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Life of anarchist-feminist revisited 100 years after her murder

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Sept. 16 will mark 100 years since the brutal killing of Noe Ito, a Japanese anarchist, author and social critic of the Meiji and Taisho eras, who was targeted and killed in the massacres that followed the Great Kanto Earthquake.

Although opinions vary in her hometown of Fukuoka about her reputation and liberal approach to matters of sex and politics, in recent years people have become more aware of her due to newly published works as well as a biographical dramatization on public broadcaster NHK that detailed a life that was never bound by moralistic norms.

A library in the southwestern city of Fukuoka has opened an exhibition about Ito, who raised her voice for oppressed women of the time throughout her often turbulent life. A group of volunteers last year launched a project to educate people about her, and a festival to celebrate her life is scheduled for Sept. 15-16.

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Ito was born in Imajuku, Fukuoka Prefecture, which is now in the city of Fukuoka's Nishi Ward, before later going to Tokyo to pursue her studies. She married a man her family had picked out for her in her hometown, but ran off a little over a week later to live with Jun Tsuji, her former English teacher who she met at the Ueno Girls High School in Tokyo.

Around the time she married Tsuji, Ito joined the literary monthly magazine "Bluestocking," founded by the pioneering feminist Raicho Hiratsuka, and advocated women's rights through her work. She often wrote autobiographical pieces and penned social critiques, drawing on her personal experiences of the "free love" she desired.

Appointed in 1915 as the second editor-in-chief of Bluestocking at age 20, Ito later worked with anarchist leader Sakae Osugi. After becoming romantically involved with Osugi, at 21, she left Tsuji and their two children to be with him.

Osugi, who was already married, was also simultaneously romantically involved with Ichiko Kamichika, another feminist, attracting public condemnation for his relationships with the three women. Kamichika, in a fit of jealous rage after learning that Ito and Osugi had spent a night together, stabbed Osugi in the throat several times.

Osugi's wife left him after the incident, but Ito and Osugi would remain bonded and go on to have five children while living together until their deaths, despite never being legally married.

The pair became a target of the state and other critics for their unorthodox views and behavior and efforts to undermine the existing political system. Ito wrote articles in "Rodo Undo" (Labor Movement), a journal she published with Osugi, and participated in socialist women's organizations.

On Sept. 16, 1923, amid the chaos of martial law following the Great Kanto Earthquake, Ito, Osugi and his 6-year-old nephew Munekazu, who was born in the United States, were murdered by a squad of military police known as the Kempeitai,

led by Lt. Masahiko Amakasu. At the time of her death, Ito was aged 28 and had given birth to seven children.

A military court ruled that the Kempeitai did not sanction the killings and that Amakasu and others had gone rogue and strangled the three to death before tossing their bodies into an abandoned well. Bruises on their bodies, especially Ito and Osugi's, indicated that they had been severely beaten before being strangled.

Immediately after the quake, there were rumors that socialists, Koreans and others were committing acts of insubordination. Massacres by the military, police and vigilantes, who took advantage of the chaos, were widespread.

Following public backlash, Amakasu was court-martialed and sentenced to 10 years in prison but was released on parole in 1926. Afterward, he traveled to northeastern China and is said to have been involved in the founding of Manchuria under the Imperial Japanese Army. He committed suicide after Japan surrendered in World War II.

Yuko Kamiya, a documentarian at the Fukuoka City Public Library, said of Ito, "There was a strong image of her being uninhibited in love, and people were split about how they viewed her after her death."

Recently, however, many books, such as the biographical novel "Kaze yo Arashi yo" written by Yuka Murayama, have been published, attracting empathy and interest in Ito's ideas on feminism. An NHK drama based on Murayama's novel was broadcast in 2022.

On the occasion of the centennial of her death, Fukuoka is holding a special exhibition, "Kazeyo: Noe Ito from the Perspective of Letters and Works," through Oct. 15. "We hope that people will be interested in Noe's thinking and the environment that she was born into and raised," Kamiya said.

To enlighten and spread Ito's ideas of women's empowerment in modern Japan, 12 volunteer men and women in their 20s to 90s in Fukuoka launched the "Noe Ito Centennial Project"

last year. Once a month, they host a book club, focusing on the "Noe Ito Collection."

The festival scheduled for this weekend will include lectures by researchers and fieldwork at Ito's birthplace and other places of interest associated with her.

In the World Economic Forum's latest Gender Gap Index, Japan ranks 125th out of 146 countries.

Project member Nobuyuki Ito, 69, a resident of Itoshima, Fukuoka Prefecture, noted that "the wall that Noe ran into," such as the lack of progress in discussions on separate surnames for married couples in Japan, remains intact.

He said Ito's approach, in which she "saw personal problems as social problems, and unflinchingly tried to change society by speaking out to say 'something is wrong' can be applied to today's society, which also faces the same difficulties."

A symposium commemorating the 100th anniversary of the death of Ito and Osugi and others, called "Let's Walk the Path of the Free Self," will also be held in Tokyo on Sept. 24.

"Their ideas and actions, such as about women's liberation, anti-discrimination, peace and war, are once again being questioned today," said the symposium organizer.