Sample Application 2
The Violent Politics of Modern Japan, 1860-1960

(Submitted to the NEH-JUSFC program for Advanced Social Science Research on Japan)
"THE VIOLENT POLITICS OF MODERN JAPAN, 1860-1960"

I. PROJECT SUBJECT, ISSUES, AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Violence marked much of Japanese political life from the convulsive last years of the early modern order in the 1860s to the period of post-World War II reconstruction in the 1950s. It was a form of political expression, a tool for the advancement of political agendas, and a physical manifestation of political power that punctuated conflicts, undergirded political institutions, and heightened ideological tensions. This project, a book manuscript that is a revision of my doctoral dissertation, is the first scholarly examination of violence in the practice of everyday politics in modern Japan and focuses on what I have termed professional providers of political violence: those who received compensation for performing acts of political violence, or more broadly defined, those with a reputation for violence who used or threatened physical force in the political sphere. Included among the professionally violent were Japanese mafiosi (yakuza), political ruffians (soshi), and continental adventurers (tairiku ronin).

The central aim of this project is to explore the dynamics of the relationship between private (non-state), organized, political violence and the modern Japanese state. To what extent was political violence managed by the state? And what does this tell us about the nature of the modern Japanese state in its various incarnations? Scholars from Chalmers Johnson to Sheldon Garon have forwarded the image of a Japanese state strong enough to manage society, and this understanding has persisted despite the recent shift away from the language of "strong" and "weak" states. This study reconsiders and complicates the idea of a strong Japanese state by examining the state's ability, or inability, to monopolize violence.

The subject of political violence has until recently been largely untouched by scholars of history and politics, as was noted by Hannah Arendt some thirty years ago and by political theorist John Kenne in the 1990s. Scholars now do deal with popular violence, modern mass violence, and terrorism, but few if any examine violence in the practice of everyday politics. Moreover, this research on violence opens a new area of inquiry within the field of Japanese studies. American scholars of Japan avoided the subject of violence in the immediate post-World War II decades, seeking to combat a popular stereotype of the Japanese as a violent people. The resulting focus on group harmony and misleading characterization of Japan as a "consensual society" discouraged until the late 1970s and 1980s studies on conflict, and explains even now the relative dearth of studies on violent conflict. By placing violence at the center of a story about Japanese political and social history, this project hopes to demonstrate that the practice of politics was often dangerous, chaotic, and far more violent than has been previously understood.
Three specific sets of questions address the overarching theme of the relationship between private, organized, political violence and the modern Japanese state. First, the role and social construction of political violence in the formative years of the modern nation-state is considered through an analysis of the leadership and participation of gamblers (bakuto) in the Freedom and People's Rights Movement of the 1880s. These gamblers, a type of Japanese mafiosi, not only provided force but also emerged as important political actors in a series of violent incidents (gekka jiken) that were the popular and revolutionary manifestations of the Freedom and People's Rights Movement, an appeal for primarily democratic political reform. In the Gunma Incident of 1884, for example, gamblers such as Yamada Jonosuke and Seki Tsunakichi participated in strategy meetings before the incident, were to lead an attack on a key local garrison with their henchmen, protected other leaders from arrest after their plot failed, and became a part of the region's political network. The gamblers in this and other similar incidents helped to transform frustration with usurious lending practices and national fiscal policies into violent uprisings against a young modern state.

The violence of the Freedom and People's Rights Movement suggests that the new Meiji state had not yet established a comfortable monopoly on violence and was not able to delegitimize the use of violence in politics. Moreover, the violence of this movement challenges the prevailing understanding of the Meiji period (1868-1912) as one of "civilization and enlightenment," a characterization born of a scholarly focus on elite politics that has downplayed the messiness of modernization and politics in practice.

Second, the relationship between violence and democracy, and violence and fascism, is examined through a focus on the continuity in violent tactics and cultures of political violence from the mid-Meiji years through the 1930s. The violent incidents of the 1880s gave birth to political ruffians who became an integral part of elections and parliamentary politics as they disrupted public meetings, incited riots, and intimidated political opponents. Their presence at the creation of constitutional and parliamentary government facilitated their incorporation into the modern political system, first as loosely-organized groups and then in the early 1900s onward as violent, institutionalized wings (ingaidan) of political parties.

At the root of both the democracy of the 1900s to early 1930s, and the fascism of the 1930s and 1940s, was the understanding that violence could be used as the ultimate expression of political power. Viewing the violence of the 1930s in the light of these historical continuities differs from the conventional narrative which describes the assassinations of the immediate pre-World War II years as fascist gunshots that disturbed the political calm, clearly delineating democracy from fascism. It was the collapse of a space in which political power was negotiated, sometimes violently, between the state and non-state
actors that marked the era of fascism; a culture of political violence was not a
new or distinguishing aspect of fascist Japan.

Third, there are questions of ideology. How did ideologies justify
violence, and how did violence come into play in ideological conflicts? It was the
political right that formed the closest bonds with the professionally violent,
namely Japanese mafiosi, who in the years after the Russian Revolution
became the center of a nationalist nexus that wove together government,
military, political, and financial figures. The Greater Japan National Essence
Society (Dai Nihon Kokusui-kai), for example, was established in 1919 by mafia
bosses and Home Minister Tokonami Takejiro, and fought in numerous labor
protests on the side of management. Such acts of violence were justified by a
supposed Robin Hood-esque tradition as well as ideas of chivalry, an enduring
Japanese spirit, reverence for the emperor, and preservation of the national
polity. In this way, the professionally violent lent force to nationalism, shaping
the ideological landscape of prewar Japan. This connection between mafias
and ideology challenges specialists in mafia studies, who continue to insist that
mafias are by definition non-ideological.

These inquiries central to the project will be followed by a final chapter
that explores questions of why the post-World War II Japanese state was able to
manage violence so successfully. (This section will be researched in Tokyo this
summer, under the auspices of a NEH Summer Stipend.) Dealing with the
period from the outbreak of the Pacific War to the mass demonstrations against
the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty in 1960, this chapter will take a transwar
approach to an analysis of private violence, focusing on the postwar
reincarnation of the professionally violent as political fixers who wielded power
not through physical force, but money.

What ultimately emerges from the project is a conception of a political
landscape in which various groups staked out and defended their position vis-à-
vis others with the threat or use of violence. The state, defined by political
theorists from Machiavelli to Charles Tilly as having a monopoly on the legitimate
use of physical force, was not always able to manage violence and was a group
that was challenged in contests for political power.

II. OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

With the support of the NEH Fellowship, I hope to spend July 2006 to
June 2007 researching three sections to be added to the project, and completing
the book manuscript. The research will be incorporated into the tentative
chapter outline below.

Introduction
Theories of Political Violence; Key Questions; Historiography; Sources and
Methodology
Chapter One: The Emergence of Modern Political Violence
"Men of High Purpose" and the Early 1860s; Gamblers and the Meiji Restoration; Gamblers and the Freedom and People's Rights Movement

Chapter Two: Institutionalizing Political Violence
Early Political Ruffians; The 1890 and 1892 Elections; Parliamentary Politics in the Meiji Period; Violent Pressure Groups and the Political Parties; Mafiosi in Diet Politics

Chapter Three: Ideology and the Creation of a Nationalist Nexus
Right-Wing Groups; Labor Strikes; The Social Construction of Political Violence

Chapter Four: Echoes of the Past
Private Violence in Wartime Japan; Left-Wing Political Violence in the 1950s; Political Fixers

Conclusion

The first section will fit into chapter one, and will deal with the activities of continental adventurers who crossed the boundaries of the Japanese mainland to become politically active abroad in the colonies of the Japanese empire, such as Korea and Manchuria. Since many of these young men seem to have been affiliated with right-wing organizations in Japan, this piece will take up the question of why yakuza and other providers of political violence initially forged a relationship with the right and what this meant for Japan's colonial projects. It will also explore possible connections between informal violence and the activities of the Japanese state in these contexts.

The second section will become a part of chapter three, and will examine the use of violence by left-wing groups. What now is a chapter that focuses on ties between mafias and right-wing groups will be complicated by an inquiry into the relationship between the violent and left-wing groups. Bringing the left into dialogue with the right will clearly deepen the analysis of the role that violence played in ideological conflicts.

The third and final section will be woven into each of the four chapters, and will explore the discursive construction of political violence from the 1860s to 1960. Central to this intellectual history will be questions about how violence, the violent, and the state's relationship to both have been conceived by various political thinkers, actors, and the media. This will shed light on views of the new Meiji state and its critics, the reputation of political parties, ideological battles, and the shift away from violence in the postwar period.
To research these three sections, I will spend July to December 2006 in Tokyo where the archival materials for the project are located. I plan to mine the various archives at the University of Tokyo, with which I have been affiliated in the past, as well as other major university libraries for material on continental adventurers. The National Diet Library and the Tokyo Metropolitan Library will be useful for primary sources, including newspaper articles and other journalistic coverage, on both the continental adventurers and the discourses about political violence. And finally, the Ohara Institute for Social Research will be valuable for primary materials related to left-wing violence, as they have a rich collection of labor handbills, posters, government documents, and police reports. My fluency in the Japanese language and previous experience with these particular archives will facilitate my research.

From January to June 2007, I will write the three new sections, which will be presented as several conferences papers and journal articles. I will complete the book manuscript by June of 2007.

This project lends itself to comparative and interdisciplinary study, and has broad implications for scholarly understanding of the struggle between violent groups and the modern state—a topic meaningful for modern political and social history, and very much applicable to the present.