

Shusui, Kotoko, 1871–1911

Anonymous

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Kotoku Shusui

Born 4 November or 23 September 1871 — Japan, died 24 January 1911 — Japan

Kotoku Shusui was a socialist and anarchist who played a leading role in introducing anarchism to Japan in the early 20th century, particularly by translating the works of contemporary European and Russian anarchists, such as Peter Kropotkin, into Japanese. He was a radical journalist and is often considered an anarchist martyr, as he was executed for treason by the Japanese government.

Socialist years and imprisonment

Kotoku moved from his birthplace, the town of Nakamura in the Kochi prefecture, to Tokyo in his mid-teens and became a journalist there in 1893. From 1898 onwards he was a columnist for the Every Morning News, one of the more radical daily papers of the time; however, he resigned that position when the paper took up a pro-war stance during the Russo-Japanese War. In 1903 he co-founded the Common People's Newspaper with another Every Morning News journalist, Sakai Toshihiko. This paper's outspoken anti-war stance and disregard of the state's press laws landed its editors in trouble with the government on numerous occasions, and Kotoku himself served a five month jail sentence in 1905 from February to July.

America and the anarchist influence

In 1901, when Kotoku had attempted to found the Japanese Social Democratic Party with Sakai, he was not an anarchist, but a social democrat — indeed, Sakai and Kotoku were the first to translate The Communist Manifesto into Japanese, which appeared in an issue of the Common People's Newspaper and which got them heavily fined. His political thoughts first began to turn to a more libertarian philosophy when he read Kropotkin's Fields, Factories and Workshops in prison. In his own words, he “had gone [to jail] as a Marxian Socialist and returned as a radical Anarchist.”

In November 1905 Kotoku travelled to the United States in order to freely criticise the Emperor, whom he now saw as the linchpin of capitalism in Japan. During his time in the US, Kotoku was further exposed to the philosophies of anarchist communism and European syndicalism. He had taken Kropotkin's Memoirs of a Revolutionist as reading material for the Pacific voyage; after he arrived in California, he began to correspond with the Russian anarchist and by 1909 had translated The Conquest of Bread from English to Japanese. One thousand copies of his translation were published in Japan in March of that year and distributed to students and workers.

Return to Japan

On Kotoku's return to Japan, in June 1906, a public meeting was held to welcome him. At this meeting, on June 28, he spoke on “The Tide of the World Revolutionary Movement”, which he said was flowing against parliamentary politics (ie. Marxist party politics) and in favour of the general strike as “the means for the future revolution.” This was an anarcho-syndicalist view, and one which, because anarcho-syndicalism was growing in the US at the time, with the founding of the Industrial Workers of the World, showed the American influence clearly.

He followed this speech with a number of articles, the most well-known of which was “The Change in My Thought (On Universal Suffrage)”. In these articles, Kotoku was now advocating direct action rather than political aims such as universal suffrage, which was a shock to many of his comrades and brought the schism between anarchist communists and social democrats to the Japanese working class movement. This split was made clear when the relaunched Common People’s Newspaper folded in April 1907 and was replaced two months later by two journals: the social democrat Social News and the Osaka Common People’s Newspaper, which argued from an anarchist position, in favour of direct action.

Although most anarchists preferred peaceful means, such as the dissemination of propaganda, many anarchists in this period turned to terrorism as means of achieving revolution and anarchist communism, or at least hitting out against the state and authority. Repression of publications and organisations, such as the Socialist Party of Japan, and “public peace police law”, which effectively prevented trade union organisation and strikes, were both factors in this emerging trend in Japan.

However, the only incident was when four anarchists were arrested for possessing bomb making equipment. Although no attacks had been carried out, in December 1910 twenty-six anarchists were convicted of plotting to assassinate the Emperor. Kotoku was hanged along with twelve others on 24th January, 1911, even though only four of the hundreds arrested were found to be involved in a planned attempt on the Emperor’s life, and Kotoku wasn’t one of them.

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A short biography of journalist Kotoku Shusui, who helped introduce anarchism to Japan and was executed for treason.

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