

Ōsugi Sakae (1885–1923)

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Ōsugi Sakae, Japanese anarchist intellectual leader, was a prolific writer and translator of the works of anarchists including Kropotkin, Bakunin, and Goldman. Born in Shikoku, Ōsugi attended Nagoya Cadet School until his expulsion for disorderly conduct in 1901. Thereafter he moved to Tokyo to attend middle school, where he buried himself in his studies and embarked on a spiritual journey, ultimately turning to anarchism after his mother's death. Anarchist Kōtoku Shūsui discovered Ōsugi and recruited him as a contributor for Kōtoku's paper, the *Heimin shimbun*. Ōsugi eventually became central to the Japanese anarchist movement as an ardent, vocal activist.

The years 1906 to 1910 were formative; Ōsugi spent much of this time imprisoned for press law violations and participation in demonstrations. Ōsugi served two years after the 1908 Red Flag Incident, in which he was arrested for arguing with police over the display of red flags inscribed with anarchist slogans. In prison he learned several European languages and became well-read in sciences and political thought. In addition, Ōsugi avoided implication in the 1910 High Treason Incident when a foiled plot to assassinate Emperor Meiji served as pretext for the execution of 12 anarchists, including Kōtoku and his ex-wife Kanno Suga. After this tragic event, Ōsugi foreswore the use of violent tactics in his attacks on Japan's sociopolitical system. Through his writing, Ōsugi assumed a leading role in the anarchist movement. Police efforts to silence him were futile; when they shut down one of a series of periodicals, Ōsugi merely published another, keeping the movement in the forefront of public awareness.

Ōsugi's translations of western anarchist literature shaped not only the anarchist movement in Japan, but also his personal life. Enamored with egoism and free love embedded in the literature he translated, the married Ōsugi carried on an affair with anarchist Kamichika Ichiko. In 1916, he also moved in with feminist anarchist writer Itō Noe. While Itō shared Ōsugi's views on free love, the other two women did not – his wife divorced him and Kamichika attempted to kill him.

Through correspondence and his continued translation work, Ōsugi kept the Japanese anarchist movement in close contact with larger world events. Invited to participate in the 1923 IWA meeting in Berlin, he smuggled himself out of Japan in order to attend. In transit, however, he attended a May Day rally in France where authorities arrested and subsequently deported him. Two months later, Ōsugi's career came to a tragic end. Using the ensuing turmoil of the 1923 Tokyo earthquake as justification, police arrested several political activists, including Ōsugi and Itō. Likely under orders from government superiors, police strangled Ōsugi and Itō in their cells.

References and Suggested Readings

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