



## ***Zen Terror in Prewar Japan: Portrait of an Assassin.*** **By Brian Daizen Victoria**

Ronald S. Green, Professor, Coastal Carolina University, US, [rgreen@coastal.edu](mailto:rgreen@coastal.edu)

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This book is useful for undergraduate classes on Buddhism, Zen, modern East Asian history, political science, intelligence and security, peace and conflict studies, and other areas of Asian studies. But students can only receive a professor's proverbial tea of knowledge if their cups are not already overflowing with misconceptions. *Zen Terror in Prewar Japan* goes a long way toward eliminating widely held misunderstandings, a goal of its author. This is the third and final volume of meticulous research and engaging information presented by Brian Daizen Victoria, senior research fellow at the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies, about militaristic connections between Zen Buddhism and Japanese nationalism around and during the time of World War II. Readers having familiarity with his work most likely gained it through the first volume in this trilogy, *Zen at War* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1997/2006), which had a major impact on Buddhist studies and the study of ethics in general. The second volume, *Zen War Stories* (Routledge, 2002), continued to open the eyes of English readers to the active role Zen priests and their institutions played in not only justifying killing in the service of the country but also recruiting for and participating personally in a wide array of military matters.

I had the same experience that James Mark Shields relates in the book's foreword of being genuinely changed in my thinking about Zen by *Zen at War* as a graduate student. When teaching introductory courses on Buddhism or Zen, I always include information that lets students know that it may not be what they, along with the general public, thought—namely, a religion of peace and love adhered to by millions of people who have never raised a finger in violence from the mountainside where they remain in perpetual meditation. The specifics about how this view is wrong and the potentially dire consequences of maintaining it is what Victoria's trilogy is all about. Not only are his books must-reads for teachers of the abovementioned subjects, but I have also found they are perfect to assign or suggest to students for research and class projects.

Victoria, a fully ordained Sōtō Zen priest himself, holds that a necessary step toward realizing Buddhist ethical values is to remove the blinders about the reprehensible behavior of its institutions and affiliates so that steps can be taken to ensure that such brutalities will not be repeated. This is the very point of *Zen Terror*, which follows the life and acts of terror of the infamous lay Buddhist Inoue Nisshō (1887–1967), from his troubled childhood to his spy activities abroad, organization of political assassinations, imprisonment, and ultra-nationalistic activism in the postwar period. Unlike the previous two volumes in the trilogy, which were scathing critiques of Zen institutions, *Zen Terror* focuses on this single individual through most of the book, providing analyses of the larger and smaller implications of Inoue's activities as well as related historical materials in the latter portion of the book. Victoria's account is based largely on the

autobiographical writing Inoue completed late in his life. In short, Inoue describes his own troubled youth as stemming in part from his mother's aloofness and leading to sexual and alcoholic debauchery as well as suicidal tendencies. At the same time, he was troubled, deeply troubled, about a matter of utmost importance to him—that is, determining standards for right and wrong.

Because Inoue welcomed death, he took on a dangerous assignment as a spy for the Japanese Army in Manchuria in 1909, where he first encountered a Japanese Sōtō Zen priest, under whom he began his Zen practice. After returning to Japan in 1921, meditation would greatly help improve his negative outlook on the human condition. Victoria repeatedly stresses that although numerous analyses have labeled Inoue as a Nichiren Buddhist, and although he chanted the *Daimoku* (*Nam myōhō renge kyō*; Praise be the Mystic Law of the Lotus Sutra), he was primarily devoted to Zen practice (see, for example, this passage from page 199: “Inoue’s use of *daimoku* recitation as a meditative aid, to enter *samādhi*, did not signify his affiliation with the Nichiren sect, something Inoue clearly stated in his conversation with Chief Justice William Flood Webb, as recounted in chapter 12”; see also Inoue’s description of his connection to Nichiren/Nichirenism on page 76). According to Inoue, these Buddhist practices led to a dramatic and mystical enlightenment experience that gave him abilities that included hearing the guiding voice of the universe, healing illnesses, predicting the future, and freezing an investigating police officer in his tracks.

Inoue next engaged in “post-enlightenment training” under Rinzai Zen master Yamamoto Gempō and subsequently began instructing “patriotic youth” to carry out assassinations of political and financial leaders who blocked Emperor Hirohito from assuming full control of Japan—that is, those leaders who supported Taishō democracy. Inoue had come to believe that Japanese emperors were divine and, as such, could always be relied upon to do what was best for their “children” (*sekishi*)—that is, the Japanese people. He instructed his band of youthful assassins to adopt a strategy he called “One Person Kills One (Person),” which also became the title of his memoirs (*Ichinin issatsu*), after he had originally planned to use a phrase related to Buddhism, “Kill One That Many May Live” (*Issatsu tashō*), which appeared inside the cover. In the book’s conclusion, Victoria describes the theory some hold that Inoue started WWII by destroying Taishō democracy in 1932, which led to the empowerment of the military and Japan’s full-scale invasion of China in July 1937.

After the assassinations, Inoue was sentenced to life imprisonment, but he was released a few years later, in 1940. In a shocking turn, he then became the live-in advisor of Prime Minister Konoé Fumimaro. In the postwar era, Inoue was the founder and head of another ultranationalist group called the National Protection Corps. He died in 1967.

In his own accounts, Inoue tells us that he often deceived people about his identity when it was expedient to do so and gives examples throughout. This raises important questions about the part identity plays in the trust between reader and author in such situations, an issue suggested by Charles Withers in his writings on travel accounts (see Withers 2021). In the book's introduction, Victoria prepares the reader for a "bumpy ride" (11), which he warns sometimes reads like manga (a Japanese graphic novel). While I found many episodes along these lines, one that stands out is when Inoue decided to enlist the aid of a Japanese True Pure Land (Shin) priest in Qingdao, China, during World War I, at a time when Germany and Japan were at war. Qingdao was then a German colony, and Inoue had been assigned by the Japanese Army to secretly enter the colony so that he might report on both its layout and armaments. Before receiving the priest's reply, Inoue reports, he realized that if the priest were to refuse, he must (according to Inoue) kill him to prevent him from giving Inoue away. Inoue pointed the barrel of his gun at the priest and said, "Master, please give your answer to *this!*" (45). The Shin priest replied he would be happy to aid Inoue since he was in Qingdao as a spy for the Imperial Japanese Navy!

When reading such farcical descriptions, I was reminded that Inoue says that while at Waseda University, he had wanted to be a novelist but gave up on the idea when he was told that he could not write about himself (30–31). Inoue clearly likes to write about himself as a hero, I suspect fictively, including numerous miraculous events he attributes to himself, likely offered as proof that his missions were divinely sanctioned.

While *Zen at War* may continue to have the larger impact on Buddhist Studies, *Zen Terror* may prove to reach new audiences. In addition to Victoria's study of the travel diaries and autobiographies of an infamous terrorist, I found much of value concerning the conditions experienced by Japanese civilians traveling abroad in Asia before WWII, which might tell us something about what the unrelated but contemporary Ōtani expeditions to Tibet experienced in terms of suspicions and other challenges (see Kohl and Green 2022). I would also like to suggest that Inoue cuts a character similar to the ultra-nationalist "heroes" depicted by Mishima Yukio in *The Sea of Fertility* tetralogy, particularly in the second, *Runaway Horses* (1969), which follows the thoughts and feelings of a character involved in the very acts described in *Zen Terror* and was inspired by events in Inoue's life and his death in 1967.

For this reason, Victoria's work could be valuable supplementary reading for modern Japanese literature or history classes. Like a number of his characters, including Mizoguchi in *Temple of the Golden Pavilion*—and like Mishima himself in his tragic suicide—Inoue said that destruction is what is needed, not theory. Likewise, Inoue said he wanted to sacrifice his own life so others could walk across his body to

build a better society. In the face of his Zen-like rejection of words, it seems paradoxical that he exerted so much effort to demonstrate his skill in argumentation to readers or to have written his memoirs at all. *Demon Slayer*, a widely popular anime movie and television series currently available on Netflix, also follows a paramilitary group that challenges Taishō democracy in various ways. *Zen Terror* and *Demon Slayer* could work very well together in teaching about this period and its aftermath for Japanese history.

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### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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### Videos on this topic with Brian Victoria

“War, Zen Buddhism and Academia with Dr Brian Daizen Victoria.” Recorded September 21, 2016. IAFOR Media video, 41:05. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fl3mADy46xQ>

“Zen and the Art of Ending Taishō Democracy: A virtual u:japan lecture by Brian Victoria.” Recorded June 10, 2021. Universität Wien Department of East Asian Studies video, 42:35. <https://stream.univie.ac.at/media/ostasien/japanologie/ujapanlectures-2021-06-10?res=960>

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