

Kōtoku Shūsui

Founder of Modern Anarchism in Japan

CIRA-Nippon

January 1975

Kōtoku Shūsui, whose name has become a kind of legend since the war (although in the country town where he was born, people still look embarrassed if you mention his name), was Japan's first real anarchist and the Japanese movement's first revolutionary martyr. At the time when Japan was launching its imperialistic programme, Kōtoku opposed nationalism and militarism despite the popular fervour aroused by the way against Russia in 1904. In 1906 he predicted an eventual war with the US.

He was born in a small country town in southern Japan, one with strong traditionalistic tendencies, in 1871. At the age of ten (!) he began publishing his first political newspaper; at 15 he ran away to Tokyo, but was soon expelled under the new Peace Preservation Law. From the beginning, Kōtoku was a warrior in the samurai tradition. Thus he opposed Christianity at a time when the dominant trend in the Japanese movement was Christian Socialism (his last work was titled 'Rubbing Out Christ'), and never really trusted parliamentary socialism.

In 1893 he got a job translating cables from Europe, so he became familiar with developments overseas. Soon after, his family provided him with a submissive Japanese wife from his home district. Within two months he sent her back and divorced her, saying that she did not match his ideal of a wife.

By 1897 Kōtoku had announced his intention to "investigate socialism". Since he had previously placed responsibility for checking Japan's moral decline' in the hands of a few upright individuals, it was a big step to take. In 1898 he began working for a radical scandal-sheet named *Yorozu Chōhō*; as a result of his editorials it became the most popular paper in Japan. At the same time, following the railway workers' strike in 1897, modern Japan's first big labour dispute, Kōtoku saw for the first time the need for union organization and helped form the *Rōdō Kumiai Kisei-kai* (Association of Labour Unions), Japan's first body aimed at promoting unionism. Shortly after this, he became a member of the Society for the Study of Socialism along with many future socialist leaders. It was a kind of Fabian Society. Meanwhile, Kōtoku had got married again, this time to an intellectual; it was another disaster.

As a member of the Society Kōtoku grew closer to socialism, though he as yet placed little importance upon the labour movement. Finally, in April 1901 he wrote a famous article under the heading "I am a Socialist and a Member of the Socialist Party". Although there was no such party at the time, a Social-Democratic Party was formed just one month later, only to be banned within

hours. Many large newspapers had already printed the party's manifesto however, which, based upon that of the German SDP, had called for Socialism, Pacifism and Democracy, to be achieved within the limits of the law. Pacifism was the offending element: Japan had just defeated China and was preparing a war with Russia. The Social-Democratic, Party was the only one to oppose these trends, and was thus regarded as unpatriotic.

Kōtoku's writings of this time included 'Imperialism: The Spectre of the 20th Century', in which he accused the Japanese government of shifting the people's attention from their economic problems onto foreign adventures. Shortly after, he published 'The Quintessence of Socialism', the leading Japanese treatise on socialism before World War 1. However, he had not yet read Marx, and retained a naive loyalist belief that socialism could be established under the benevolent gaze of the Emperor.

In February 1904 the Japanese Navy launched a surprise attack on Russia. Up to this time, the 'Yorozu Chōhō' had given Kōtoku and its other socialist writers a mouthpiece for their pacifist views. When circulation began to drop however, the paper changed its line to one of support for Japanese policy, Kōtoku and the others immediately resigned. The result was the 'Heimin Shimbun' (Common People's Paper), which soon became the leading radical paper in Tokyo, until its anti-war position persuaded the government to crack down on the news stands which sold it. In summer 1904, it carried a "letter to Russian Socialists" calling for international socialists to fight a united struggle against militarism and patriotism; 'Iskra' responded with a similar article. Subsequent issues printed articles calling on teachers to strike and denouncing religion. Although the line was predominantly parliamentary and direct action was rejected, the government grew more and more concerned. Finally, when the paper announced that its anniversary issue would carry a translation of the 'Communist Manifesto', the government acted. The issue was banned, the Society for the Study of Socialism closed, and Kōtoku and the others arrested. The last issue of 'Heimin Shimbun' appeared in January 1905, and soon after Kōtoku began a five-month prison spell.

In prison he translated works by Engels, and then came across Kropotkin's 'Fields, Factories and Workshops', his first encounter with anarchism. Under this influence he began to criticise the Emperor for the first time. When he left prison, he decided to travel to America to improve his failing health. In San Francisco he was welcomed by the local branch of the 'Heiminsha', the group which had put out 'Heimin Shimbun', and made contacts with many local anarchists, many of whom were émigré Russian revolutionaries. Later he became a member of the American Socialist Party, and addressed meetings of the IWW. This was his first introduction to the theory of direct action.

His experiences in California convinced Kōtoku that the new trend of world revolution was anarchism; he thus began to advocate direct action and the General Strike. The primitive socialism which briefly followed the great earthquake of April 1906 strengthened his belief; reaction against the radicalism of the Wobblies persuaded him that "there is no country... that pretends to be as liberal, but is in fact as illiberal, as America".

That summer Japanese socialists asked Kōtoku to return to help form a new party, the Japan Socialist Party. Before he left he organized the Japanese radicals of California into the Social Revolutionary Party of Oakland in June. When he got back he announced that his ideas had changed; in the future parliamentary politics were irrelevant to the social revolution - only strikes, leading up to the General Strike would have the necessary effect. Despite the immediate split which this caused in the Japan Socialist Party, in January 1907 the new (daily) 'Heimin Shimbun'

began to appear. At the party convention in February, the two sides fought it out; while not strong enough to carry the whole party, Kōtoku's influence was sufficient to prevent inclusion of the phrase "within the limits of the law" in the party platform. A few days later the party was banned, and the 'Heimin Shimbun' voluntarily dissolved in April. Kōtoku left for the country to translate Arnold Roller's 'The Social General Strike', and Kropotkin's 'The Conquest of Bread'.

In November 1907, on the Emperor's birthday, an 'Open Letter to the Emperor of Japan from Anarchist Terrorists' appeared on the door of the Japanese Consulate in San Francisco. The result was the chain of events which led to Kōtoku's execution three years later. While Kōtoku denied responsibility, he was probably influential at the very least. From this point on, the Japanese government decided to have his head. He was placed under constant surveillance and his family was harassed by the police.

In the 'Red Flag Incident' of June 1908 and the repression which followed, almost all the known socialist leaders were arrested. Kōtoku, who had been living in the south for his health, was almost alone and seems to have begun talking about bombs and things. While there is no evidence of a plan on his part, the people he talked to took him seriously and began gathering materials and testing explosives in the mountains in preparation for an attack on the Emperor's life. Two things suggest that Kōtoku was actively involved: one, he was suffering from advanced TB and had only a few years to live anyway; two, the continuing police repression made it impossible to organize constructive revolutionary activities. He seems to have approved the plan, even if he took no active part in the preparations.

The planning continued through 1909 and the date was set for August 1910. In May 1910, in a routine investigation, the police discovered explosive chemicals at the home of one of the conspirators. Within a few days all were arrested, Kōtoku himself being the last, although the evidence suggests that he was more interested in publishing at that stage. The trial, which began in December, was a mystery. It was held in camera and the records have never been made public. Some compared it to the Chicago Anarchists' trial in 1886. Despite the seriousness and complexity of the case, the trial lasted less than three weeks. When Kōtoku arrived at the courtroom, in a dramatic scene, the socialists in the room for the trial judgment unfurled the red flags for him to see.

On January 18, 1911, Kōtoku and 23 others were found guilty of all the charges against them, most of which were "crimes against the throne", and sentenced to death. Before the court was cleared by guards, it rang with shouts of "Long Live Anarchists!" and "Long Live Anarchy!" While twelve of the convicted later had their charges commuted to life imprisonment, those for Kōtoku and the others stuck, and he was hung in the morning of January 24, 1911 after smoking a final cigarette.

Notehelfer's 'Kōtoku Shusui' is a detailed, academic study which, in its attempts to be objective, succeeds in totally destroying the atmosphere which surrounded the early 20th century Japanese radical movement. Since it is the only full-length study of a Japanese anarchist in English, it is a very important source. Yet comrades reading it will come away with the feeling that they have learned a lot about Kōtoku's personal hang-ups but very little about the movement itself. Partly this is because most of Kōtoku's activities predated the radical phase of the movement. Much of the book is thus spent trying to relate him to other Meiji intellectuals rather than to other trends in the revolutionary movement. Hence developments in his radicalisation process are dotted here and there amongst a stream of socio-psychological theorising and long quotations. It would be nice if someone from the movement could start from the other end and write a history of the

movement which puts Kōtoku in his proper place. At the moment, however, we have to rely on the offerings of academics.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



CIRA-Nippon
Kōtoku Shūsui
Founder of Modern Anarchism in Japan
January 1975

<https://libcom.org/library/k%C3%B5toku-sh%C3%BCsui-founder-modern-anarchism-japan>

[theanarchistlibrary.org](https://libcom.org/library/k%C3%B5toku-sh%C3%BCsui-founder-modern-anarchism-japan)