Doomsday Underground

BOOKS

The Cult at the End of the World by David E. Kaplan and Andrew Marshall. Arrow Books, 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London. £5.99.

A book with a blurb that promises a detailed account of the world's first scientific death cult, "a wired, hi-tech, designer drug, billion dollar army of fanatics, focused around the leadership of a blind bearded madman armed with weapons of mass destruction," sounds like a cheap bestseller. But this book by investigative reporters David Kaplan and Andrew Marshall is no sensational trash: It's a well-researched study of a contemporary religious sect with thousands of followers in Japan, Russia and to a lesser extent the United States and Western Europe.



Doomsday prophet and follower.

The sect's central figure, Chizuo Matsumoto, better known by his "spiritual name" Shoko Asahara, is a madman who dreamed of having his own air force and nuclear arsenal to defend himself and his followers from the fall-out of an imminent Armageddon which, he preached, would come before the end of the century.

Although he sent cultists to the U.S. to obtain helicopter-pilot licences, and to post-communist Russia to shop for nuclear devices, no horror stories came out of these

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plans. But chemists who had joined Asahara's bizarre sect produced a wide range of biological weapons, including the deadly gas sarin which they sprayed in Tokyo's underground on March 20, 1995. Twelve people died as a result, and Tokyo turned into a city of fear.

Aum's hi-tech millenarianism provided the means for escape and salvation for thousands of followers who bowed to the whims of the lunatic Asahara. But the question here is not only how a religious fanatic duped well-educated youths into giving up brilliant careers to join an organization as grotesque as Aum. What's more disturbing is how, for years, the sect engaged, undisturbed by the authorities, in large-scale fraud, in peddling quack medicines, in producing biological weapons, LSD, mescaline and methamphetamines and in carrying out executions of disobedient cult members. Where were the police? Numerous complaints and law suits were filed against the sect, and journalists wrote about its activities. But not until the attack in the Tokyo underground did the police take the accusations against Aum seriously. Then, it was too late.

By focusing on a bizarre religious cult, the authors describe the vulnerability of Japanese society to the allure of spiritualism, and how Japan's authorities can be amazingly efficient and totally inept at the same time. The problem, Kaplan and Marshall say, is that the world's second most powerful economic power has "a 19th-century police force trying to fight 21st-century crime."

That is a frightening perspective, but this is a frightening book. It depicts the scenario that security experts have been warning of for years: urban terrorism with chemical weapons. As the authors put it: "It would be easy to dismiss Aum as a peculiarly Japanese case, and indeed, there are conditions in Japan that shaped the cult's unique character. The straitjacket schools and workplaces, the absentee fathers and alienated youth no doubt helped fuel Shoko Asahara's rise to power. But to suggest that what happened in Japan would not happen elsewhere would be a dangerous mistake."

An anonymous Japanese police officer provides the best comment on the fatal attack in the Tokyo underground: "A new kind of indiscriminate terrorism has become possible. If we don't solve this case at any cost, legal order will collapse."

Kaplan and Marshall's book is an excellent account of the way a society can go wrong and a warning to the rest of the world. ■ **Bertil Lintner**

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