

# ⊠⊠⊠⊠ (Taigyaku Jiken): An Introduction to the Anarchists of Japan

An introduction to the lives of some of the leading figures in early Japanese anarchism, framed around the tragic incident that saw their execution in 1911

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In 1911, 12 leftists, both anarchists and socialists, were arrested and executed in an event that would come to be known as 大逆無道 (Taigyaku Jiken), or the High Treason Incident. Their crime? Conspiring (allegedly) to assassinate the Japanese emperor Meiji, the infamous ruler who oversaw Japan's transition from a feudal, isolationist kingdom into an imperialistic, industrialised world power.

Beginning with the discovery of potential bomb making materials in the apartment of a factory worker<sup>1</sup> in the Nagano Prefecture, the incident resulted in the mass arrest of 26 socialists who were then trailed for high treason charges in secret. The event was indicative of the growing authoritarianism in Japan and foreshadowed the government that the world would come to see during the Second World War. Its significance is described succinctly in *Japan at War*:

The 1910s have been called the “winter years” for Japanese socialists, a period when government harassment and public indifference drove Marxists into silence. ... There is little question about the importance in this chain of the High Treason Incident, when conservatives and progressives alike expressed outrage over the activists' plot and writers of all stripes felt constrained to keep silent about censorship and secret trials.

As we can often observe, scapegoating and fear mongering by those in power can act as a rallying cry, uniting the nation against a common enemy. For the Meiji government, this enemy was socialism in all its forms and they would do anything to drive it out; including, as has been unearthed by recent writers, the fabrication of an assassination plot<sup>2</sup> as part of a wider government strategy to quell the Japanese socialist and anarchist movements.

In this piece, I will introduce the thought of Japanese anarchism and anti-imperialism through three of those executed in the High Treason Incident: Kōtoku Shusui, a leading socialist and anarchist figure; Uchiyama Gudō, an anarcho-communist and Sōtō Zen priest; and Kanno Sugako, an anarcha-feminist journalist.

Whilst anarchism in Japan is certainly not limited to these figures, their lives and writings will introduce you to both anarchism in the Japanese context and to the political climate of the period. For more reading, I would recommend 'Anarchism in Japan'<sup>3</sup> by Chushichi Tsuzuki.

## Kōtoku Shusui (高島 武平)

Born on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1871 in Kakamura and into rather humble origins, Kōtoku started his working life as a houseboy for the liberal politician Hayashi Yūzō.<sup>4</sup> Obtaining an education and becoming a newspaper writer in 1893, Kōtoku's interest in politics grew. In 1899, he switched tracks, leaving the newspaper *Yorozu Chūhō*<sup>5</sup> because of its support for the Russo-Japanese war, a paper where he once railed against the Japanese occupation of Manchuria; and later, in 1901, he published his first book: *Imperialism, Monster of the Twentieth Century*, a critique of imperialism that predates Hobsbawm and Lenin.

<sup>1</sup> <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=vl7Auu2UVEsC&pg=PA117&lpg=PA117&dq=the+high+treason+incident+encyclopedia&so>

<sup>2</sup> <https://libcom.org/files/Monster%20of%20the%20Twentieth%20Century,%20Kotoku%20Shusui%20and%20Japan%E2%80%99s%20F%20Imperialist%20Movement%20-%20Robert%20Thomas%20Tierney.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://sci-hub.tw/10.1111/j.1477-7053.1970.tb00513.x>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Kotoku-Shusui>

<sup>5</sup> <https://hermes-ir.lib.hit-u.ac.jp/rs/bitstream/10086/8492/1/HJsoc0030100300.pdf>

His journey into anarchism, however, would turn out to be a marathon, not a sprint, for his first major political endeavour would be helping to organise the Social Democratic Party in 1901. This party was immediately banned by the government, a decision that led Kōtoku (alongside his resignation from *Yorozu Chūhō*) to join forces with the socialist Sakai Toshihiko (坂井 徳彦) and create a newspaper: the *Heimin Shimbun*, or *Commoner's Newspaper*<sup>6</sup> (which we appreciate, for obvious reasons). During this journalistic period of his life, Kōtoku, along with Sakai, became the first to translate and publish The Communist Manifesto into Japanese; an action which got them heavily fined. In 1905, the radicalism of the paper became too much for the Meiji government. *Heimin Shimbun* was banned and Kōtoku imprisoned.

His turn into anarchism, much like many Japanese and also Chinese anarchists at the time, can be attributed largely to the works of Kropotkin. As noted by an article on *Libcom*:

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.'<sup>7</sup>

Choosing self-exile, Kōtoku travelled to America where he was greatly influenced by the various socialist and anarchist groups that organised there. Protesting on the streets with the International Workers of the World (IWW), he came to hold a pessimistic view of American society:

The way the workers are persecuted and oppressed here makes America not the tiniest bit different from Russia or Japan. Just look, look at the scars over my shoulders! That's from the beating the police gave me.' How can liberty exist, how can popular rights exist in a place where the capitalist class exists, where the landlord class exists!<sup>8</sup>

These experiences would come to define Kōtoku's radicalism and oversee his turn towards anarchism. Participating in state politics was now not good enough, and as he wrote in 1906:

I want myself to be idealist, revolutionary, progressive. I do not like lukewarm socialism, syrupy socialism, state socialism.<sup>9</sup>

From his experiences with American anarcho-syndicalists much like those in the IWW, Kōtoku came to see that direct action was more preferable and effective than rallying around a state party. This was a new Kōtoku Shusui. Leaving his social-democrat and Marxist days behind him, he returned to Japan with the intention of spreading radical anarchist thought, an intention reflected by the newly reestablished *Heimin Shimbun*, which folded in 1907 to be replaced by two new papers:<sup>10</sup> *Social News*, for social democrats, and the *Osaka Common People's Newspaper*, which argued for anarchist direct action. The stones were now set for Kōtoku's new political goal, but sadly, so they were also set for his later execution. His life started as a houseboy turned social-democratic, and ended, in the High Treason Incident, as a committed anarchist, anti-imperialist, and socialist who popularised the classic socialist texts in Japan.

<sup>6</sup> <https://libcom.org/history/shusui-kotoko-1871-1911>

<sup>7</sup> <https://libcom.org/history/shusui-kotoko-1871-1911>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2383076?seq=1>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2383076?seq=1>

<sup>10</sup> <https://libcom.org/history/shusui-kotoko-1871-1911>

Before we end our look at Kōtoku's life, however, I would like to draw your attention back to the book he authored in 1901: *Imperialism: Monster of the Twentieth Century*. This work deserves, in light of its significance *and* its lack of representation in Western circles, to be more widely read and understood as a valuable addition to our understanding of imperialism. This significance lies in two main points; firstly, that it predates Lenin's analysis of imperialism by 16 years; and secondly, that it provides a comprehensive perspective of imperialism from a writer in the periphery, and which also accounts for the conditions from which imperialism rose in that periphery.

Unlike Lenin, who viewed imperialism as the inevitable result of capitalism's creation of surplus value and its strong industrialism, Kōtoku placed the blame primarily on social, political, and ideological factors. To take a passage from the book:

Like the spread of plague, imperialism is truly a horrible disease that infects everything that it touches. Indeed, so-called patriotism is the microbe that causes the disease while militarism is the means by which the microbe is transmitted.<sup>11</sup>

Illustrating his point with various historical examples, such as English colonialism, the rise of the German Empire, and the indigenous massacres in the United States, he effectively argues that imperialism functions by manipulating the people's fear of the foreign "bogeyman". The expansion of the military this permits leads to violent theft of land and resources abroad, an act which in itself then grows the people's hatred for the 'other' and then permits more military expansion. Kōtoku makes sure to stress that such expansion will only ever be to the benefit of a country's ruling class. Citing the English massacre at Peterloo, where troops who had recently fought against Napoleon charged at English protesters demanding parliamentary reform, Kōtoku states that:

The blade of the bayonet that cuts off the enemy's head serves just as well to spill the blood of one's fellow countrymen.

To fall for patriotism and nationalism is the same as falling for the ruling class' lies. The fear and distrust the people may hold towards those outside of their community is given a structure, a state and military through which to express that fear and turn it into vile hatred. For Kōtoku, this is the crux on which imperialism lies, a belief which led various Lenin-inspired Marxists to criticise him. But, as noted by the historian Robert Tierney,<sup>12</sup> the development of Japanese imperialism does not easily fit into the definitions invented by Lenin, for it 'preceded the development of a strong capitalist sector or the accumulation of surplus capital'. Lenin's hypothesis was, in essence, reversed, as Japanese industrialists only began to invest in overseas market after, and not before, military conquest and territorial expansion led by the state and a 'vanguard' of 'small and middle merchants'. Later criticisms of Kōtoku appear to adapt Japan to fit Lenin's model, rather than adapt their own thinking to match Japan. To Tierney, this is most likely due to 'the acceptance of Lenin's established authority in doctrinal matters', and not the applicability of his theories in these historical circumstances. For those who are interested in learning more about Japanese imperialism it is a must read.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://libcom.org/files/Monster%20of%20the%20Twentieth%20Century,%20Kotoku%20Shusui%20and%20Japan%E2%80%99s%20F%20Imperialist%20Movement%20-%20Robert%20Thomas%20Tierney.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <https://libcom.org/library/monster-twentieth-century-kotoku-shusui-japans-first-anti-imperialist-movement>

Kōtoku Shusui's contributions to socialism and anarchism in Japan, alongside his contribution to our understanding of imperialism, cannot be understated. Any anarchist (and really, any socialist) should come to know who he was and what he thought. Not to hold him to any doctrinal standard, but to see anarchism from the perspective of an incredible, non-western thinker.

## Uchiyama Gudō (ウチヤマ グド)

Uchiyama, who would come to die alongside Kōtoku, began his life on May 17, 1874, as one of four children in a woodworking family in Ojiya,<sup>13</sup> a village in the Niigata Prefecture. Losing his father at the age of sixteen, Gudō began to turn his eyes towards Buddhism, to which he would later enter priesthood, undergoing an ordination in the Sōtō Zen sect at the Hōzōji temple on April 12, 1897.

One might, if they had in mind the typical image of Buddhists, believe that Uchiyama was stepping out of the material world and into the enlightened and separate realm of the Buddhist temple, where monks and initiates live in peace, isolated from the people around them. This is far from the truth in both the past and for Uchiyama's presence. Buddhism had, like all segments of Japanese society, been swept up in the Meiji era's push towards an imperialistic state. As is explained in *Imperial-Way Zen: Ichikawa Hakugen's Questions for Buddhist Ethics*:

'after undergoing severe state persecution during the early Meiji period (1868–1872), and in an effort to distance itself from the recently discredited Tokugawa government, Buddhism was reinvented as a modernizing force. This “New Buddhism” (Shin Bukkyō), as it came to be known, was seen as “socially useful.” That is, it pursued a variety of social service projects, supported the Emperor through nation-building activities, and projected itself as universally appealing and compatible with a modern, scientific world. In essence, New Buddhism, alongside Confucianism, Shinto, and other nationalistic ideologies, presented itself as a positive and worthy contribution to the body of the Japanese state—the kokutai—and the glory of the Imperial-Way.<sup>14</sup>

It is both this environment of growing Japanese militarism and imperialism, and the Buddhist establishments acceptance of it, that garnered Uchiyama's intense criticism. In his various writings, he railed against the Japanese state's treatment of tenant farmers, the arrogance and hypocrisy of its ruling class, and the negative elements of his own belief system. His approach to Buddhism was one that reflected his socialist-anarchist ideals, and so his interpretation of the Buddhist texts and practises emphasised its egalitarian and communal qualities, whilst denouncing what he saw as bigotry. For example, on the matter of reincarnation:

Gudō regarded the Buddhist teaching according to which one's present economic and social fate is the outcome of past lives and actions as a superstition, promoted by those in power to defend against reasonable claims made by those underprivileged.<sup>15</sup>

Whilst, on the opposite end, he wrote in the *Heimin Shimbun* that:

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<sup>13</sup> [https://books.google.co.uk/books/about/Zen\\_at\\_War.html?id=qhMLAAAYAAJ&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.co.uk/books/about/Zen_at_War.html?id=qhMLAAAYAAJ&redir_esc=y)

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.thezensite.com/ZenBookReviews/Imperial\\_Way\\_%20Zen.pdf](https://www.thezensite.com/ZenBookReviews/Imperial_Way_%20Zen.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> <https://terebeck.hu/zen/mesterek/UchiyamaGudo.html>

As a propagator of Buddhism I teach that “all sentient beings have the Buddha nature” and that “within the Dharma there is equality, with neither superior nor inferior”. Furthermore, I teach that “all sentient beings are my children”. Having taken these golden words as the basis of my faith, I discovered that they are in complete agreement with the principles of socialism. It was thus that I became a believer in socialism.<sup>16</sup>

Gudō was committed not just to Buddhism, but to the people, and so his writing and work attempts a synthesis of the two: a socially-conscious and active Buddhism that does not ignore, and can actually give solutions to, the plight of the exploited. Heavily influenced by their organisational structure, for example, Uchiyama took the traditional Sangha,<sup>17</sup> or communal lifestyle, of the Buddhist monks and applied it to his campaign for land reform, arguing that if ‘two or three hundred persons who, living in one place at one time, shared a communal lifestyle’ just as the monks did, then they would be able to construct communities of solidarity and socialism throughout all of Japan. Unlike the establishment Buddhists, who had tactically announced their support for Meiji imperialism, Gudō saw their shared religion as not just socialist in character, but a model from which to create a new society.

When not writing about Buddhism, Uchiyama developed polemics aimed at tenant farmers with the intention of convincing them of anarcho-communist principles. In one text called ‘Anarcho-Communist Revolution’, he writes:

Folks, let’s stop paying taxes to the stupid government, and let’s ruin those hideous people as soon as we can! Then, let’s take back the wealth that the government has stolen from us over a long time through force and oppression, from the time of our ancestors, and let’s keep it in common!<sup>18</sup>

The brunt of this piece lays out the oppressive and exploitative nature of the state and capitalism, laying the blame for the tenant farmer’s problems on the ‘thief called the landlord’, the ‘big thief called the government’, and the ‘other thieves called merchants’; however, writing as he was in the time of Meiji, Uchiyama was also keen to take on the almost supernatural status in which the new emperor had afforded himself. As he writes:

The boss of this government, the emperor, is not the son of god, as the schoolteachers deceptively tell you. The ancestors of the present emperor came from a remote corner of Kyushu; murdering and stealing.

Gudō wishes to be clear on the matter: Meiji is a thief, and no better or more special than the landlords, the government and the merchants who steal in his name. This is greatly significant in the time of Japanese state-building, which sought to deify the emperor and unite the nation in his name.

Uchiyama would continue this staunch repudiation of the government until his execution in 1911. We can take inspiration through the voracity of his words, the way he wished to connect with the working people, and the way he stood up to the establishment voices of his religion. To end on some words that summarise his activism excellently:

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<sup>16</sup> <https://terebess.hu/zen/mesterek/UchiyamaGudo.html>

<sup>17</sup> <https://wkup.org/what-is-a-sangha/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://terebess.hu/zen/mesterek/Museifu.pdf>

the hand that holds the rosary should also always hold a bomb

## Kanno Sugako (寛政 寛政)

Born in Osaka in 1881, Kanno led a turbulent childhood as one of five children,<sup>19</sup> and as a daughter to a father whose family mining business had collapsed. Sexually assaulted at 15 by a man who worked for her father (which was supposedly arranged by her stepmother), Kanno was doubly punished by both her traumatic attack and the shame forced upon her by society; much as women still are today. Finding solace in an essay by Sakai Toshihiko (the same Sakai who created *Heimin Shimbun* with Kōtoku) which encouraged sexual assault victims not to feel the shame society wishes them to feel, Kanno was drawn towards socialism, and later, anarchism.

After marrying a man in a merchant family in 1889 at 17 in order to escape her town and travel to Tokyo, Kanno returned to Osaka in 1902 to care for her father. In the coming years she would write various piece of long fiction, such as 'Omokage' (寛政), a story where a woman resents her parents for pushing a societal construction of femininity on her, as well as poems expressing an anti-war stance. Writing also for various publications and newspapers, Kanno would come to fight against the system of concubines, the exploitation of sex workers; and, just like her now lover Kōtoku, the Russo-Japanese war. In 1906, the editor of the Wakayama Prefecture newspaper *Muro Shinpō*<sup>20</sup> was jailed for insulting the authorities, leading Kanno, who had already contribute various article, to become the chief editor. It is during this time that she continued to write on the topics of socialism, anarchism, feminism, and Christianity, a faith that inspired much of her political work.

All in all, Kanno was consistent in her rebellion towards Japanese society and its status quo norms and values, whether that was its misogyny, warmongering, or its march towards capitalism. In her writing she combined all of these rebellions into one, as she wrote in one paper, the *Muro Shinpō*:

Our ideal is socialism, which aims at the equality of all classes. But just as a great building cannot be destroyed in a moment, the existing hierarchical class system, which has been consolidated over many years, cannot be overthrown in a day and a night ... So we [women] must first of all achieve the fundamental principle of 'self-awareness', and develop our potential, uplift our character, and then gradually work toward the realization of our ideal.<sup>21</sup>

Much like Kōtoku, however, Kanno did not start her socialist journey as a voracious proponent of direct action. That would be triggered later by the notorious Red Flag incident, a gathering of anarchists and socialists who had come to celebrate the release of the political activist and activist Koken Yamaguchi.<sup>22</sup> It was at the moment that the gathering was attacked by police and multiple anarchists, including Kanno, were arrested, that she began to call more clearly for direct action. As she later notes:

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<sup>19</sup> <https://unseenjapan.com/kanno-sugako-writer-socialist-revolutionary/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9780203448762>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9780203448762>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.worldcat.org/title/concise-dictionary-of-modern-japanese-history/oclc/1014734032>



Basically even among anarchists I was among the more radical thinkers. When I was imprisoned in June 1908 in connection with the Red Flag incident I was outraged at the brutal behavior of the police. I concluded that a peaceful propagation of our principles could not be conducted under these circumstances. It was necessary to arouse the people's awareness by staging riots or a revolution or by undertaking assassinations.<sup>23</sup>

It is from this event in 1908 and up until her execution in 1911 that Kanno reached her most radical, organising direct action with Kōtoku and other anarchists; actions that would later see her accused of a plot to assassinate the emperor. On her way to the gallows, Kanno kept a remarkable prison diary detailing the events during and leading up to her trial and execution. In one of its final pages, she delivers a threat to the Japanese government:

It seems that the authorities are watching our comrades in the outside world with even greater vigilance. The trial's shocking and outrageous results show that the government is planning to take advantage of this incident to adopt extreme, repressive measures. Persecute us! That's right, persecute us! Don't you know that for every force there is a counterforce? Persecute us! Persecute us as much as you wish. The old way is fighting the new – **imperialism versus anarchism**.<sup>24</sup>

The way in which she presents that last dichotomy: 'imperialism versus anarchism', encapsulates the mood of Japanese anarchists in this period. Unlike those who lived in European imperial powers, whose critiques were levelled primarily at capitalism and the state, Kanno, along with many of her peers, saw the growing tide of imperialism as their main enemy. The uniqueness of this viewpoint, which puts the Japanese anarchists more in line with their counterparts in the European colonies than in the European core, is admirable and cannot be understated.

## Conclusion

I hope you have found this introduction to the early Japanese anarchists interesting and informative, not only as a lesser-known form of anarchism, but as an anarchism formulated outside of the European context and therefore outside of anarchism's "traditional" intellectual history. For more reading, I would wholly recommend reading the entire of Kōtoku Shusui's *Imperialism*, which can be found here.

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<sup>23</sup> <https://biblio.co.uk/reflections-on-the-way-to-by-hane-mikiso/work/311989>

<sup>24</sup> <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/kanno-sugako-reflections-on-the-way-to-the-gallows>

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