

[Japan Society-New York: Documents Project. (1930-1945, Economics)]

[Document 57]: “Bad harvests struck. . . . Land and homes were lost.” Mishima Yukio, 1933 trial of the ultranationalist zealot Iinuma Isao for plotting the assassination of rich industrialists, in *Runaway Horses*, 1969.

JUDGE: Take as much time as you need, but explain the development of your feelings, your indignation, your resolution.

IINUMA: Very well, Your Honor. . . . Gradually, I became acquainted with the problems of society. I was shocked at the inaction of the government in the face of the chronic depression that had been dragging on since the worldwide panic.

A mass of jobless wage-earners that reached two million, men who had formerly worked away from home and sent money back, now returned to their farming villages to aggravate the poverty already reigning there. I learned that there were great crowds at Yugyo Temple in Fujisawa where the monks dished out rice gruel to the unemployed who were walking home to the country, lacking the money for train fare. And yet the government, despite the gravity of the situation, responded only with nonchalant indifference, Minister of the Interior Antachi declaring: “Relief measures for the unemployed would make people frivolous and lazy, so I will do all I can to avoid such a harmful policy.”

Then in 1931, bad harvests struck Tohoku and Hokkaido. Whatever could be sold was sold, land and homes were lost, and the situation was such that whole families lived in stables, and people held starvation at bay by eating acorns and roots. Even in front of the township hall one saw notices such as: “Anyone wishing to sell his daughters, inquire within.” It was not at all



rare for a soldier on his way off to war to bid a tearful farewell to his younger sister being sold to a brothel.

Beyond the hardship of the bad harvests, the stringent economic policy of the government after the lifting of the embargo on the export of gold laid ever heavier burdens on the farmers, and the panic in agriculture mounted to new heights. The Land of Abundant Rice, which was ancient Japan, was transformed into a wasteland populated by people sobbing from the pangs of hunger. And then the importing of rice, when there was more than enough rice within Japan, caused the price of rice to plunge disastrously. Meanwhile tenant farming grew by leaps and bounds, and more than half the crop a tenant produced had to go as rent, with not a single grain of rice going into the mouth of the farmer himself. The farmers had not one yen of currency. Trade was carried out by bartering. A pack of Shikishima cigarettes went for two quarts of rice, a haircut for four quarts, a pack of Golden Bat cigarettes was a hundred bunches of turnips, and twenty-six pounds of cocoons would bring in ten yen. That was the situation.

As you know, Your Honor, the farmers are breaking out in protest everywhere. There is danger that the farming villages will go Red. Even in the breasts of the young men who are being called to the imperial colors as loyal subjects one cannot find unalloyed patriotism, and that evil is beginning to infect the armed forces.

Giving no thought to these crises, the government plods along in the path of corruption. .

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JUDGE. So that's it then? Does the prosecution have anything to say?

Source: Mishima Yukio, *Runaway Horses (Honba)*. Trans. Michael Gallagher. Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1973, 390-392.

Context.

This excerpt from Mishima Yukio's best-selling novel is not, technically, a primary source; it is included here, however, because it purports to be one: a reconstructed transcript of the 1933 trial of a young extremist who laid plans to assassinate industrialists as a means of propagating his own patriotic values. Though the characters are fictitious, the facts about rural hardships and responses are accurate. Coming on the heels of the stock market crash and the general economic crisis, bad harvests in 1931 and 1934, particularly in the northeastern region of Tohoku, made the situation on Japan's farms dire. It drove rural populations not only to desperate measures to put food on the table but to radical causes (including militarism and ultranationalism) as they sought explanations and solutions for the country's difficulties. One of the darkest responses to these difficulties was the proliferation of plots by young zealots like Iinuma to assassinate officials and capitalists whom they regarded as responsible for Japan's difficulties. Their solution, they said, was direct rule by the emperor and a stronger military.

Questions.

1. What is Iinuma's primary criticism of the ruling elites? Why do they need to be eliminated?
2. Many judges who disapproved of assassination plans like those of Iinuma expressed sympathy for the perpetrators' motives and gave them light sentences. Why do you think that was? Should such sympathy have affected their legal rulings?
3. Discuss whether Iinuma would be called a terrorist today.



Terms.

Yugyo Temple. Founded in 1325, it is officially known as Shojokoji, the headquarters of the Jishu sect of Buddhism. Fujiwasawa lies on the Pacific Ocean south of Tokyo.

Antachi. “Antachi” is a mis-translation of Adachi Kenzō, the Home (not Interior) Minister—a man who would have offended purists by his willingness to make political compromises, even though he was very much a conservative nationalist.

Shikishima and Golden Bat. Two of the period’s best known cigarette brands, Shikishima was regarded as cheap and low class; Golden Bat is Japan’s oldest cigarette brand.

Gold embargo. In 1930, Japan lifted its embargo on the sale of gold, failing to take adequate account of the seriousness of the Great Depression. As a result, gold reserves flowed out of the country, as stock prices and consumer spending plummeted.

“*Go Red.*” Iinuma fears that poverty will make farmers susceptible to Communist ideologies.