

## **Memory Politics and Popular Culture – The Example of the United Red Army in the Manga *Red* (2006–2018)**

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### **Abstract**

Serialized in a period of booming popular interest for the United Red Army (URA), *Red* (2006–2018) by manga artist Yamamoto Naoki (1960–) is to this day the most thoroughly detailed and researched work of fiction drawing on the famous Japanese terrorist group. In the present article, we would like to address how Yamamoto is fully engaged in a memory struggle regarding the “truth” of the historical event – he has been active in the “Association to transmit the overall picture of the United Red Army incident,” a group involved in the gathering and publishing of testimonies surrounding the incident, bringing to the fore until then unknown and neglected details of the URA. And yet, serialized in the *seinen* manga magazine *Evening*, *Red* constitutes at the same time a genuine piece of popular culture, fostering narrative and visual devices aimed at a large audience (for instance, all the characters appear with false and dramatized names – Nagata Hiroko becoming Akagi or “Red Castle” Hiroko – and the ideological motivations are all downplayed in favor of more sanitized and universal ones). By so doing, Yamamoto succeeds in reshaping the popular memory of the URA, but we argue that this reworking is made at the expense of the political and social background of the organization, with the result of hindering our social and historical understanding of this foundational event of contemporary Japan politics.

*Keywords:* memory, politics, manga, United Red Army, 1968

## Introduction

In the present article, we would like to address a critical issue regarding the representation of memory politics in popular culture, that is, the way complex and potentially divisive historical events are mediated and turned into widely accessible narratives through the use of mass media. We will take as an example the manga *Red* (*Reddo*) by author Yamamoto Naoki (1960–). Serialized between 2006 and 2018 in the bi-weekly *seinen* magazine *Evening*<sup>1</sup>, *Red* constitutes the first adaptation into comics of the story of the United Red Army (URA), a Japanese revolutionary organization infamously known for the torture and the killing of fourteen of its own members during the years 1971–72<sup>2</sup>. As with previous fictionalized accounts of the incident, *Red* espouses a historically grounded perspective, relying extensively on first-hand sources – including interviews of former members by Yamamoto himself – to recreate the atmosphere and the sequence of events which led to the murders. However, unlike its counterparts, it departs from a depiction of Nagata and Mori – the two main leading figures of the URA – to focus instead on the feelings and activities of rank and file members. In this sense, Yamamoto's work constitutes an important change in the representations of the URA, foregrounding for the first time a decentered and diversified account where political, ideological, and theoretical aspects are all downplayed in favor of more ordinary ones. This shift is in part due to the format of the manga: as a series, it is composed of more than one hundred and fifty chapters – which amount to a total of thirteen volumes in the *tankōbon* or book version published by Kōdansha<sup>3</sup> – and is able to deal with more trivial episodes. However, and more significantly, this shift is also the result of a turn in the way Japanese society has remembered and perceived the terrorist group in recent years. Indeed, in stark contrast to previous accounts whose authors had clear and intimate motives to tackle the incident, Yamamoto, born in 1960, was too young to participate in the 1968 student protests and belongs to a more depoliticized generation<sup>4</sup>. This lack of personal and political commitment is expressed in the interview the author gave for the magazine *Yuriika* in 2018, confessing that the incident did not leave a great impression on him as a kid:

<sup>1</sup> *Seinen* refers to publications aimed at young male adults.

<sup>2</sup> The URA formed in July 1971 as a result of the merger of two far-left organizations, the Red Army Faction (*Sekigun-ha*) and the Revolutionary Left Faction (*Kakumei sa-ha*). The first killings occurred in August 1971, when two members of the RLF – Haiki Yasuko (1950–1971) and Mukaiyama Shigenori (1951–1971) – were executed for having deserted the mountain camp in Yamanashi Prefecture where the organization had retreated to undergo military training. The other twelve victims died in the mountain of Gunma Prefecture between December 31, 1971 and February 12, 1972 after having been subjected to physical violence and critical self-examination – in Japanese, *sōkatsu* – with the aim of transforming them into better revolutionary soldiers. The purge eventually stopped after the arrests of leaders Mori Tsuneo (1944–1973) and Nagata Hiroko (1945–2011) on February 17, which in turn led to the near collapse of the organization and the Asama Lodge standoff where two policemen and a civilian were also killed. For a detailed account of the incident in English see Steinhoff (1992).

<sup>3</sup> *Red* was published in three different parts covering respectively the daily activities of the group up to the retreat in the mountain, the *sōkatsu* killings themselves, and the Asama Lodge incident. Part one (eight volumes) is entitled *Red 1969–1972*, part two (four volumes) *Red 1969–1972: the Last Sixty Days, Then Towards the Asama Lodge*, and part three (one volume) *Red 1969–1972 Final Chapter: Ten Days in the Asama Lodge*.

<sup>4</sup> *United Red Army's* director Wakamatsu Kōji (1936–2012) had for instance personal links with some members of the Japanese Red Army – an offspring of the Red Army Faction – and knew directly Tōyama Mieko (1946–1972), one of the victim (Takasaki, 2008, p. 37); though not a member of any political organization, *Rain of Light's* author Tatematsu Wahei (1947–2010) did take an active part in the 1968 student protest (Nakagami et al., 1984, p. 23); and filmmaker Takahashi Banmei (1949–), author of Tatematsu's novel cinematographic adaptation, was a student activist at the time and knew personally Yamazaki Jun'ichi (1950–1972), another member killed during the *sōkatsu* (Arai & Adachi, 2008, p. 86).

I was a sixth grade elementary school student. I guess I must have seen it [the incident] on television and so forth but, to tell you the truth, it didn't stick out in my mind. I was too absorbed by the 1972 Winter Olympics held in Sapporo (laughs) (Yamamoto, 2018a, p. 25).

In another interview carried out in 2008, Yamamoto also confirmed his lack of ideological interest in the incident, arguing that “when filtered out of its ideological elements, the [URA] story becomes an extremely compelling one” (Yamamoto & Kirino, 2008, p. 169). As a manga artist primarily known for his erotic and subversive series – his manga *BLUE* was deemed “harmful” and censored in 1992 (Kinsella, 2000, pp. 149–150) – and whose concern lies principally with outsiders and people living on the fringes of society – see for instance *Believers* (1999) – Yamamoto can be considered a rather left-leaning author with sympathetic feelings to the URA. Nevertheless, his reading remains unpolitical and does not seek to address in a critical manner the impact the incident had and is still having on Japanese society. His perspective may thus be better understood as one of a *renseki mania* or “URA enthusiast” (Yamamoto & Yanagi, 2012, p. 97), that is, of someone particularly invested in collecting and knowing facts about the incident but alienated from its deeper, political significance<sup>5</sup>.

This particular perspective reflects both positively and negatively in the manga. On the one hand, *Red* appears as the most exhaustive visual account of the incident to date, shedding new light on unknown or overlooked aspects of the killings and giving the readers a more contrasted picture than previously existing representations. Its faithfulness to the “facts” helps explain why the “Association to Transmit the Overall Picture of the United Red Army Incident” has endorsed it publicly and why former member Uegaki Yasuhiro (1949–), in the afterword to the last volume, felt compelled to praise it for its historical accuracy<sup>6</sup>. The relationship between Yamamoto and former members as well as the narrative perspective espoused by *Red* are discussed in the first part, “*Red* as Memory Politics.”

On the other hand, the manga's depoliticized and decentered perspective gives priority to what appears throughout the story as weak and helpless victims, and tends to remove key information regarding the ideological context. The result is that though detailed and faithful as possible to known facts, it ultimately fails to convey the complex dynamic which led to the deadly series of *sôkatsu* and ends up sanitizing the memory of the URA. It is no wonder, then, if the manga was *also* officially approved by the Japanese government, receiving the prize of excellence at the 2010 Japan Media Arts Festival and thereby confirming that the rehabilitation of the incident was underway at the expense of its political significance<sup>7</sup>. The narrative and visual devices through which *Red* negotiates the complex and politically charged memory of the URA incident is addressed in the second part, “*Red*, or the Rehabilitation of the URA's Memory.”

<sup>5</sup> For another example see *shôjo* culture theorist and manga artist Ôtsuka Eiji (1958–) and his manga *Unlucky Youngmen* (2004–2006). For a comparative study of *Red* and *Unlucky Youngmen* see Bouvard (2018).

<sup>6</sup> “The great achievement of this work is that it refuses creative elements that take no account of the truth” (*kono sakuhin no sugoi tokoro wa, jijitsu o mushi shita sôsaku ga mochikomareteinai koto de aru*)” (Yamamoto, 2018c, p. 298).

<sup>7</sup> The Festival is held annually by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, a special body of the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.

## **Red as Memory Politics**

### **Red and Previous Fictional Accounts of the URA**

*Red*'s serialization began in 2006 in the midst of a wave of counter-memory surrounding the URA incident, with the publication of the novel *Rain of Light* (Tatematsu, 1998), the release of its cinematographic adaptation of the same name (Takahashi, 2001), and the production of docudrama movie *United Red Army* (Wakamatsu, 2007). As mentioned in the introduction, Tatematsu, Wakamatsu and Takahashi are all authors with personal connections to either the URA or the 1968 student movement.

Until the successful publication of *Rain of Light* in 1998, accounts from the perspective of the URA were still sparse, and the fictional representation of the incident considered as taboo and risky topics. The serialization of Tatematsu's novel was for instance discontinued for plagiarism in 1993, and the editorial board as well as the author were asked to apologize publicly (Tatematsu, 1994, pp. 315–317). One of the decisive factors behind the formation of the first period of cultural remembrance has been the publication of accounts by leaders or people in positions of command at the time of the incident. Former Central Committee (CC) members Nagata Hiroko, Bandô Kunio and Sakaguchi Hiroshi have indeed published their autobiographies and versions of the event respectively in 1984 and 1993–1995<sup>8</sup>. These first-hand accounts have in turn fueled the first wave of counter-memory. Based on Sakaguchi's account, *Rain of Light* – both novel and film – may be considered as critical responses addressing the movie *Banquet of the Beasts* (Kumakiri, 1997) and its sexualized representation of the incident, and *United Red Army*, inspired by Bandô's account (Arai & Adachi, 2008, p. 87), was produced in reaction to *The Choice of Hercules* (Harada, 2002) and its depiction of the URA as a group of “faceless monsters” (Perkins, 2015, p. 102). Two major characteristics can be drawn from this first wave of cultural counter-memory: first, its main concern is to introduce the event from the perspective of the URA in the face of a highly antagonistic cultural environment and, second, it is aimed at articulating a rationale for the killings. As a consequence, all these fictional accounts espouse the view of people in command at the time of the event and use a fair amount of time to introduce the political situation – words like “communist transformation” (*kyôsanshugi-ka*) or “death by defeatism” (*haiboku-shi*) are for instance explained at length<sup>9</sup> – rather than depicting the more basic and daily activities of the group. By comparison, *Red* gives a greater attention to lower-rank militants and is more interested in everyday life aspects of the URA than in the killing *per se*.

Both *Rain of Light* and *United Red Army* centers on the murders and espouse the perspective of leaders Mori and Nagata, or of CC members Sakaguchi and Bandô<sup>10</sup>. This is evident in the way they introduce their narrative, through a condensed history of the Japanese New Left for *Rain of Light* (film) and *United Red Army*, and through the robbery of the Mooka gun store for *Rain of Light* (novel), a decisive event which is at the origin of Revolutionary Left Faction (RLF)'s decision to retreat back into the mountain. By contrast, *Red* expresses from the beginning its indifference towards the murders and the top-leading figures. The manga starts with Iwaki Yasuhiro (Uegaki Yasuhiro in real life) attending a political meeting at Hirosaki

<sup>8</sup> The CC of the URA, formed on January 3, 1972, was composed of the following members: Mori Tsuneo, Yamada Takashi (1944–1972), Nagata Hiroko, Sakaguchi Hiroshi (1946–), Bandô Kunio (1947–), Teraoka Kôichi (1948–1972), and Yoshino Masakuni (1948–).

<sup>9</sup> For an analysis of the social function of these terms see Steinhoff (1992).

<sup>10</sup> The novel *Rain of Light* is narrated from Sakaguchi's perspective years after the end of the event, and *United Red Army* relies extensively on Nagata and Mori's point-of-view shots for the *sôkatsu* scenes. For a detailed analysis of the latter see Perkins (2015, pp. 112–117).

University (Aomori Prefecture) in the summer of 1969. The scene, unrelated to the forthcoming events – Iwaki/Uegaki is not yet a member of the Red Army Faction (RAF) – is depicted from Iwaki/Uegaki's viewpoint, making the reader feeling like sitting at his side (Figure 1). This decentered perspective is further outlined by the first caption of the manga which starts with the words “almost unrelated to that (*sore to wa amari kankei naku*)” (Figure 1), the pronoun “that” referring to another narrative thread introduced a few pages later and depicting rank and file members of the RLF on the verge of breaking into Haneda airport (Figure 2). Through the contrast of both sequences and through the use of eye-level perspective in figure 1 and medium “shot” distance in figure 2, Yamamoto prompts the identification and involvement of the reader with Iwaki/Uegaki and the RLF members, and deconstructs the teleological discourse which sustains the narrative of both *Rain of Light* and *United Red Army*.



Figure 1: Iwaki/Uegaki attending a political meeting at Hirosaki University  
(Yamamoto, 2007, p. 5)



Figure 2: lower-rank members of the RLF about to break into Haneda airport  
(Yamamoto, 2007, p. 12)

The use of a decentered, depoliticized narrative is a conscious and articulated choice on the part of Yamamoto. In an interview to the film magazine *Kinema Junpô* in 2016, he explained for instance what differentiated his manga from Wakamatsu's movie:

To be frank, it is too short. In my case, I want to introduce as many events as possible. The period when they were having fun robbing banks and so forth, these are the kind of joyful moments I want to depict before turning to the tragedy of the killings. I also find interesting the case of people who ran away or got caught by the police. (Yamamoto, 2016, p. 50).

At the fortieth anniversary symposium of the incident in 2012, he also proclaimed that he “would rather present things as they are rather than trying to solve the mystery of the incident (*nazo o tokô toka, sô iu yori mo, sono mama teishutsu shitai*)” (Rengô-sekigun jiken no zentaizô o nokosu kai, 2013, p. 286), which is another way to stress his disinterest in the political dimension of the event. The shift of attention from CC to lower-rank members as well as the relative indifference towards the “mystery” of the killings expressed here by the author, though constituting a decisive break with previous representations, are no coincidence and can be considered as the result of a broader change in the social context surrounding the URA's counter-memory.

### The “Association to Transmit the Overall Picture of the United Red Army Incident”

Indeed, the years immediately preceding the serialization of *Red* saw a substantial shift in the memorialization of the incident. The twenty-fifth anniversary of the event in 1997 was the occasion of a journey to the mountains of Gunma Prefecture where relatives, supporters, friends and former members gathered and held a memorial service (*irei*) for the victims on the sites of the killings (Rengô-sekigun jiken no zentaizô o nokosu kai, 2013, pp. 31–72). The trip had been arranged by Mukai Chieko, a founding member of the “Association to transmit the overall picture of the United Red Army incident (*rengô-sekigun jiken no zentaizô o nokosu kai*, hereafter called *Nokosu kai*),” an organization founded in January 1987 with two main objectives: giving support to the ongoing appeal hearings of Nagata, Sakaguchi and Uegaki, and to gather as much information as possible about the incident. It is important to stress that *Nokosu kai* was *not* founded by members or former members of the URA: Mukai, a free-lance editor, got to know the organization through the first court hearings, and Mitobe Takashi, another founder and the executive committee representative of the association during a few years, knew some members of the RLF from the time he was a radical student at Yokohama National University, but he did not take part in any activity of the RLF nor, later, of the URA.

As the Japanese verb *nokosu* (to leave, to hand down) implies, *Nokosu kai*’s main concern lies in transmitting to future generations the memory of the incident. Its premise is that something meaningful and worth of remembrance can be learnt from it. The association is also not interested in ideological quarrels or in assessing which member is the most responsible for the killings. Its objective is to transmit the *whole picture* of the URA incident, not to pick up one version over another. *Nokosu kai*’s position is better expressed in the speech Mitobe delivered for the seventeenth commemoration of the incident (*jû nana-kaiki*) held in December 1987:

it is possible to learn something from the incident, something fruitful, that we may keep alive for future generations. We should record not only comments by people directly involved but also, as a form of primary source related to the overall picture, everything which belongs to the periphery of the incident. This is the reason why we created *Nokosu kai* and are taking part in its activities. (Rengô-sekigun jiken no zentaizô o nokosu kai, 2013, p. 27)

### The Second Wave of Counter-Memory

Though founded in 1987, *Nokosu kai*’s objectives to gather, record and publish testimonies of the incident took time to realize, and until 2003 the association remained barely visible to the general public. The decisive impetus came from the release from jail of former members who were to cooperate actively with *Nokosu kai* and publish their own accounts of the murders.

Contrary to still living CC members, sentenced to death or life imprisonment – and of Bandô, who had been released from jail in 1975 in an extralegal deal with the Japanese Red Army – lower-rank members such as Uegaki had all, by 2000, been released. Katô Michinori (1952–), whose brother Yoshitaka (1949–1972) died on January 4, as well as Maesawa Torayoshi (1947–), who escaped during the transfer from Haruna mountain camp to Kashô mountain camp at the end of January, had both been released in 1987, and Aoto Mikio (1949–) and Uegaki Yasuhiro, both arrested on February 19 – a few hours before the shootout at the Asama Lodge – and sentenced respectively to 23 and 27 years of imprisonment, had been released in 1994 and 1998. Back into society, these former militants were free to share their experience in the URA and started disseminating their own narrative of the incident. A second commemorative excursion held in 2003 for the thirtieth anniversary of the incident saw the participation of Uegaki, whose help to locate the former sites of Haruna and Kashô mountain camps – the

places where the majority of the killings occurred – was decisive. Uegaki, Katô, and Maesawa also took part in the memorial for the victims of the URA held in Tôkyô that same year. For the first time, former members gathered to discuss publicly and share their experience of the *sôkatsu* killings, an event which triggered the publication of the first testimonies by *Nokosu kai*. Indeed, the association has since been involved in the publishing of a series of “*shôgen* (testimonies)” in the form of booklets where former members discuss their own perspectives of the incident. Between 2004 and 2019 twelve issues of the *shôgen* series have been published<sup>11</sup>. Concurrently to these engagements with *Nokosu kai*, Uegaki, Katô, Maesawa and Aoto were also involved in interviews for magazines, television companies, newspapers, as well as in the publication of their own record of the incident. Uegaki was the most active of the group with the publishing of *United Red Army: Testimony of the Twenty-Seventh Year* (Uegaki, 2001a) and of a renewed edition of his former *The Soldiers of the United Red Army* (Uegaki, 2001b), and with participations in television and public talks. Katô published his own book in 2003 (Katô, 2003), and Maesawa and Aoto were also busy giving interviews in magazines and newspapers at the same period.

These testimonies represent a shift in the way people relate to the killings. Whereas Sakaguchi, Nagata and Bandô’s accounts tend to stress the *specificity* of the incident and focus on the ideological and theoretical framework used to justify the murders, *Nokosu kai*, on the other hand, insists on its *unspecificity* and highlights group dynamics or marxism as the main cause. As a consequence, the responsibility for the murders remains unclear, and the general impression is that rank and file members were overwhelmed by political forces beyond their control. As suggested by Fabiana Cecchini in her study of the autobiographical account *Il Prigioniero* by former Red Brigade member Anna Laura Braghetti, the sense of inevitability and victimhood radiating from these accounts has for major consequence to dissociate the witness from his/her terrorist and political past. In Cecchini’s (2011) words:

the [...] identity that emerges places direct reliance on the reader to listen to and understand her rather than judge her life choices. The reader, in this case, is understood to be a member of the community “that is willing to forgive a prodigal child” [...]. The community is one to which Braghetti wishes to return, in hopes of recovering her reputation and returning to modern society with a new identity. (p. 86)

It is important to note that, similar to Braghetti’s account, former rank and file members’ accounts do not ask the audience to judge their past political actions or mistakes, but instead to *understand* them. This is the reason why their approach seems more descriptive than narrative and why they give so much attention to details which would be considered insignificant in the context of the first wave of counter-memory. Besides, after long-term prison sentences, Uegaki, Katô, Maesawa and Aoto were also eager to start a new life and, for some of them, marry and have children (Asayama, 2012). Adopting a more consensual stance and projecting themselves as victims rather than perpetrators was an efficient way to recover their reputation and seek forgiveness.

### **Red and the Second Wave of Counter-Memory**

When asked in 2016 which former members had been interviewed for the preparation of *Red*, Yamamoto mentioned “Uegaki (Yasuhiro), Aoto (Mikio), Maesawa (Torayoshi), Yukino

<sup>11</sup> A shortened version of the issues published before 2012 has been gathered and reedited in *Rengô-sekigun jiken no zentaizô o nokosu kai*, 2013.



(Kensaku), and the second son of the Katô siblings (Michinori)” (Yamamoto, 2016, p. 50). They are all members of *Nokosu kai* or people involved in its activities (Yukino, arrested in the summer of 1971 and which for that reason did not take part in the *sôkatsu* killings, became after 1997 one of the most active members of the association). It must also be noted that, as part of a project called “Let’s Go Explore With Yamamoto Naoki (*Yamamoto Naoki no sagurinagara itte miyô*)” for the magazine *Tsukuru*, Yamamoto had already interviewed Uegaki and Katô as of 2004 and 2005, that is, more than one year before *Red*’s serialization began (Yamamoto, 2018b, pp. 113–124). The manga is thus obviously indebted to the second wave of counter-memory, and its memory politics can be considered as basically the same as *Nokosu kai*. This proximity helps explain the break *Red* represents when compared to previous visual representations of the URA incident. It also explains the historical accuracy of the manga, Yamamoto having been granted access to information never related publicly by members of the association. Scenes such as the one depicting Iwaki/Uegaki being possibly recognized by a child (Yamamoto, 2009, pp. 83–85), or showing Iwaki/Uegaki and Kita/Mori living temporarily in the luxurious apartment of a famous celebrity in Tôkyô (Yamamoto, 2011, p. 97), have for instance all been directly related to the author by Uegaki and contribute to enhance the documentary value of the manga.

However, *Nokosu kai*’s memory politics cannot be considered as more neutral or better reflecting the truth than the more one-sided first wave of counter-memory. As mentioned above, the association does possess a particular perspective on the incident, and *Red*, though reflecting faithfully the association’s memory politics, twists and simplifies decisively some aspects to give it a more universal and appealing turn.

## ***Red*, or the Rehabilitation of the URA’s Memory**

### **Espousing the View of Lower-Rank Members**

As mentioned in the first part, Yamamoto’s work departs from previous representations in that it also focuses on daily, insignificant activities and does not center its narrative on the murders. Scenes depicting RLF members playing golf (Yamamoto, 2007, pp. 78–79), RAF members having sex (Yamamoto, 2008, pp. 52–54), or URA members joyfully playing arm wrestling (Yamamoto, 2012, pp. 36–39) are not unusual and tend to depict the organization in a rather sympathetic light. However, the visual composition of these scenes is as much important as their content, and it is through the use of skillfully drawn panels espousing the point-of-view of the lower-rank members that the reader’s identification with the organization becomes really effective.

For instance, in the short scene mentioned above of Iwaki/Uegaki being possibly recognized by a child, Yamamoto relies on a complex structure of points-of-views to transform a minor incident into a moving sequence. The episode takes place the day after a major political and military failure on the part of the RAF, and starts with a depressed Iwaki/Uegaki being told on the phone that his girlfriend had an abortion. After the phone call, the character notices a child staring at him from the lower left side of the frame (Figure 3). He stares back and, on the next page, we see the child looking in the opposite direction (lower left side of the frame). The following panel reveals the object of the kid’s gaze: wanted posters of RLF and RAF members with Iwaki/Uegaki’s face prominently displayed on them (Figure 4). The sense of urgency and suspense is enhanced through the next panel, a tight close up of Iwaki/Uegaki’s eyes, and then an exchange of looks with the child from the terrorist’s point-of-view. The reader expects some action to happen: the child starting to scream, or Iwaki/Uegaki starting to run away. However, the exact opposite happens. Indeed, the next panel shows the terrorist lingering: he vaguely

smiles, waves at the child, and then leaves calmly (Figure 5). This wordless interaction does not only highlight the character's humanity – instead of running away or using violence to escape, he *smiles* – but also highlights in a very subtle manner his feelings of sadness and uncertainty. Through the complex use of point-of-view frames, Yamamoto thus transforms a minor episode into a moving scene through which the reader cannot but feel sympathy for Iwaki/Uegaki.



Figure 3: Iwaki/Uegaki hangs up the phone and notices a child staring at him (Yamamoto, 2009, p. 83)

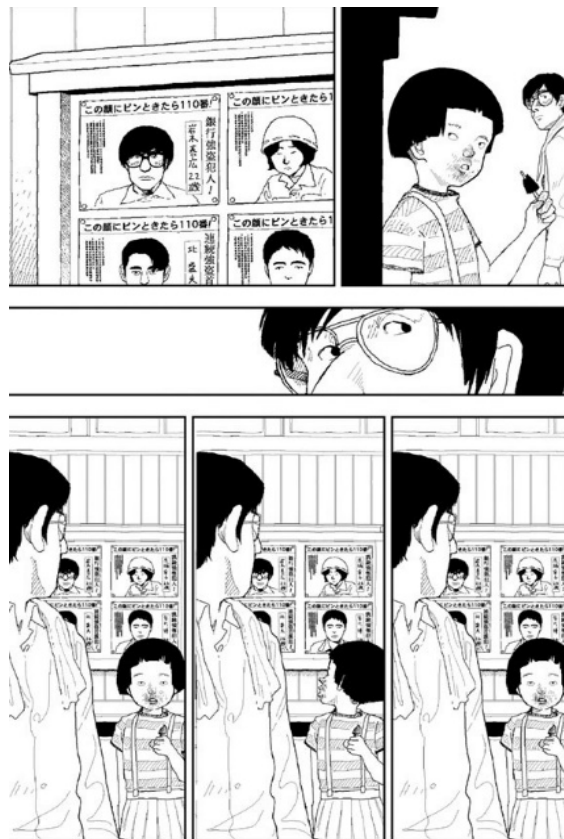


Figure 4: Iwaki/Uegaki's face displayed on the wanted posters (Yamamoto, 2009, p.84)



Figure 5: Iwaki/Uegaki stares back, smiles and waves at the child before leaving (Yamamoto, 2009, p. 85)

Point-of-views framed from the perspective of lower-rank members are also extensively used in the more problematic setting of the killings. In Haruna mountain camp – the place where most of the murders took place – CC members had a separate room to debate and discuss the URA's political agenda. However, important decisions were notified to the whole group through *zentai kaigi* or general meetings, and it is through those meetings that the first deaths were reported and justified on political grounds to all members. Yamamoto deals with these important and crucial moments through the use of long shot distance and eye-level perspective, prompting the reader to identify with lower-rank members. For instance, in the scene depicting the announcement of the first death<sup>12</sup>, the author uses a long shot making leaders Akagi/Nagata and Kita/Mori appear as tiny little figures in the background (Figure 6). The “distance effect” is further enhanced through the use of a big table in the middle drawn with one-point perspective, and of a speech balloon (*Ibuki ga shinimashita*, “Ibuki is dead”) whose size is remarkably small compared to the panel. Needless to say, eye-line perspective – as in the case of figure 1 – contributes to involve the reader and gives him/her the impression of sitting among rank and file members. The identification with the latter ones is further reinforced by the use of a series of reaction “shots” in the lower half of the page: framed in medium close up, mouth closed and eyes looking to the side, the characters are presented with rather dubious expressions.



Figure 6: Akagi/Nagata announcing the death of the first *sôkatsu* victim (Yamamoto, 2015a, p. 9)

<sup>12</sup> It is the death of Ibuki, or Ozaki Mitsuo (1950–1971) in real life.



Figure 7: Akagi/Nagata justifying Ibuki/Ozaki's death as "death by defeatism"  
(Yamamoto, 2015a, p. 11)

The reader is clearly asked to sympathize with lower-rank members and to put into question Akagi/Nagata and Kita/Mori's words. Indeed, in the next double page spread, the female leader introduces and links for the first time the concepts of "communization of the self" and "death by defeatism", arguing that Ibuki/Ozaki's death is not the result of physical violence but of his own failure to achieve communization (Figure 7). If Akagi/Nagata looks rather confident, this is not the case of lower-rank members whose disbelief is even more apparent than on the preceding page. Some of them don't even look at the leader, and their facial expression and thoughts – the fourth panel suggests they are thinking of Kurobe (Katô Yoshitaka in real life) and Yakushi (Kojima Kazuko [1949–1972] in real life), both subjected to *sôkatsu* and tied to trees outside – clearly mark them as doubtful of Akagi/Nagata's message. Through the skillful use of point-of-view and reaction shots, Yamamoto thus undermines the ideological and theoretical framework used by the leaders to justify the murders, inviting the reader to take his/her distance with the political atmosphere at the time of the killings. As outlined in the first part, this approach is consistent with *Nokosu kai*'s memory politics of considering the URA incident as the consequence of group dynamics rather than politics. However, the use of point-of-view frames and other visual devices aimed at triggering the identification of the reader also constitutes a break from the association's objective to seek understanding rather than judgement.

### Powerless Victims

As is evident from the lower two panels of figure 7, point-of-views in *Red* do not just serve the purpose of undermining the ideological framework or inviting the reader to identify with lower-rank members: they also tend to reinforce the sense of weakness and failure which pervades the narrative, contributing to transform potential terrorists and ideologues into helpless and powerless victims. In figure 8, for instance, we see Miyaura – Kaneko Michiyo (1948–1972) in real life – about to be beaten with a rope by Kita/Mori. The low-angle perspective enhances the weakness of the young woman – who is also eight months pregnant – and presents Kita/Mori as a ruthless and omnipotent torturer. As a consequence, the reader is not asked to understand or reflect on the situation but to engage emotionally with the young woman and to consider Kita/Mori as the villain of the piece. This is a blatant simplification of the situation at the time of the killings.





Figure 8: Miyaura/Kaneko facing Kita/Mori before being tortured (Yamamoto, 2017, p. 11)

Indeed, it must be noted that, while leaders Mori and Nagata did provide the theoretical framework to justify the murders, it is rank and file members – including Kaneko Michiyo – who participated the most in the beating and the burying of the victims. As such, they obviously bear a responsibility and cannot be depicted as helpless and innocent victims without rising serious moral concerns. If *Nokosu kai*'s memory politics of considering the URA incident as the consequence of group dynamics rather than ideology is also pervaded by a sense of victimhood, the distinction between victims and perpetrators remains unclear – for instance, Mori and Nagata are frequently mourned as victims of the incident rather than perpetrators (Rengô-sekigun jiken no zentaizô o nokosu kai, 2013, p. 169) – and the reader is not asked to actively identify with the victims and consider the sole URA leadership as responsible. By contrast, point-of-views in Yamamoto's work espouse wholeheartedly the position of helpless and powerless victims, urging the audience to take side and to dissociate between good and evil, “innocent” victims and perpetrators.

Another efficient mean through which the distinction between perpetrators and victims is achieved in *Red* is the use of extradiegetic numbers informing in advance the reader of the death of the protagonists. Located on the “outside” of the diegesis – the characters cannot see them – these numbers appear as ominous signs and contribute to the manga's overall sense of inevitability and victimhood. For instance, Shirane (Ôtsuki Setsuko [1948–1972] in real life), the thirteenth character to perish in *Red*, systematically appears with the number 13 painted on her, Miyaura/Kaneko, the fourteenth to die, the number 14 (see Figure 8), and so forth. Yamamoto has stated in interviews that the device was inspired by Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Galápagos* (1985) and theatre director Matsuo Suzuki's play *Countdown* (1995), and was aimed primarily at facilitating the identification of the different characters (Yamamoto & Kirino 2008, p. 175). The device does facilitate the reading of the story, but also reinforces the impression that Miyaura/Kaneko and others were from the beginning passive victims instead of active agents of the situation. For instance, after the shock of Ibuki/Ozaki's death mentioned above, the members gather and are urged by Akagi/Nagata and Kita/Mori to continue to act as usual and to “work hard on Ibuki/Ozaki's behalf” (*Ibuki no bun made ganbatte ikanakereba naranai*). Number 8 (Amagi/Tôyama) and number 13 (Ôtsuki/Shirane) then start a political speech through which both women assert their political commitment (Figure 9). Amagi/Tôyama says she came to the mountain to become a “soldier of the Revolution” (*kakumei-senshi*), and Ôtsuki/Shirane, after a lengthy quote of Mao Zedong, expresses how Ibuki/Ozaki's death must be considered as insignificant and detestable (*daki subeki karui mono*

da). It is a bold declaration expressing the view of people fully committed to the Revolution and ready to die for it. However, the sheer presence of the numbers suggests to the reader that the women do not really believe in them and are just begging for the attention of the leaders. Even though they express strongly their political will, they still appear as the passive victims of a situation they do not control. This doomed sense of inevitability is further enhanced by Kita/Mori's intervention in the next panel, complaining to Amagi/Tôyama, Takachiho (Shindô Ryûzaburô [1950–1972] in real life) and Bandai (Namekata Masatoki [1949–1972] in real life), that they are not taking seriously enough their own *sôkatsu*. Significantly, Kita/Mori, who committed suicide on January 31, 1973, and who is frequently remembered as a victim of the incident by *Nokosu kai*, does not appear with a number (unlike, for instance, the civilian and the two policemen killed during the Asama Lodge shootout, appearing respectively with the numbers 16, 17, and 18 in the last volume).



Figure 9: Number 8 (Amagi/Tôyama) and number 13 (Ôtsuki/Shirane) asserting their political commitment in front of Kita/Mori (Yamamoto, 2015a, p. 13)

Names also play an important role in dissociating the victims from the perpetrators. As with *Rain of Light* – both novel and film – *Red* does not rely on real names but uses instead fictionalized versions of them. Yamamoto and his editor were apparently considering the legal risks when they took this decision (Yamamoto, Kirino, Kanai, 2018, p. 66) but, as other changes added by the manga, these transformations were carried out on dramatic rather than historical premises. Leaders Nagata Hiroko and Mori Tsuneo are for instance transformed into Akagi Hiroko and Kita Morio. The kanji for Akagi (赤城) literally means “red castle” and the one for Kita (北), “north”. They both connote elevation and communism. “Kita”, the opposite of “south”, possibly refers to North Korea, the kanji being regularly used in newspapers to refer to the country; it must also be noted that the RAF – the group to which Kita/Mori originally belonged to – also successfully hijacked a plane, the Yodogô, to North Korea in March 1970. By contrast, *sôkatsu* victims all possess names connoting purity and sacredness. Tôyama, Akagi/Nagata’s alter-ego, becomes for instance Amagi (天城) or “heaven castle”, Ôtsuki becomes Shirane (白根) or “white root”, Kaneko becomes Miyaura (宮浦) or “inlet shrine”, Yamazaki Jun (1950–1972) becomes Kamiyama (神山) or “mountain of the god”, and so on. The sense of victimhood is thus not only inscribed in the visual composition of the panels, but also in the names of the characters.

## Removing the Political and Historical Context

As with the characters' names, the title of the manga can also be considered a decisive form of generalization and, by extension, of depoliticization. Indeed, the word “red” (*reddo*) was not in use at the time of the event to refer neither to communism nor to New Left politics (the ideological current to which the URA belongs). Its choice may stem from commercial reasons – it sounds better to a contemporary audience than the words “communism”, “New Left”, or *aka(i)* (red), much more radical and negatively connoted – but it also has the consequence of presenting the URA and its ideological background as something intrinsically alien. Indeed, in Japanese the word is written in *katakana* (レッド), a syllabary usually reserved for non-Japanese names, thus suggesting that the URA and New Left politics in general can be considered a foreign import. This approach is consistent with Yamamoto's overall strategy to dismiss the post-1968 political atmosphere as the underlying cause of the murders, and to focus instead on group dynamics. It also implies that all left-wing politics, from the *Zenkyōtō* student movement to more traditional parties like the Japanese Communist Party (JCP), are one and the same<sup>13</sup>. Indeed, the difference between the New Left and the Old Left (which includes the JCP) is nowhere addressed in the manga, and words like New Left or New Left movements are systematically replaced by “revolution” (*kakumei*) or “class struggle” (*kaikyū-tōsō*), that is, expressions which can refer to both currents. The generalization of the political context hinders a proper understanding of the URA and of the *sōkatsu* murders.

Indeed, the two organizations at the origin of the URA – the RAF and the RLF – both lay roots in different and opposed ideological currents. On the hand, the RAF – as its full name, Red Army Faction of the Communist League, indicates – is the offspring of the Communist League or *Bund*, a New Left organization founded in 1958 which played a central role in the protest against the signature of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between Japan and the United States in 1960. The *Bund*, as other New Left organizations, not only stems from the opposition to Stalinism – the latter having been publicly denounced at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956 – but also, and more significantly, from the opposition to the concept of “Democratic Revolution for National Independence” (*minzoku dokuritsu minshushugi kakumei*) which was being brought to the fore by the JCP at the time (Tōshi hensan iinkai, 1977, pp. 72–74). For students and intellectuals informed by Trotskyism and internationalism, the concept of “National Revolution” not only meant the betrayal of the idea of World Revolution, but also embracing Japanese imperialism. Officially founded in September 1969, the RAF has inherited *Bund* and New Left's internationalism. It is for instance at the origin of the Japanese Red Army's foundation in 1971 – a terrorist organization based in Lebanon and involved in attacks all around the world – and of the Yodogō hijack incident mentioned above. Its targets were also primarily government facilities like the Ministry of Defense or the Prime Minister's office. The RLF, on the other hand, and as its full name of Revolutionary Left Faction of the Japanese Communist Party indicates, is affiliated to Old Left politics. Though unrelated to the JCP at the moment of its foundation in April 1969, the group still shared the anti-Americanism of its parent organization. Its political line was for instance “patriotic and anti-American” (*hanbei aikoku rosen*), and the majority of its targets between 1969 and 1970 were U.S. related facilities (bases in Kanagawa Prefecture and the consulate in Yokohama). Smaller, the RLF attracted more students from working-class backgrounds and had a strong feminist position. By comparison, the RAF was composed mainly of middle-class students from good universities and was much more male-oriented (Steinhoff, 1992, p. 196). When both organizations merged in July 1971 to form the URA, differences between New Left

<sup>13</sup> The *Zenkyōtō* or All-campus Joint Struggle Councils is the organization form which was at the center of the 1968 student protest.



and Old Left politics soon crystallized into quarrels and dissensions which eventually led to the first *sôkatsu*. In the self-criticism statement (*jiko-hihan sho*) Mori wrote right after his arrest in February 1972, the URA leader indicates that when both groups joined in Haruna base camp at the end of December 1971, a “critical examination of the history” (*rekishi-teki sôkatsu*) of the RLF and the RAF was undertaken (Mori, 1984, p. 16). Physical violence as a way to help Katô Yoshitaka achieve his *sôkatsu* – though not the first to die, Katô was the first member subjected to torture – was introduced right after this critical examination. It can also be argued that concepts like “communization of the self”, though borrowing to New Left phraseology, were made up from the bottom by Mori to deal with the questioning by the RLF of Tôyama’s commitment to women’s liberation (Tôyama’s hairstyle, clothes and makeup were considered a problem by RLF members). The theoretical framework which will lay the foundation to justify the murders can thus be considered, at least in the beginning, as the answer found by Mori and Nagata to adjust the ideological differences existing between both organizations. Erasing the opposition between New Left and Old Left is thus a decisive move on Yamamoto’s part, a move which not only contributes to hinder our understanding of the incident but also changes completely its historical significance.

## Conclusion

As one of the first examples of a mediation of the second wave of counter-memory, *Red* has decisively contributed to the rehabilitation of the URA incident in contemporary Japanese society. The popular television program *Walking through modern history* (*Ikegami Akira no gendai-shi o aruku*) (Tôkyô Television) has for instance explicitly espoused the perspective of lower-rank members and reenacted, for the first time on television, Uegaki and Aoto’s arrest on the occasion of a special program broadcast on January 27, 2019. The novels *Army of the Dead* (*Shisha no guntai*) by Kanai Hiroaki (1948–) and *Going through the Valley of the Night* (*Yoru no tani o yuku*) by popular writer Kirino Natsuo (1951–) were also published respectively in 2015 and 2017, the former dealing with the incident from the perspective of leader Nagata Hiroko and the latter espousing the view of a female rank and file member. *Red*’s popular success has also contributed to increase *Nokosu kai*’s visibility, and as such can be considered a decisive factor in the steady publication of the “*shogen*” series by the association since 2004. The proximity between the association and Yamamoto also explains the historical accuracy of the manga and its documentary value. *Red*’s overall contribution to a more contrasted and exhaustive understanding of the URA incident is thus undeniable. However, as suggested in the course of this article, the way Yamamoto reworks *Nokosu kai*’s memory politics on more universal and sanitized grounds is not without raising serious moral and political concerns.

Though firmly grounded in first-hand accounts and possessing an undeniable documentary value, *Red* may indeed be better understood not as a historical account – or, to use Yamamoto’s word, a “non-fiction” (Yamamoto, 2018a, p. 25) – of the URA incident, but as a failure narrative of New Left politics. Significantly, the manga opens with the symbol of student activism defeat in Japan – the “fall” of the Yasuda Auditorium at Tôkyô University on January 19, 1969 – and ends with Tanigawa – Sakaguchi Hiroshi in real life – being violently dragged out of Asama Lodge by police forces. Both images borrow to the period’s iconography – the Yasuda Auditorium’s scene is directly inspired by a famous aerial photograph by Tôkyô Shimbun, and the URA sequence comes from the equally famous NHK live footage of the Asama Lodge incident – and both express a sense of failure and powerlessness (the students of the first image appear as tiny white helmets and Taniguchi/Sakaguchi looks like a vulnerable prey in the second). As detailed in the first part, *Red* departs from previous fictional accounts in that its interest lies primarily with insignificant and “joyful moments” than with the killings *per se*. It

is significant, then, that Yamamoto did not make the choice of the most “joyful” moment of the period – that is, 1968 – as the beginning of his story, but chose instead its symbolic failure. Framing the URA incident through the categories of defeat and victimhood has deep moral and political consequences. It urges the readers to identify with what appear as hapless and weak victims rather than violent revolutionaries, obscuring the fact that *everyone* bears a moral responsibility in the killings. It also denies the group any form of political agency and contributes to enforce the conservative idea that the URA members were not intrinsically radicals, but confused young people overwhelmed by the historical and political situation of the time. That the Japanese government has enthusiastically endorsed *Red* thus comes as no surprise, and the rehabilitation of the URA’s memory through failure and victimhood, though decisive to foster a better understanding of the incident, raises the difficult question of the possibility of a truly radical left-wing politics in contemporary Japan.

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