

1894–1931: Anarchism in Korea

Workers Solidarity Movement

1991

In the 2,000 years of Korean history there arose movements fighting for peasants rights and for national independence. Within these movements there were tendencies that may be seen as forerunners of modern anarchism, in the same way as we might view the Diggers in the English revolution.

In 1894 Japan invaded, under the pretext of protecting Korea from China. The struggle for national independence became central to all radical political activity.

The modern anarchist movement in Korea began to take form among the exiles who fled to China after the 1919 independence struggle, and students and workers who went to Japan. This struggle, the 3.1 Movement within which anarchists were prominent, involved 2 million people; 1,500 demonstrations were held; 7,500 were killed; 16,000 wounded and more than 700 homes and 47 churches destroyed.

In the period up to the close of World War II the Korean Anarchist Federation has identified three stages.

The first stage covered the first half of the 1920s and is described by the KAF as the gestation period.

In the early years of this century as the Japanese ruling class started their imperialist drive into other Asian countries they also ruthlessly cracked down on any opposition at home. Japanese anarchists were to the forefront in anti-imperialist agitation. In 1910 Kotoku Shusui, a leading Japanese anarchist, was executed for treason. The Commoners Newspaper was rallying opposition to the Russia-Japan war and to the occupation of Korea. With the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, the rice riot of 1918 and the mass uprising in Korea in 1919, the Japanese ruling class was worried.

Following the bloody suppression of the 3.1 Movement and the rise in the level of class struggle in Japan itself, the Japanese bosses blamed anarchists and Koreans for the Tokyo earthquake of 1923. More than 6,000 Korean workers in Japan were hunted down with clubs and bamboo spears. All known Japanese and Korean anarchists were arrested. Park Yeol and his wife Kaneko Fumiko, Korean anarchists, veterans of the independence struggle and organisers of the Tokyo “Black Workers Society”, were sentenced to death. Many others were jailed. The charge of causing an earthquake may have been a bit embarrassing to sections of the ruling class so the sentences were commuted to life in prison. Kaneko died in jail and Park was not released until the end of

WWII. Many of the Koreans jailed in what became known as “the High Treason case” went on to become leading activists in the anarchist movement in their own country.

The Korean Anarchist Federation in China was formed in April 1924. and published the “Korean Revolution Manifesto”. It was militantly anti-imperialist “we declare that the burglar politics of Japan is the enemy for our nation’s existence and that it is our proper right to overthrow the imperialist Japan by a revolutionary means”. It went on to stress the to do more than merely exchange rulers, pointing out the difference between a political revolution and a social revolution. It had no doubts about the role of anarchists, it laid emphasis on the leading role of the anarchists in a revolutionary situation. The Federation began to produce papers like Recapture and Justice Bulletin.

By 1928 the spread of libertarian politics allowed the Korean Anarchists to organise the Eastern Anarchist Federation with comrades from China, Vietnam, Taiwan and Japan – which published a bulletin, Dong-Bang (The East). The “Manifesto” was adopted by the Eastern Federation as its formal programme.

The second stage which covered the years 1925–30 was dominated by the organisation of the movement. Armed with the theory of anarchist revolution set out in the “Manifesto” and practical experiences drawn from the 3.1 movement, the workers organisations in Japan and “the High Treason case” groups were organised in Seoul, Taegu, Pyongyang and other areas. By November 1929 there had been a huge growth and the Korean Anarchist Communist Federation was formed as a national organisation. As part of the anti Japanese resistance it was a totally underground body. This should not lead anyone into thinking that it was small or lacking in widespread support.

To give some idea of how the movement had grown I want to look at how things had progressed since the early 1920s. In Kiho province the daily newspaper Dong-a Ilbo reported in October 1925 that ten members of the League of Black Flag had been jailed for one year each. The following year the same paper reported that five young workers were jailed for putting out a manifesto very similar in style and content to the “Korean Revolution Manifesto”.

In 1929 Dong -a Ilbo tells of a secret society of anarchists organised by Lee Eun-Song which had one hundred members in the town of Icheon in Kwangwon province. In that year it transpired that the entire membership of the Chunju Artists Movement Society were all anarchists, such were the names and fronts used to throw the Japanese police off the scent. In response to this the death penalty was brought in for organising societies with the aim of “changing the national structure”.

In Taegu a League of Truth and Fraternity was set up in 1925 by exiles who returned from Japan. The Revolutionists League also came into being and both were in regular contact with the Tokyo Black Youth Society. I have also come across anarchist groups in Anui, Mesan, the Changwon Black Friend League, the Jeju Island Mutual Aid group. The last mentioned used their remoteness from central government to organise co-ops of farmers and artisans, even a peasants’ band. Needless to say the organisers quickly found they were not that remote and saw the inside of a prison cell.

In Kwanso and Kwanbul province I have found mention of at least eight more groups. Almost all the groups around the country were involved in a mixture of producing leaflets & papers, organising trade unions and engaging in resistance to the occupation.

By this time we know that most areas could boast of an active group. There were also organisations in Manchuria and amongst exiles in China and Japan.

The next stage was the fighting period which ran up to 1945.

Among the two million Koreans in Manchuria the KAF in Manchuria was able to sink deep roots immediately after its formation in 1929. The Federation's main organiser, Kim Jong-Jin, drew up a plan which he put to the anti-Japanese guerillas. It covered voluntary collectives for farmers, free education up to age 18 with adult education for those older and arms training for all responsible adults. Discussions followed and eventually an anarchist plan was agreed which was described as being "according to the free federation principle based upon the spontaneous free will of man".

The difficulty that was not really addressed was how to deal with the Stalinists who were also organising in this region and were slandering the anarchists and others as "tyrants". The young anarchists around Yu-Rim wanted to fight ideology with ideology and demonstrate the superiority of their ideas. The older anti-Japanese guerillas around Kim Jwa-Jin (sometimes called the Korean Makhno) thought it was enough to state their support for anarchism but that they could ignore the Stalinists until national independence was won because only then would real politics come to the forefront. Not a lot different from the stages theory put forward by elements in Sinn Fein!

By August 1929 the anarchists had formed an administration in Shinmin (one of the three Manchurian provinces). Whether this was a government is still a point of contention among anarchists. Organised as the Korean People's Association in Manchuria it declared its aim as "an independent self-governing cooperative system of the Korean people who assembled their full power to save our nation by struggling against Japan". The structure was federal going from village meetings to district and area conferences. The general association was composed of delegates from the districts and areas.

The general association set up executive departments to deal with agriculture, education, propaganda, finance, military affairs, social health, youth and general affairs. The staff of the departments received no more than the average wage.

We would expect that the organisation would start at village level and then federate upwards. However the EAPM believed that the war situation made this impossible to apply the principle immediately. In the interim they appointed the staffs and appointed them from the top down. Organisation and propaganda teams were then sent out to agitate for support and for the creation of village assemblies and committees. In one village a rice mill capable of milling over 1 million bushels was built to allow the local co-op to break from reliance on merchants. Seemingly all these teams reported a good response and were made welcome wherever they went.

The local administration of the anti-Japanese fighters in Shimin voluntarily dissolved itself and lent its support to KAPM. As the anarchists grew in numbers and support the Stalinists and the pro-Japanese elements in Manchuria felt their own power bases threatened.

On January 20th the anarchist general Kim Jwa-Jin was assassinated while doing repair work on the rice mill I just mentioned. The killer escaped but his handler was caught and executed.

At a meeting in June in Peking of the KAFC it was decided to divert all resources outside Korea itself to Manchuria and most KAFC members moved to the anarchist zone in northern Manchuria. It should be noted that women comrades were active as agitators and arms smugglers.

From late 1930 onwards the Japanese were attacking in waves from the South and the Stalinists, supported by the USSR, from the North. In early 1931 the Stalinists sent assassination and kidnapping teams into the anarchist zone to murder leading activists. They believed that if they wiped out the KAFM the KAPM would wither and die. By the summer of 1931 many leading

anarchists were dead and the war on two fronts was devastating the region. It was decided to go underground. Anarchist Shimin was no more.

The main source used was Ha Ki-Rak's A History of the Korean Anarchist Movement which was published in 1986 by the Korean Anarchist Federation. Apart from being poorly translated and chronologically confusing, it is written from the perspective of the more nationalist and reformist tendency in the Korean movement.

From a talk by Alan MacSimoin to the Workers Solidarity Movement Dublin branch in September 1991 on flag.blackened.net. This was a talk given to a WSM meeting. As such it represents the authors opinion alone and may be deliberately provocative in order to start discussion. Also it maybe in a note form and has not been edited. Still I hope you find it useful.

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