

Kanno Sugako's Daring Revolution

How a writer and socialist revolutionary ended up undertaking a daring plot to take out the Meiji Emperor — and the price she paid for it.

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Sugamo Prison, Tokyo, 1911. Twelve criminals were sentenced to death by hanging for plotting to assassinate the Meiji emperor. Eleven had already been executed; the last mounted the gallows with a defiant smile on her face. Her name was Kanno Sugako (菅野 清子), a writer, journalist, socialist-turned-anarchist, purported to be the ringleader behind the assassination plot. She was the only woman out of twenty-six put on trial. According to one witness, her last words were, “I die for the cause, *banzai!*”

Kanno Sugako is known as the first female political prisoner in modern Japan to be tried and executed. She initially gravitated towards socialism, writing for newspapers, reform groups, and Christian organizations; but a two-month stint in prison converted her to anarchism. Her numerous lovers and promiscuity often set her at odds with society, but she remained unapologetic about her relationships. Kanno is often overshadowed by her male comrades, but she stands on her own as an important and diverse figure in the annals of modern Japanese history.

Kanno's Early Life

Born in Osaka in 1881, poverty and instability ruled much of Kanno's early years. She was the third out of five children, and her miner father struggled to find steady work following the collapse of his mining business. While distant from her father, Kanno was close to her mother. Unfortunately, her mother died in the final year of Kanno's compulsory elementary education. Her father's new wife was every bit the archetypal hateful stepmother, and life for Kanno grew worse.

At fifteen years of age, Kanno was sexually assaulted by a miner who worked for her father. According to one of Kanno's discarded lovers, Kanno's stepmother orchestrated the sexual assault to further drive a wedge between father and daughter. Scorned and blamed by society, Kanno found some solace in an essay by Sakai Toshihiko (堺 徳彦), who encouraged sexual assault victims not to let shame and guilt wear them down. Her interest in socialism was piqued, and she hungrily read more of Sakai's work.

Escape from her toxic family situation came in the form of a promising marriage to a Tokyo merchant. She married in 1898 and moved to Tokyo, but it became clear she had no interest in her new husband or his business. Souring marital relations and her father's poor health prompted her return to Osaka in 1902; she apparently got divorced that year.

Writing, Socialism, and Women's Issues

Heartened by the success of writer and feminist Yosano Akiko, Kanno grew determined to break into the writing world. She didn't let her lack of secondary education hobble her, and her persistence caught the attention of Tokugawa-style novelist Udagawa Bunkai (宇田川 文啓). With his economic and writing assistance — supposedly garnered in exchange for sexual favors — in 1903 Kanno secured employment with newspaper *Osaka Choho* (大阪朝報; *Osaka Morning Report*) as a journalist and fiction writer.

Kanno's first articles heavily criticized prostitutes and *geisha*, calling them morally corrupt individuals and “ugly women.” She demanded the cancellation of a geisha performance at the 5th National Industrial Exhibition, saying such a wanton display would tarnish Japan's image.

In her fiction, Kanno explored the myriad oppressions women faced in a modernizing society. In her story “Omokage” (奥影), her protagonist, self-proclaimed tomboy Akiko, resents her parents for pressuring her to adopt societal constructions of femininity. She criticizes them for extolling feminine virtues, like chastity, when society only cares about women’s physical appearances.

Kanno’s interest in women’s issues grew after reporting on an Osaka Reform Society meeting discussing the abolition of the red-light district. The socialists impressed Kanno and opened her eyes to the deeper issues underlying the brothel system. Her writings reflect this change, as she turned her criticisms towards the government for sanctioning prostitution and prolonging the suffering of “fallen women.” She joined the Christian organization *Fujin Kyofukai* led by Yajima Kajiko and became quickly engrossed in the Reform Society’s anti-prostitution campaign.

Anti-war Sentiments and the *Heiminsha*

Like other socialists, Kanno opposed the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905). She published her first novel *Breaking Off* (断; *Zekkou*) in 1903 and wrote a number of poems expressing her antiwar stance. Kanno also subscribed to the antiwar publication *Common People’s Newspaper* (国民新聞; *Heimin Shinbun*), edited by Sakai and Kotoku Shusui (小田幸次).

While in Tokyo as a representative for the Osaka Reform Society, Kanno finally got the chance to meet Sakai, the man whose denunciation of rapists had struck a chord with Kanno years ago. She was enamored by the male socialists making up the *Heiminsha* (国民新聞; *Common People’s Association*), who professed to fight against gender oppression and elevate women’s voices. However, it would take her stint as a newspaper editor for her to realize how little women figured in a male-dominated school of thought.

Editing *Muro Shinpo*

As Kanno submerged herself in socialism and women’s issues, her relationship with Udagawa grew strained, and the two eventually parted ways. With her father’s death in 1905, Kanno took care of her younger sister Hide, sick with tuberculosis. Without Udagawa’s assistance, writing alone wasn’t enough to comfortably support Kanno and manage Hide’s illness, so she took up jobs teaching Japanese to foreign teachers to supplement her income.

Kanno had left an indelible impression upon the *Heiminsha*, notably Sakai. Per Sakai’s recommendation, Shingon priest and journalist Mori Saian (森西庵) asked Kanno to take over publication of his socialist paper *Muro Shinpo* (村新報) in the event the authorities imprisoned him. She was understandably reluctant; for the first time in her life, she was economically stable, able to live comfortably and manage her sister’s illness. Mori eventually managed to persuade Kanno to move to Wakayama Prefecture in 1906. She developed a friendship with fellow editor Arahata Kanson (荒田寛). The two would later enter a common-law marriage.

Drifting Away, Loss, and Illness

Managing the newspaper sobered Kanno to the real expectations of the male socialists in her acquaintance. The men in Kanno’s circle professed their belief in gender equality by day and

prowled the red-light district at night. Men with loose sexual morals got a pass; Kanno and other sexually independent women faced ridicule and labeled as immoral. The double standards grated on Kanno's nerves.

Upon Mori's return, Kanno continued to write for the home section of *Muro Shimpō*, but remained bitter about the lack of female representation in socialism. She called for women to become self-aware and to read more. Kanno's scorn is clear in her attack on society's double standard on chastity in a 1906 article:

“Among the many annoying things in the world, I think men are the most annoying. When I hear them carrying on interminably about female chastity, I burst out laughing.... I greet with utmost cynicism and unbridled hatred the debauched male of today who rattles on about good wives and wise mothers. Where do all of these depraved men get the right to emphasize chastity? Before they begin stressing women's chastity, they ought to perfect their own male chastity, and concentrate on becoming wise fathers and good husbands!”

Kanno eventually left Wakayama Prefecture and found work writing for the *Mainichi Dempo* (*Daily Telegraph*). Her sister's tuberculosis weighed heavily on Kanno, contributing in some ways to her bitterness in the shortcomings of socialism. What good was charity if it couldn't ease her sister's suffering? Kanno and Arahata lacked the funds to care for her sister, and in 1907 Hide passed away. Hide's death hit Kanno hard, and to make matters worse, Kanno herself contracted tuberculosis. Her illness and cynicism put her at odds with Arahata, and the two eventually separated.

The Red Flag Incident and Kanno's Radicalization

On June 22, 1908, a crowd of supporters and friends gathered to welcome the release of revered anarchist Koken Yamaguchi (山岡 幸子) from prison. Two factions of socialist thought came together to celebrate: those who wanted to act in accordance with the law, and those who favored “direct action.” Many were waving red flags with socialist and anarchist slogans. In what is now known as the Red Flag Incident (赤旗事件; *Akahata Jiken*), fights broke out when the police tried to disperse the crowd, arresting fourteen socialists.

Kanno attended the rally despite her illness but hadn't been arrested in the roundup. Her friends Sakai and Arahata weren't so lucky. She witnessed enough police brutality at the rally to grow concerned about her friends' well-being. When Kanno went to the police station, she was promptly placed under arrest.

Sick and angry over the treatment of socialists, the two months Kanno spent in prison awaiting trial quickly radicalized her. She no longer believed pacifism could bring about the change necessary to sway the government. Her worsening tuberculosis also fed into the bitterness she felt. By the time her trial began, Kanno had converted to the “direct action” camp.

Declarations During the Trial

Reporters were fascinated by Kanno's conduct during the trial, calling her eloquent and cunning. She would enter the courtroom with medicine in one hand, her frail image belying her

candid remarks. While the male defendants demurred their outright involvement in anarchism, Kanno had no such reservations:

“To the [judge’s] question to each [of the defendants], “Is your objective anarchism?” most men replied, “The ultimate objective of socialism is anarchism, but we have not publicly mentioned it yet.” But Kanno Sugako said, ‘I am an anarchist rather than a socialist. I feel more strongly so as my thoughts have progressed nowadays.’ “

Kanno criticized the police brutality at the rally and their unlawful conduct. Despite her obvious ideological alliances, Kanno was found not guilty and released on August 29, 1908.

Kanno knew her freedom came with a price. The police now constantly dogged her steps, and tuberculosis and the subsequent loss of writing work slowed her down. She took up domestic work to make ends meet. Much to the chagrin of her friends, who still believed she was in a relationship with imprisoned Arahata, Kanno began a romantic relationship with Kotoku, who divorced his second wife and moved in with Kanno.

Socialists couldn’t pen anything without garnering unwanted government attention and fines,. But that still didn’t stop Kotoku and Kanno from publishing their own journal *Jiyuu Shisou* (自由思想; *Free Thought*) in 1909. Her inability to pay these fines eventually landed Kanno in prison, but not before she became involved in a plot that would shock the nation.

The High Treason Incident

The censorship of *Jiyuu Shisou* snapped something inside Kanno. If she couldn’t write, what was she to do? Around this time she met disgruntled factory worker Miyashita Takichi. He believed that the Emperor’s divinity was merely a myth used to subjugate the masses. Kanno eagerly latched on to this theory. Together with Kotoku and three others, Kanno hatched a plan to assassinate the Emperor.

Planning was slow, however, and interrupted by Kanno’s illness. Kotoku grew disenchanted and withdrew from the group, pleading Kanno to do the same. The group met off and on in the *Heiminsha* headquarters in the Setagaya district, and sometimes in Kanno and Kotoku’s home. In 1910, Miyashita completed a bomb and gave it to a friend for safekeeping, who betrayed the group to the police.

While the Great Treason Incident (大逆無道; *Taigyaku Jiken*) is also called the Kotoku Incident (小逆無道, *Kotoku Jiken*), the prosecution painted Kanno as the leading instigator of the assassination plot, enamored and righteous with the idea of bringing down a false figurehead of divinity and overthrowing a corrupt government. As one defense lawyer put it, “She was not a likable woman.” Kotoku surely would have made peace with the authorities had Kanno not seduced him.

Kanno remained as blunt as ever on the stand, coolly admitting to her involvement in the plot. She sought to emulate Sofia Perovskaya, the ringleader of the group responsible for czar Alexander II’s assassination. Although cognizant of the Emperor’s status as a symbolic figurehead and not wholly complicit in the government’s policies, Kanno knew eliminating him would cripple the country.

“Although I feel sorry for him personally, he is, as the emperor, the chief person responsible for the exploitation of the people economically. Politically he is at the

root of all the crimes being committed, and intellectually he is the fundamental cause of superstitious beliefs. A person in such a position, I concluded, must be killed.”

Of the twenty-six people on trial, twenty-four were given death sentences, and two received life sentences. Only a reprieve from the Emperor himself commuted twelve of those sentences. Kanno was one of the ones still slated to die.

Kanno’s Last Days

Writing became her solace as she awaited her execution. Kanno wrote her memoirs “without any effort of self-justification” in mind, laying out all her thoughts and grievances. She grappled with death and the afterlife, having long ago distanced herself from secular views in favor of materialism. She fretted over her neglect of her sister’s grave and wrote instructions to ensure the grave would remain properly cared for.

Kanno also expressed her anguish over the verdict. While she had no qualms about dying for her own beliefs, she condemned the prosecutor for sentencing innocent people. Many of those on trial were only associates of the main perpetrators; it was clear to Kanno the police used the plot to round up and punish any dissident thinkers.

Kanno swung from the gallows on January 25, 1911, at twenty-nine years of age. Newspapers gleefully recounted her countenance and hanging; one report claims it took her twelve minutes to die. Kanno was buried next to her sister Hide in the Tokyo Buddhist temple Shoshunji.

Kanno was only one of many in the early Meiji period who questioned society’s treatment of women and sought to change it. When one ideology had failed her, she moved on to another. Kanno didn’t want the world to see her as a victim, forever at the whims of cultural and patriarchal norms. We can confidently say she succeeded in that regard.

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