



The 1932 Yasukuni Shrine Incident

No. 40

1. An Unanticipated Crisis

In April 1925, a few years after the end of World War I, the government established a system whereby army officers on active duty were stationed as training officers at institutions of secondary and higher education for males, including middle schools, higher schools, teachers' colleges, and university preparatory divisions. The curriculum for the program specified by the Ministry of Education comprised marching drills, rifle practice, semaphore training, and lectures on military affairs. Students who completed the campus military training program would be exempted from some months of actual camp training if conscripted and would be eligible to serve as officers rather than as ordinary draftees. For universities, having a training officer stationed on campus became an essential social credential. Sophia University applied to receive a training officer in 1928, the year the university was elevated to full university status under the University Ordinance, and records in the Sophia University Archives show that it participated in the military training program from that year until 1944.

The period from 1928 on saw a steadily growing trend toward militarism. Through incidents such as that of 15 May 1932, when young naval officers assassinated the prime minister; the military insurrection of 26 February 1936; and the Marco Polo Bridge incident of July 1937, Japan moved step by step towards war with China and involvement in World War II. In the midst of these developments, the university encountered a major crisis in what became known as the Yasukuni Shrine incident. The incident, which led to threats by the Army to withdraw the training officer from Sophia, came close to imperiling the university's existence and had ongoing repercussions for the relationship between Christian groups and the state.

2. The Background to the Yasukuni Shrine Incident

On 5 May 1932, Colonel Kitahara Hitomi, the training officer who had been stationed at Sophia since September of the previous year, took the sixty second-year students in the university preparatory division to Yasukuni Shrine. At the time, the Catholic church prohibited believers to show reverence at shrines or Buddhist temples, and in accordance with this teaching, on this occasion three Catholic students did not offer



Colonel Kitahara Hitomi

reverence at the shrine. Colonel Kitahara immediately reported their failure to do so to his superiors in the Army, and the Army in turn informed the Ministry of Education that it was necessary to take action against a school that had shown itself in this way to be dangerously unpatriotic.

In just this same period Sophia was celebrating several milestones. In April it had established an innovative new program in journalism, and in June it put on a series of public events to commemorate completion of a new administration and classroom building (the



Letter from Archbishop Alexis Chambon to Minister of Education

Hatoyama Ichirō seeking a formal clarification of the public nature of the act of offering reverence at shrines (National Archives of Japan)

present Building No. 1). The high point of those events was the ceremonial opening of the new building on 14 June in the presence of numerous invited dignitaries. That same day President Hoffmann received word from the Ministry of Education that the Army was demanding to have the training officer withdrawn from Sophia.

The Army and Ministry of Education exchanged repeated memoranda in the following months about the Sophia situation. In an effort to resolve the problem, on 22 September, the Tokyo archbishop, Alexis Chambon, wrote to the Ministry of Education seeking a formal clarification of the meaning of requiring students to show reverence at shrines. The response from the vice-minister, dated 30 September, declared that taking students to shrines to show reverence “was based on educational reasons”; the intent behind the bow that the students were asked “to perform in unison” on such occasions was “none other than to express patriotic commitment and sincere loyalty.” Having received this statement, the Catholic bishops of Japan came to interpret showing reverence at shrines as an expression of patriotism rather than something religious; it thus became permissible for Catholic believers to take part in such activities.

3. Media Coverage and Its Impact

It seemed that the problem had been resolved. But, on 1 October 1932, the day after the Ministry of Education issued its response to Archbishop Chambon, the newspaper *Hōchi shinbun* took up the matter of showing reverence at shrines in an article with the headline “Holding firm to convictions of faith, students refuse to offer reverence at Yasukuni Shrine.”

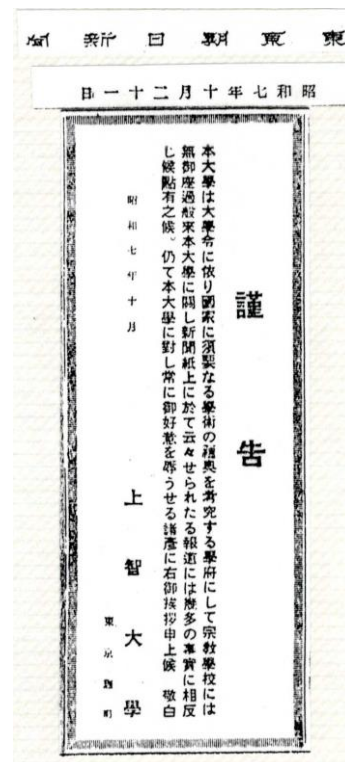


Newspaper clippings on the Yasukuni incident

(from *Jōchi Daigakushi shiryōshū*, vol. 3)

Two weeks later, on 14 October, the newspaper *Yomiuri shinbun* carried an article with a headline indicating that the Army was determined to withdraw the training officer from Sophia because the university was “acting against the spirit of military education.” Articles of a similar bent in other papers followed.

In the face of these articles, on 21 October, the university placed an announcement in the *Tokyo Asahi shinbun* in which it declared that Sophia was not a “religious school” and that the recent media coverage included various erroneous reports. On 5 December it sent a similar notice to students’ parents. But, on 7 December, having failed to secure the Ministry of Education’s agreement to withdraw the officer, the Army adopted a different strategy and transferred Colonel Kitahara to Aomori as part of a rotation of personnel.



Announcement placed by the university in *Tokyo Asahi shinbun* on 21 October 1932

4. Surmounting the Crisis

Following Colonel Kitahara’s transfer to Aomori, there was no indication from the Army of when a replacement might be appointed. This situation had several negative repercussions. On 10 February 1932 the *Tokyo Asahi shinbun* carried an article with the headline “Unrest at Sophia University over the military

education problem; impact on graduates' employment prospects." For a university in this period not to have a military training officer was tantamount to being labeled "a university lacking in patriotism," and it also meant that graduates would lose the prerogatives in regard to conscription that came from completing the on-campus military training program. In May 1932 about 315 students had been enrolled at Sophia; by May 1933 the number had dropped to 264, and by the end of the year it had declined further to about 220. Reports were widespread that Sophia students could not find employment upon graduation. At long last, however, the university received word that a new officer would be stationed at Sophia, and on 15 December 1933, Colonel Koide Haruo began his appointment at the campus. With his arrival and resumption of the military training program, the controversy gradually quieted down.

In the course of the incident, many communications concerning it were exchanged between the Army and the Ministry of Education and between the Ministry of Education and representatives of the Catholic church and Sophia. The Sophia University Archives holds extensive records of these communications. For the university the incident was an extremely grave matter, and it was the source of much bad publicity. Recovery took some time, but gradually enrollments increased again, and Sophia went on to consolidate its position as one of only a limited number of prewar private schools with full university status.