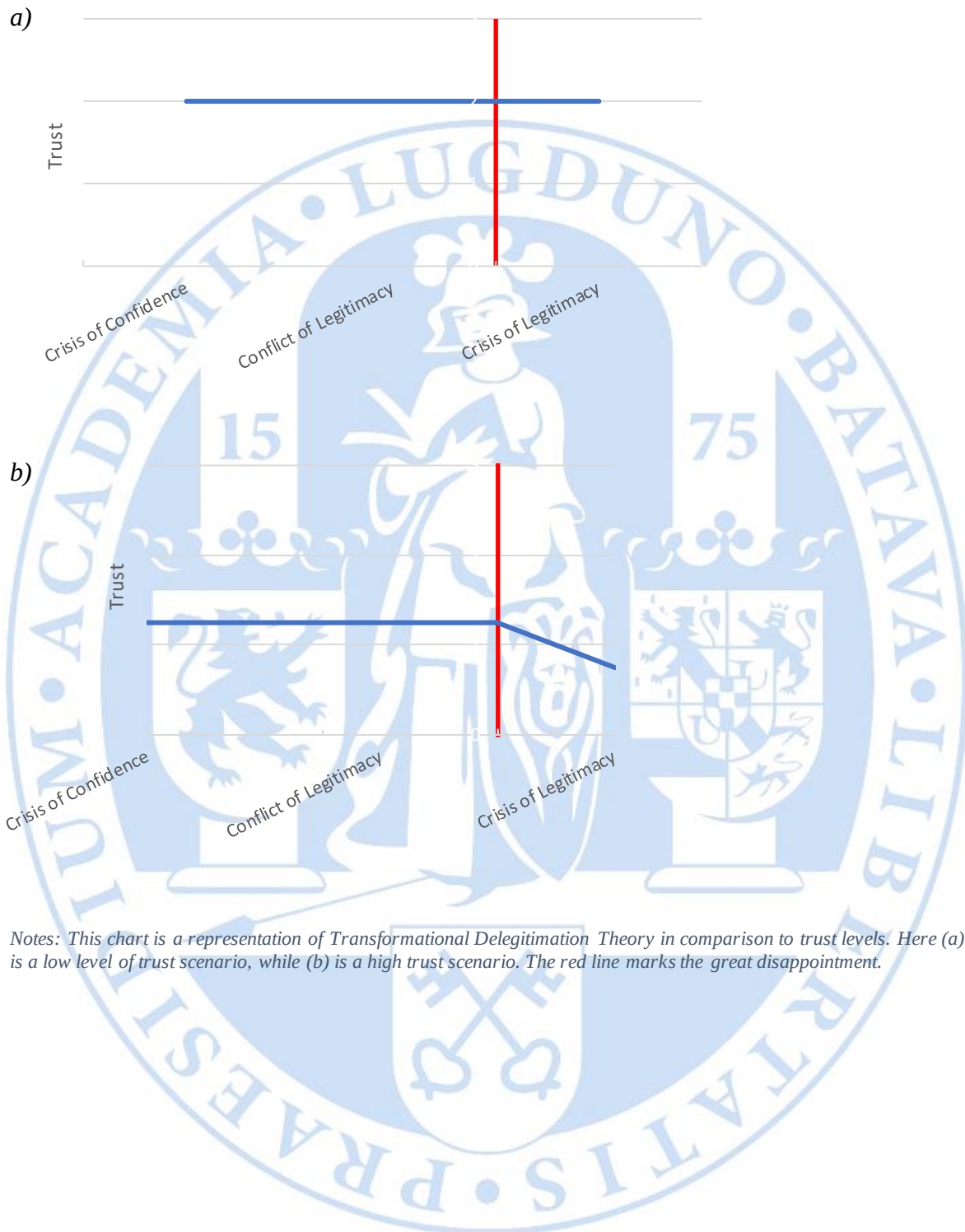


Table 2 - Tracing the Delegitimation of the Japanese Government

Crisis of Confidence (1952-1972)	Gathering of factors contributing to the abandonment of critique
• Good police performance: police work manages to be successful in combating crimes, giving good perspectives to Japanese citizens about law enforcement. • Japan and U.S. alignment: The occupation of American troops and later establishment of an aligned government is a factor that lives through generations of countrymen, enabling groups to feed off the revanchist feelings from the past. • Japanese Economic Miracle: with the Keiretsus, economic activity in Japan was rising rapidly and continuously throughout decades, but this improvement did not translate into a better perception of standard of living, neither a perception of future improvement according to government surveys.	
Conflict of Legitimacy (1972-1989)	The great disappointment that leads to mistrust
• New Religions and New New Religions: Japanese countrymen seek for narrative comfort in religion to seek meaning and answers to their earthly problems. • Aum Shinrikyo: As part of one of the new religions, Shoko Asahara forms a cult with an apocalyptic philosophy as a mean to provide answers to prospective members, while feeding from the revanchist feelings and worse off citizens. • Recruit scandal: insider trading, corruption deteriorating trust in government, and interest rates start to fall vertiginously.	
Crisis of Legitimacy (1990-1995)	Results of the delegitimation
• Cult: Aum Shinrikyo has established itself with a wide network of members. Any possible danger to the survival of the group is met with violence. In 1989, lawyer Sakamoto Tsutsumi is killed by the group to stop him from engaging in his campaign against it. • Consolidation: After years of existence, the indoctrination of members from Aum Shinrikyo had a firm base on literature from Shoko Asahara, still feeding from revanchist feelings. Japan continues to make trade with the U.S., and the group takes advantage of this to reaffirm its doctrine. • Limitations to surveillance: Japanese police had constitutional limitations to preventive surveillance and a lack of experience in dealing with a different kind of terrorism (religious terrorism). • Sarin gas attack: The group makes a bold move, making its members plant gas canister in the Tokyo subway system. The attack is carried without regards for other citizens' lives since the indoctrinated environment pictures the government as illegitimate. • VEO intensity: the year of 1990 had more terrorist attacks than all previous years together.	

Source: Table elaborated by author

Method

To evaluate properly the ascension of Aum Shinrikyo throughout 1950 and the culmination of the sarin gas attack in 1995, I will adopt a strategy of process tracing through the lenses of the theory of Transformational Delegitimation from Sprinzak. The specific choice for Aum Shinrikyo is due to the lack of time to gather several different cases and dissect them in detail. The choice of the theory of Transformational Delegitimation is based on its explanatory capability within a complex context. While Sprinzak pursues to explain how groups grow to delegitimize the government, his theory conveys the peaceful (and possibly democratic) beginning of many groups before resorting to political violence. Hence, Transformational Delegitimation does not only hold great explanatory power, but it also becomes a powerful tool when combined with an extensive process tracing method to evaluate the case of Aum Shinrikyo. Furthermore, my approach to this theory is oriented to fill the gap left by Sprinzak in giving it the thread to its needle. This needle is trust, and here I use trust to explain how the lack of trust is the spark that fires up delegitimization by VEOs.

The beginning year of 1950 was chosen due to the end of the II World War and it demonstrates a good starting point since the American military occupation is on Japanese soil. Moreover, the ending of the timespan (1995) is marked by the sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo subway, which also marks the beginning of the end of the cult. Surveys of the Public Relations Office from the Prime Minister cabinet on social awareness (2017) and life of the people (2016) were used to better explain how the causal mechanism of Transformational Delegitimation were affecting the Japanese society and government. Both surveys used for this study have missing data from later years in regard to the public opinion towards the government, which leaves some grey areas on the relational aspect of economy affecting trust. However, since the earliest survey



starts in 1982 and the official foundation of Aum was in 1987, (Metraux, 1995) means that the missing data does not make this study unviable.

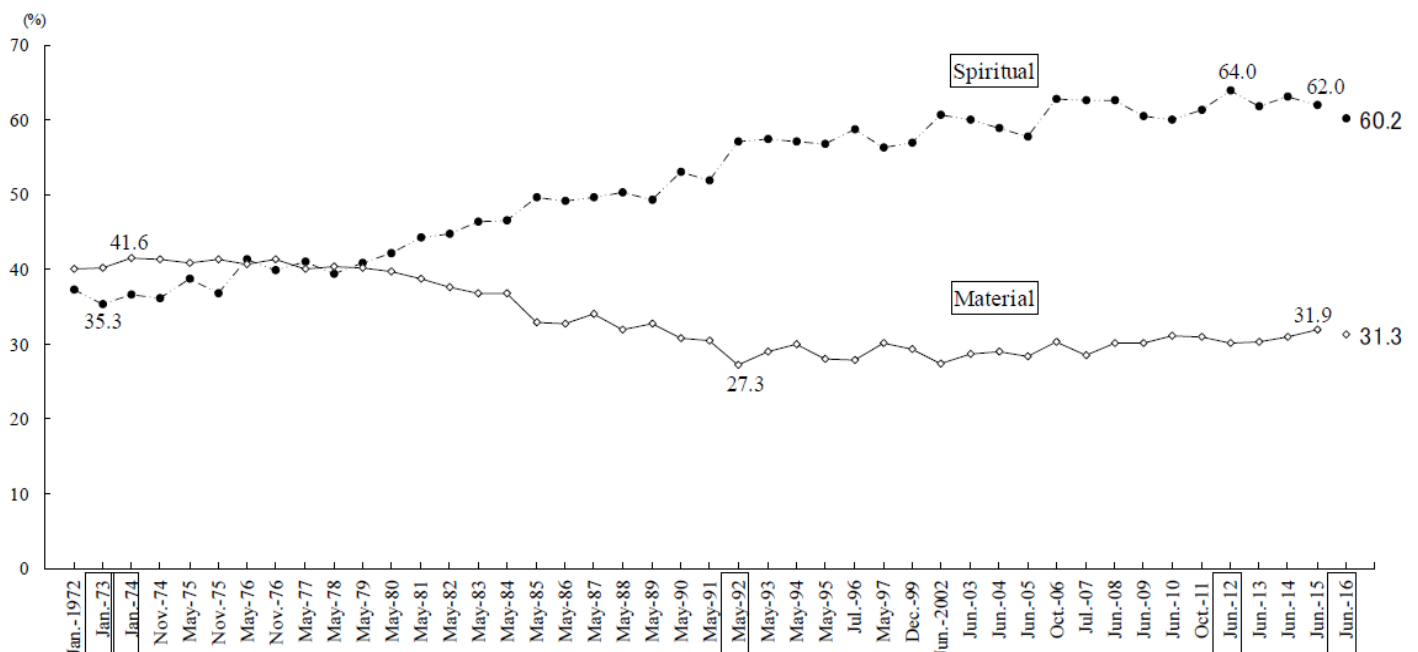
Discussion

As said previously, after the second world war Japan was occupied by the US. The occupation was ended in 1952 by the San Francisco Peace Treaty (Edelstein, 2008) leaving behind a country with revanchism sentiment but aligned to the US. The following decades were marked by accelerated economic recuperation that would be known as the Japanese economic miracle, that miracle would only stall later after 1990. (Mitani, 2011; Metraux, 1995) Considering that Japan was economically well off, crime was not rampant, (Merriman, 1991) left-wing terrorism was contained in latter years, and the USSR was walking to its dissolving phase, what could explain the rise of Aum Shinrikyo? What facilitated and emboldened them to commit the Sarin gas attack in 1995? I discuss in this section that the failure of the government to keep the trust of its citizens through the Recruit scandal and furthermore the incapability of addressing violations of Aum are the answers for these questions.

The foundation of Aum predates to 1987, before and after the group official foundation year, the citizens were struggling with the government as they did not see the policies of the government policies reflecting the ideas and views of its people as Chart 3 shows. Going through a quick recapitulation, the public opinion surveys also reveal some other perspectives of the population for the Japanese government, such as the need to shorten the bridge of interactions between the politicians and general population. (Public Relations Office, 2017) Although the surveys do not go back to the US occupation times, they cover enough time to show a long lasting disappointment of the Japanese citizens with their government. In addition, the data shows that citizens did not perceive any significant change in their standard of living and a vast majority view that their prospect of future lifestyle will not change, and that has

remained the opinion of the majority from 1968 until 2016 at least. (Public Relations Office, 2016) Together with other statistics showing that more than half of the citizens felt and still feels worried or anxious, the population resorted to spiritual wealth instead of material gains. (Metraux, 1995; Public Relations Office, 2016) The fact that the preference of the Japanese population has increased for spiritual wealth is a clue to how Aum was able to gather members, together with the continuous dissatisfaction of the citizens with their government.⁷

Chart 2 – Preference for material wealth or spiritual wealth time series



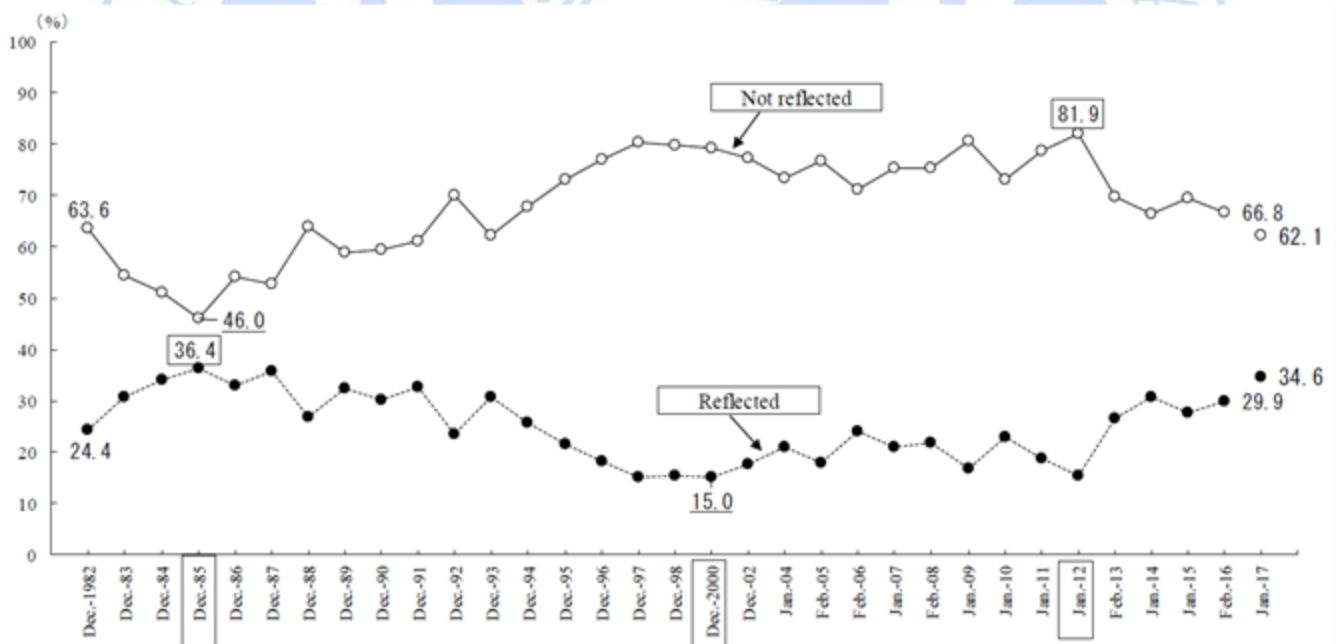
Source: Public Relations Office, The Government of Japan. Question: 'With regard to material and spiritual wealth in your future lifestyle, which of the following two attitudes is closer to yours?'

The statistics of social awareness and life of the people point out that there was a problem following the Japanese economic miracle, a problem that was not addressed by the government. This problem was the constant distrust that the Japanese have in their government that only got worse through the corruption scandal that came public in 1986. Even though public order, education, and other factors were viewed positively and therefore should withhold the rise of

⁷ In the Social Awareness survey of the Public Relations Office, two of the general concerns of the Japanese population is the government finances and defense.

terrorist groups, the dissatisfaction of the citizens with their government followed a growth tendency through the decades. According to Transformational Delegitimation Theory, this dissatisfaction in t_{-1} generated a crisis of confidence because it was not answered in t_0 , lowering expectations from Japanese citizens, and consequentially the government has lost their trust in the foreseeable future t_1 . Following the theory, after the great disappointment, as the next years are followed by loss of trust, it should be possible to observe an intensification in VEO activity. In Chart 4 it is possible to observe that the Global Terrorism Database has registered a spike in activity in 1990, year that follows the scandals and also an abrupt fall on interest rates⁸ by the Bank of Japan. (Wilson, 2008)

Chart 3 – Reflection of Public Opinion in the Government Policies Times Series



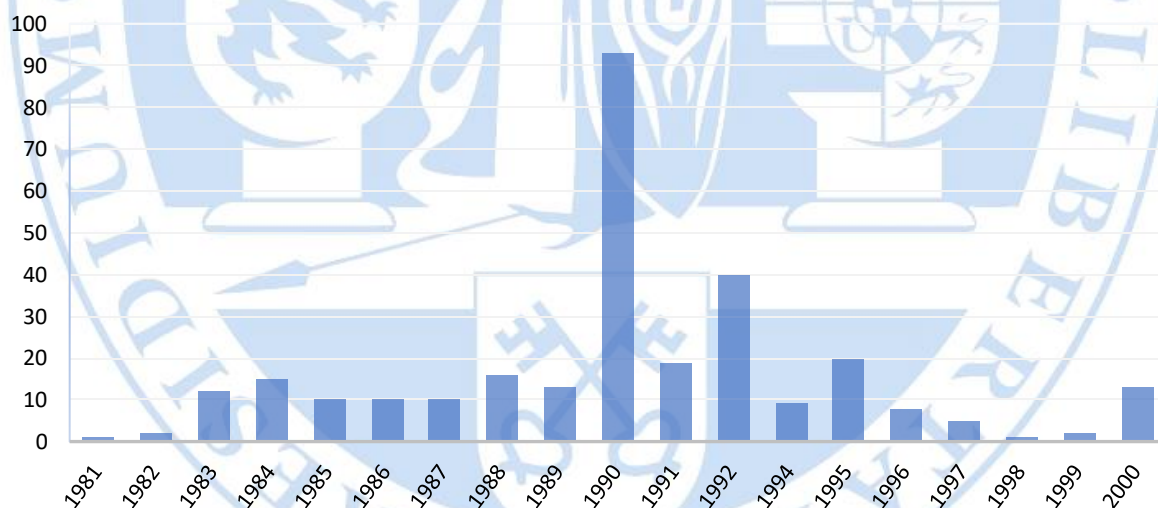
Source: Public Relations Office, The Government of Japan. Question: "Overall, to what extent do you think that the ideas and views of the people are reflected in the government's policies?"

So far, data converges to a spike and higher activity between 1990 to 1992, but it could coincide with the slowing down of economy that Japan will start facing from the 90's and beyond. However, it is necessary to consider that data also points to loss of trust at least five years

⁸ Interest rates in Japan were roofing around 9% between 1980 and 1981, and it bottomed to nearly 2% in between 1987 and 1989.

before in 1985⁹, where the declining tendency from 1982 was reversed to a continuous dissatisfaction of the Japanese citizens. Insofar, one can imply that the intensification of incidents could be a result of the economic volatility and animosity with scandals, but considering that in $t-1$ the Japanese government has performed well in containing criminal activity (VEOs included), and economic performance has been more than optimal throughout decades, trust is the one variable that has explanatory power to the increase of VEO activity beforehand. However, the number of incidents per year serves a limited purpose showing that there was in fact an emboldenment after the great disappointment. This limited purpose is due to the existence of a group of factors, namely the constitutional changes that permitted the Japanese police to use surveillance countermeasures more actively against Aum and left-wing VEOs, and also the outstanding performance of the Japanese police. (Jones & Libicki, 2008; Public Relations Office, 2017)

Chart 4 - General VEO Activity in Japan by Year of Occurrence



Source: Global Terrorism Database. Elaborated by author.

Notes: This chart counts only incidents per year, not number of victims. Missing data on the year of 1993 called for the exclusion of the year to facilitate the reading of the chart.

⁹ See Chart 3



Nevertheless, one can still argue that grievances from the Japanese population could be established before the loss of trust, and this is indeed a honest claim against Transformational Delegitimation. However, not all grievances escalate into conflict, (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Collier, Hoeffler, & Rohner, 2009) and even unemployment¹⁰ can hardly be linked to insurgents killing civilians indiscriminately. (Berman, Callen, Felter, & Shapiro, 2011) Also, Transformational Delegitimation theory works within a timeframe of past (t_{-1}), present (t_0), and future (t_1) where either a grievance or a greed can be established in t_{-1} , but it is necessary that this grievance/greed continues to t_0 for delegitimation to take place. This mechanism can be observed in the Japanese population before 1990, when the VEO activity has remained below 20 incidents per year, and after the Recruit scandal in 1987 the number of incidents by VEOs has increased, and skyrocketed in 1990. This trigger effect of the great disappointment is a window of opportunity for VEOs to attack to government that is facing loss of trust, delegitimize it, and gather support from citizens by competing with the government. Even though Aum did not explicitly proposed to take over Japan's government, the structured mounted by Asahara tried to parallel infrastructure and services provided by the state, and the internal organization was also mounted in a way to show an authoritarian regime. (Reader, 2000; Metraux, 1995; Olson, 1999) It is also necessary to emphasize that the group did not have just have structures directed for its own members, but also laboratories to fabricate weapons such as the sarin gas that was used in 1995.

All in all, Aum had a great advantage of two major factors to grow in numbers, the fact that it operated as a cult, something that facilitated the affiliation of many members, and the rising dissatisfaction of the Japanese population with the government finances, which consequentially

¹⁰ Unemployment is cited here as part of the greed theory in conflict studies, as opposed to the grievances theory.

lead to a loss of trust in their government. Both of these factors played along during '87 to '95 increasing the number of affiliated members of Aum, facilitated by the increasing number of citizens looking for spiritual wealth, showing that after the Recruit scandal there was a window of opportunity for the group to shift the legitimacy scales from the government to its favor. This shift was possibilitated by the positive expectancies (t_1) of its group members that have seen a more promising future inside the cult. Scientists had freedom to develop research in equipped facilities, physicians could work in Aum's own hospital, and other high prestige professionals joined Aum on their own accord. (Reader, 2000) Even though members might not have known that the group had even militaristic aspirations, the group had good track records (t_{-1}) which helped Aum to maintain the trust of its members and grow enough to compete with the government in legitimacy.

Furthermore, the group has followed every step of the process of Transformational Delegitimation as Table 2 has shown. The group took advantage of a series of factors that allowed them to recruit and attack the metro later on, but one of the main factors was the lack of trust that the population had towards their government¹¹. The general population had grievances that were not addressed by the government previously, and the Recruit scandal could officially mark down the great disappointment that shifted legitimacy to Aum. With the newly found legitimacy, Aum could compete with the government to establish a parallel government within their group, this competition also established a crisis of legitimacy. The result of this crisis of legitimacy is the increasing number of incidents seen in Chart 4, where in a single year (1990) Japan has seen more terroristic attacks than all previous years in record. The escalation of political violence is part of the conflict and crisis of legitimacy in Transformational Delegitimation Theory, and nevertheless Sprinzak's theory can issue

¹¹ See Chart 3

explanatory power to understand the situation between Aum Shinrikyo and the Japanese government.

Conclusions

Throughout this study I have laid a path to guide my reasoning to use trust as one important variable to identify VEOs emboldment, and it was possible to identify that this emboldment had in fact happened. The theoretical framework given by Transformational Delegitimation has elegance and explanatory power to describe the phenomena connecting trust and terrorism. Even though the literature focus on showing how terrorism can affect levels of trust, authors overlooked the actual capacity of trust by treating it like a *post-factum* resource. Nevertheless, some of the literature has taken a shy glance in the use of trust as an asset to deal with terrorism, while the OCDE and some scholars have given it enough importance to use the trust of its citizens as a valuable measure to predict security and economic variables.

In the case opted for this study, data has shown a convergence of factors that can explain why and how Aum Shinrikyo has gained such popularity and was able to attack the Tokyo Metro in 1995. The economic animosity of the Japanese miracle did not translate exactly to an amelioration of the perspective of standard of living of its citizens, nor it gave them hope to improve their standard of living in the future. (Public Relations Office, 2016) Moreover, the Japanese police force had experience dealing with left-winged terrorism in the decades before the 80's, but Aum has proved to be a new challenge together with severe constitutional limitations to surveillance, paving a safe way for at least one full year of terroristic incidents¹². (Metraux, 1995; National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), 2019) Additionally, the political scandals between 1986 and 1989 (Recruit and Uno

¹² See Chart 3

scandals) were the triggering events, the great disappointment as Sprinzak's calls, that made possible the escalation in political violence.

Moreover, three timeframes were separated considering Transformational Delegitimation process and the chain of events: (i) the Crisis of Confidence period (1952-1972) when the Japanese citizens saw economic indicators showing positive results, but they did not see this growth reflecting into their daily lives necessarily; (ii) the Conflict of Legitimacy period (1972-1989) when New New Religions arise to answer the need of fulfillment in life¹³, (Public Relations Office, 2016) also in 1987 Aum Shinrikyo is officially founded taking advantage on the great disappointment after the Recruit scandal is made public in 1986; and (iii) the Crisis of Legitimacy period (1990-1995) when Aum practices several terroristic acts taking advantage of limitations on surveillance. In the same period, Aum also takes advantage of a II World War revanchism against the US, thus making itself a parallel government, delegitimizing the Japanese government, and finally committing the sarin gas attack in the Tokyo Metro in 1995. The group took advantage of a 'mistrustful' that was in place before the group rose. This lack of trust was present in t_{-1} , and in t_0 the Japanese were met with a great disappointment, the Recruit scandal, which gave the general population a window to delegitimize their government, thus joining an opponent organization, such as Aum, that shows possibilities of new gains in t_1 . These gains were not just spiritual, which gave some of its members incentives great incentives to disobey and defy the Japanese government rules and law.

In conclusion, Transformational Delegitimation Theory has shown itself promising in reading the case of Aum in Japan, however it is necessary to acknowledge the limitations of the approach adopted in this paper. For more extensive proofing it would be necessary to evaluate

¹³ In the Public Opinion Survey on the Life of the People of 2017, the Public Relations Office found that the majority of the Japanese citizens has shown a preference to spiritual wealth after May 1980.



the theory in actual statistical correlation and significance. As far as my readings and experience shows, future studies on this could compile figures on the levels of trust and the recruitment of VEOs to observe the evolution of delegitimation throughout parts of its own process.

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