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Kōtoku Shūsui:

What his ideas were and What impact they had

110 years ago, on January 24, 1911, the infamous Kōtoku Denjirō was hung for his alleged plot to assassinate the Japanese Emperor Meiji. Now he is better known by his pen name: Kōtoku Shūsui. The question of whether Kōtoku had personally planned or participated in the attempted assassination of the emperor has always been up for debate among historians. Many agree that it is difficult to reach a definite conclusion due to the lack of pertinent documents. In the twenty-first century, Kōtoku has been categorized as a socialist anarchist. The general public, without knowing many details of Kōtoku Shūsui's ideas, would summarize him as a radical extremist and consider his impact from this so-called High Treason Incident of 1910.

Upon closer look, Kōtoku Shūsui was an idealist. Because of his growing frustration, Kōtoku turned from socialism to anarchism and the means of "direct action." Having read countless western works, he ultimately dreamed of a complete communist Japanese society. Except for his efforts on the ideological enlightenment of the public, his other plans of action were unrealistic. Even though he had not explicitly condoned violence, Kōtoku's ambivalence in thought and failure to implement a sufficiently Japanese-style socialist movement led in the end to an assassination. He did exacerbate the inner split in the Japanese socialist movement at that

time. Nevertheless, his diverse thought experiments inspired anti-imperialist and socialist movements in Japan and other Eastern Asian countries.

Some details about the High Treason Incident were discussed by Historian Chushichi Tsuzuki. After the Red Flag Incident happened in June 1908 in which many of Kōtoku's stalwarts were arrested, Kōtoku began to print an anarchist pamphlet. It "criticized the Emperor system and urged the peasants to refuse military service and boycott the payment of rent and tax."<sup>1</sup> Copies of this pamphlet were sent to several Anarchist sympathizers including Takichi Miyashita, an ironworker, who lived near Nagoya at the time. He eventually made up his mind to assassinate the Emperor in order to show his compatriots that the object of their worship was merely "an earthly being capable of bleeding."<sup>2</sup> He began to manufacture a "bomb." Kōtoku had met Miyashita and at one stage supported his scheme. On the birthday of the Emperor in November an experimental bomb exploded in a lonely valley near Matsumoto.<sup>3</sup> It was at this stage that Kōtoku had second thoughts. He withdrew from the plot and focused more on being a writer than a martyr. In May 1910 the conspiracy was suddenly frustrated after the nature of Miyashita's activities was disclosed by his fellow workman. Kōtoku was arrested in June. Twenty-four persons including leaders of local anarchist groups were sentenced to death. Twelve of them headed by Kōtoku were executed in January 1911.

Historians have suggested that Kōtoku experienced some changes in his thoughts during his life, specifically from state socialism to anarchism. They also have debates on whether Kōtoku had encouraged violence. Nobutaka Ike was a Stanford University professor of Japanese and East Asian politics. He wrote a paper called "Kōtoku: Advocate of Direct Action" in 1944.

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<sup>1</sup> Chushichi Tsuzuki, "Kōtoku, Osugi, and Japanese Anarchism," *Hitotsubashi Journal of Social Studies*, vol. 3 (March 1966): 36.

<sup>2</sup> Tsuzuki, "Japanese Anarchism," 36.

<sup>3</sup> Tsuzuki, "Japanese Anarchism," 37.

In it, Ike first focused on the subject of the “High Treason Incident” in 1910. He suggested that the trial of Kōtoku and twenty others “was largely held *in camera* (in private, which is the opposite of trial in open court), with only lawyers, members of foreign embassies and legations, and those with special permission attending,” and that this secret trial brought “adverse criticism both in Japan and abroad.”<sup>4</sup> After elaborating on some of the criticisms and mentioning government officials’ response, Ike added that there were accusations that the whole affair had been trumped up by the government. He argued against those claims. The evidence was from Ike’s own discussion with Oka Shigeki, Kōtoku’s close friend who gave him lodging when he came to the United States in November 1905. Oka claimed that Kōtoku told him “in order to introduce new social ideas into Japan it would first be necessary to destroy the traditional belief in the divinity of the emperor and that the most effective method would be to assassinate him and thus demonstrate that he was mortal.”<sup>5</sup> Though Ike did not specify the date when he and Oka had their discussion, based on the paper’s publication year which is 1944, it is proper to assume that their discussion happened years perhaps even decades after Kōtoku’s initial conversation with Oka in the United States. Nevertheless, Ike believed Oka was telling the truth. The author suggested that based on this piece of evidence, “one can readily see why the trial was held *in camera*.” He explained that if Kōtoku were allowed to testify and make public his motive to assassinate the emperor, “the damaging effect it would have had on the myth which forms the cornerstone of Japanese political theory would have been incalculable.”<sup>6</sup> Though Ike clarified “it is true that verbally, at least, Kōtoku deplored violence,” he used Mikhail Bakunin as an example

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<sup>4</sup> Nobutaka Ike, “Kōtoku: Advocate of Direct Action,” *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, vol. 3, no. 3 (May 1944): 222-223.

<sup>5</sup> Ike, “Kōtoku,” 225.

<sup>6</sup> Ike, “Kōtoku,” 225.

to show that one's words do not show one's true intentions.<sup>7</sup> Bakunin was an influential anarchist who also deplored violence but had actively promoted uprisings and assassinations.

Ike did not conclude that Kōtoku was simply a radical anarchist who thirsted for a regicide. As he wrote about Kōtoku's life stories, he suggested Kōtoku at first supported a Japanese socialist movement through parliament. The movement was prominent in the short-lived Social-Democratic Party that he helped found in 1901. It was the opposite of anarchism as it encouraged an active engagement with the government. Based on Kōtoku's article published in 1902, Ike believed that he agreed with the party's focus of "reforming the election law and putting universal suffrage into effect."<sup>8</sup> But Kōtoku had begun to show frustration with the representative government and doubt the effectiveness of universal suffrage. Ike suggested that Kōtoku experienced his change in thought and turning to anarchism during his trip to America from later 1905 to June 1906. This was after having been released from jail for publication of the first Japanese translation of "The Communist Manifesto." Kōtoku came back after less than a year and soon began to advocate for direct action from the workers themselves. Kōtoku's main appeal for his new thoughts was in the history of other countries. For example, to show the ineffectiveness of universal suffrage, he pointed to countries like the United States where he claimed that the majority of those elected there were "those who are very wealthy, or very brazen." He believed the outstanding men in the country and the party were rarely elected. Kōtoku concluded that "we can almost say there are no representative assemblies in the world which represent the people's will in the strict sense."<sup>9</sup> In Ike's opinion, many of Kōtoku's assertions were extreme.

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<sup>7</sup> Ike, "Kōtoku," 225.

<sup>8</sup> Ike, "Kōtoku," 228.

<sup>9</sup> Ike, "Kōtoku," 233.

Historian George Elison had his own weigh-in on Kōtoku's transformation of ideas in his detailed article "Kōtoku Shūsui: The Change in Thought." Elison agreed with Ike and emphasized that Kōtoku's "'change in thought' occurred in large measure due to experience garnered during a stay in the United States from November 1905 to June 1906."<sup>10</sup> After explaining Kōtoku's anarchist mindset, Elison claimed Kōtoku was "an idealistic actionnaire, with great talent but with shallow roots" while maintaining that "his persuasiveness overshadowed his shallowness."<sup>11</sup> Kōtoku had been influenced by materialism, French Libertarian ideas, socialism, pacifism, and others from his studies of prominent figures such as Menciuis, Henry George, and Marx. Referencing Kōtoku's early works written before 1905, Elison credited Kōtoku for being a powerful propagandist who can "strike home with every word."<sup>12</sup> During the Russo-Japanese War, Kōtoku's anti-militarism and anti-imperialism mindset sprouted his early anarchist conceptions. But he still bore "the tinge of German social-democratic thought," and "rejected any violent action."<sup>13</sup> Elison declared that Kōtoku's phase of anarchism began after he was finally jailed in 1905 for his translations. He asserted that Kōtoku was able to find a new focus in his socialist consciousness as he shifted his readings from Engels' to Kropotkin's writings. The article also stated the fact that Kōtoku was suffering from poverty and his own chronically weak constitution. Elison believed Kōtoku had concluded that his life in Japan under persecution was hopeless, and he had to "go to a more civilized country."<sup>14</sup> His frustrations and hastiness might have made him eventually welcome anarchism, ask for direct action, and want immediate results. During his trip, Kōtoku was disappointed in America's

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<sup>10</sup> George Elison, "Kōtoku Shūsui: The Change in Thought," *Monumenta Nipponica*, vol. 22, no. 3/4 (1967): 438.

<sup>11</sup> Elison, "The Change in Thought," 439.

<sup>12</sup> Elison, "The Change in Thought," 443.

<sup>13</sup> Elison, "The Change in Thought," 444.

<sup>14</sup> Elison, "The Change in Thought," 448.

democratic system as he failed to see any substantial progress of social reform. “I want myself to be idealist, revolutionary, progressive. I do not like lukewarm socialism, syrupy socialism, state socialism.” In Elison’s judgment, this declaration written by Kōtoku in 1906, was a forecast of Kōtoku’s “bomb” which would be thrown into the Japanese movement.<sup>15</sup> The author argued that Kōtoku’s call for anarchism divided and hindered the Japanese socialist movement as different factions from within soon emerged after his trip.

The circumstances around his journey to America were crucial in examining how Kōtoku made his change in thought. Before his trip, in his letter to American anarchist Albert Johnson, Kōtoku confessed that “five months’ imprisonment not a little injured my health, but it gave me many lessons of social questions. I have seen and studied great many of so-called ‘criminals’ and became convinced that the government institutions – are only responsible for them – poverty and crime.”<sup>16</sup> Like what Elison had suggested, Kōtoku’s frustration of a two-year fight against the Russo-Japanese War, in the face of persistent harassment and oppression along with his imprisonment made him reject the Japanese government. This rejection is Kōtoku’s departure point for anarchism.<sup>17</sup> Wanting to “criticize freely the position of ‘His Majesty’” and carrying the question of “when can I rise again?”, Kōtoku left for America.<sup>18</sup>

In San Francisco, he sought association exclusively with American and refugee European radicals. One who was pointed out by Elison to have a telling influence on Kōtoku was Mrs. Fritz. From her he received a copy of Jean Grave’s *Moribund Society and Anarchy* which was considered the best introduction to anarchism ever written. With her he held repeated discussions

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<sup>15</sup> Elison, “The Change in Thought,” 452.

<sup>16</sup> Elison, “The Change in Thought,” 447.

<sup>17</sup> Elison, “The Change in Thought,” 447.

<sup>18</sup> Elison, “The Change in Thought,” 447-48.

concerning the uselessness of universal suffrage and the effect of assassination of rulers.<sup>19</sup> After participating in the local socialist movement, Kōtoku's disappointment was acute as he wrote in his indignation: "how can liberty exist, how can popular rights exist in a place where the capitalist class exists, where the landlord class exists!"<sup>20</sup> After witnessing the chaos ensued after the San Francisco Earthquake in 1906, Kōtoku had his realization of anarchism. He saw the situation in which "commerce was at a complete standstill" as an "ideal paradise." Kōtoku only lamented that it would soon revert to "the original capitalist system of private property."<sup>21</sup> This was when he attained the clear focus on anarchism.

Nobutaka Ike asserted at the end of his article that Kōtoku was "neither an original nor a profound thinker," and that he "did not get a following of any size." He believed Kōtoku copied arguments from radical Western theorists which he himself did not fully understand. Kōtoku's theory of direct action, in Ike's opinion, "had little influence in the long run."<sup>22</sup> George Elison also finished his article expressing criticism, asserting that Kōtoku's imprint "was not beneficial to the movement's later development." The abandonment of parliamentarism caused a "hopeless split" in the surviving socialist movement after the first legal Japanese socialist party was forced to shut down by the government. Both writers gave many thoughtful points and had their own takes. But like what Elison stated in his writing: "No one-sided interpretation of Kōtoku's anarchist phase is possible,"<sup>23</sup> much of Kōtoku's late struggle after 1906 and his life before is still up for debate.

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<sup>19</sup> Elison, "The Change in Thought," 449-50.

<sup>20</sup> Elison, "The Change in Thought," 450.

<sup>21</sup> Elison, "The Change in Thought," 453-54.

<sup>22</sup> Ike, "Kōtoku," 236.

<sup>23</sup> Elison, "The Change in Thought," 446.

Kōtoku Shūsui's first book was entitled *Imperialism, Monster of the Twentieth Century*. This book is important because it is a monumental work that reflects contemporary conditions in Japan and expounds on Kōtoku's early fundamental ideas. Kōtoku Shūsui was heavily influenced by Western theorists. In 1887, sixteen-year-old Kōtoku went to Tokyo to attend a private school of English. Kōtoku worked as a translator in 1893 for the *Jiyu-Shinbun* (*Liberal Newspaper*) of the then Liberal Party.<sup>24</sup> His early exposure to many Western works was the foundation for his first book written in 1901. Uchimura Kanzō, a Japanese philosopher who had worked with Kōtoku, in the book's preface written by him, announced this as Kōtoku's "original work." But this claim was partially denied by Kōtoku in his "Three Preliminary Observations" at the beginning of his book:

The theories of imperialism set forth in this work were first developed in insightful analyses by Western intellectuals. I have taken up the most progressive theses propounded by renowned thinkers who hold to the highest ideals, such as Tolstoy, Zola, John Morley, Bebel, and Bryant. For that reason, I do not consider myself an original author but rather a commentator on other men's ideas.<sup>25</sup>

This statement is correct as Kōtoku had paraphrased many contents from J.M. Robertson's 1899 *Patriotism and Empire* in this book. This might have predicted Kōtoku's future idea to lack thorough evaluation and include no appropriate implementation planning. Ike's view that the socialist and communist movements in Japan "have been largely copied from Western models, which Japanese propagandists have not understood well enough to put into effective operation in the Japanese social order, which they have also not understood adequately" has some validity.<sup>26</sup> Still, it is important to see how Western thought built Kōtoku's stance on

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<sup>24</sup> Tsuzuki, "Japanese Anarchism," 31.

<sup>25</sup> Kōtoku Shūsui, "Imperialism, Monster of the Twentieth Century," in *Monster of the Twentieth Century: Kōtoku Shūsui and Japan's First Anti-Imperialist Movement*, trans., ed. Robert Thomas Tierney (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 137-38.

<sup>26</sup> Ike, "Kōtoku," 236.



issues and shaped many of Kōtoku's ideas before his trip to the United States. Kōtoku borrowed many of the ideas of Western neoradicalists who attacked imperialist policies. But he did have a more pessimistic view on imperialism than his Western influencers and that he believed it could not be reformed. On this issue, Kōtoku affirmed that “scientific socialism will destroy barbaric militarism,” and that common people ruling themselves will “make it possible to uproot and eliminate predatory imperialism.”<sup>27</sup>

Published three years before the Russo-Japanese War, this book vigorously criticized Japanese imperialism. In his introduction, Kōtoku compared imperialism to “a wildfire in an open field.”<sup>28</sup> He condemned the spread of imperialism from western countries to Japan. He made clear that the most urgent duty of thinkers to lead the twentieth century was to “expose the imminent perils of imperialism.”<sup>29</sup> He wanted this book to make a small contribution to this goal. His pacifist view not only came from his early rejection of violence which was persistent until his later days; this anti-imperialist sentiment was also rooted in what he perceived as a struggle for social progress, a progress that will realize “freedom and justice for all and the goals of universal love and equality.”<sup>30</sup> Kōtoku's pursuit of equality is the theme of many of his arguments in this book.

Kōtoku did not start with imperialism. Instead, he separated the topics into patriotism, militarism, and imperialism, with imperialism deriving from the other two. In his “On Patriotism,” Kōtoku believed that imperialism was “the warp of patriotism” and “the woof of militarism.”<sup>31</sup> He questioned the validity of patriotism as he asserted that “the love a patriot feels

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<sup>27</sup> Kōtoku, “Imperialism,” 206.

<sup>28</sup> Kōtoku, “Imperialism,” 139.

<sup>29</sup> Kōtoku, “Imperialism,” 141.

<sup>30</sup> Kōtoku, “Imperialism,” 140.

<sup>31</sup> Kōtoku, “Imperialism,” 143.

for his country stops at national borders.”<sup>32</sup> To continue further, he equated a “patriot” with a selfish man who only loves members of his own family. As a trained Confucianist, Kōtoku condemned patriotism as a narrow, private interest rather than a broad, public concern. His traditional morality stipulated that a man’s public duties should take precedence over his private interest. In this chapter, he challenged the “patriotism” of ancient Rome and Greece, citing the example of poor peasant soldiers falling into slavery. He also mocked the hypocrisy in the Peterloo incident which broke a “sacred union of people” in England as the post-war English army massacred its country’s workers who demanded a reform of parliamentary representation.<sup>33</sup> Though Kōtoku at that time had not given up parliamentarism, a sense of frustration had already taken root. He also expressed his views on “patriotism” in Japan. A key reflection on his future radical views was his listing of controversial figures such as Morita Shiken and Kume Kunitake who were shamed and attacked as traitors for questioning the excessive godly superstition towards the Emperor. The slogan “For the Sake of the Emperor,” he declared, only indoctrinated Japanese soldiers into senseless wars and did little for the progress of society.<sup>34</sup> Looking at the notorious High Treason Incident of 1910, Kōtoku might have followed those people he mentioned. His future rhetoric to challenge Japan’s traditional notion of authority in one way or another directly encouraged the attempted assassination. This clear rebellious mindset makes Ike’s quotes from discussion with Shigeki Oka more credible.

On militarism, Kōtoku blamed bloated military expansion on the military men and capitalists who stirred up “a jingoistic and arrogant patriotism among the vast majority of population.”<sup>35</sup> He challenged the cult of military conscription and attacked Japanese military

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<sup>32</sup> Kōtoku, “Imperialism,” 144.

<sup>33</sup> Kōtoku, “Imperialism,” 152.

<sup>34</sup> Kōtoku, “Imperialism,” 159-60.

<sup>35</sup> Kōtoku, “Imperialism,” 163.

leaders of his time. Duke Yamagata, Baron Kabayama, and Count Takashima, in his eyes, were guilty of plunging the Japanese society “into an abyss of corruption and decadence.”<sup>36</sup>

Throughout the book, Kōtoku’s indignant tone targeted the state. Finally, on imperialism, he argued that the unlimited expansion of an empire has led to “a widening gulf between rich and poor,” “a worsening of poverty and hunger,” and “an increase in the number of anarchists.”<sup>37</sup> It is evident that Kōtoku in 1901 had embraced the socialist struggle of class conflict while rejecting anarchism. At that time, Kōtoku identified anarchists with fomenters of social chaos rather than representatives of peace and love. He insisted that destruction is not the answer and nonviolent action is necessary.

“There is only one solution,” he declared, “start a revolutionary movement worldwide in scope.” He called for the reformation of societies from autocratic aristocracy to one where “the common people rule themselves;” a change of economy from one monopolized by capitalists to one in which “the workers own all in common;” and replacing “barbaric militarism” with “scientific socialism.”<sup>38</sup> Though it was not the point of this book, from beginning to end, Kōtoku did not propose how the “revolutionary movement” would be implemented and realized. George Elison criticized Kōtoku on this issue. In his opinion, as a leader in the Japanese socialist movement, Kōtoku failed to answer the question of what course of action applies to Japan.<sup>39</sup>

Ever since his first book, Kōtoku had been a radical idealist. Though not embracing anarchism yet, he was radical in that he had always wanted to completely overthrow the established government. He was also overly idealistic in that he had dreamed of a broad movement and a quixotic world of everybody owning all in common as mentioned. Historical

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<sup>36</sup> Kōtoku, “Imperialism,” 174.

<sup>37</sup> Kōtoku, “Imperialism,” 188.

<sup>38</sup> Kōtoku, “Imperialism,” 206.

<sup>39</sup> Elison, “The Change in Thought,” 457.

examples such as the comparison between the “effectiveness” of George Washington and the “ineffectiveness” of Ulysses Grant in governing presented by Kōtoku could not be well translated to the situation in Japan. Chushichi Tsuzuki had his succinct summary of Kōtoku’s first book: “a motley of promiscuous ideas of liberalism, socialism, and anarchism well served his purpose of challenging the authoritarian state dominated as it was by the triple alliance of aristocracy, militarism, and capitalism.”<sup>40</sup> Kōtoku’s dream of a socialist utopian society was never changed during his life. In the book’s three main chapters, he was not afraid to criticize all imperialistic European countries, the United States, and contemporary Japan. It shows that his rebellious inclinations had already been growing in him.

*Imperialism, Monster of the Twentieth Century* was influential during the first decade of the twentieth century. The book was printed in several editions; the third edition came after sixteen different reviews that appeared in major periodicals. Translator Robert Thomas Tierney based on this fact suggested that the book was widely read and had a significant impact on its readers.<sup>41</sup> It also influenced other Eastern Asian countries. A Chinese translation of this book came out in 1902, one year after its publication in Japanese. A partial translation into Korean appeared in 1906.<sup>42</sup> However, after Kōtoku’s execution in 1911 under the High Treason statute, the book along with his other works was banned by the Japanese government. Though it was not strictly enforced during the late 1920s, this ban restricted the circulation of Kōtoku’s works until 1945.<sup>43</sup> Postwar Japanese scholars have generally dismissed *imperialism* as “a flawed and limited work.” Many based their criticisms on a normative Leninist concept of imperialism.

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<sup>40</sup> Tsuzuki, “Japanese Anarchism,” 33.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Thomas Tierney, ed., *Monster of the Twentieth Century: Kōtoku Shūsui and Japan’s First Anti-Imperialist Movement* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 5.

<sup>42</sup> Tierney, *Monster of the Twentieth Century*, 1.

<sup>43</sup> Tierney, *Monster of the Twentieth Century*, 5.

Japanese economist Kazuo Ōkōchi wrote in his forward to this book that Kōtoku failed to treat imperialism as the last stage of capitalism, an omission which reflects the “limitations of the time in which he lived.”<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, members of the peace movement in postwar Japan have hailed the book and its author. Japanese writer Odagiri Hideo had suggested that “one can find superlative examples of antiwar prose in essays of Kōtoku Shūsui.”<sup>45</sup>

“Discussion of Violent Revolution, From a Jail Cell” translated by George Elison, was Kōtoku’s rare concerted discussion of his ideas on anarchism. Kōtoku completed this letter on December 18, 1910, in jail, one month and six days before his execution, to address his lawyers. Though defensive in tenor and unorganized as it was written by Kōtoku with a “bad hand” in a state of weariness suggested by the author, this text has great importance in understanding Kōtoku’s anarchism.<sup>46</sup> After claiming that the facts presented in the trial have become “guesses, twists, and interpretations,” Kōtoku dived right in explaining the relations between anarchism and assassination.<sup>47</sup> Here, his definition of anarchism shows a conspicuous transition away from orthodox state socialism. He introduced the classic thought of Lao Tzu.<sup>48</sup> As a trained Confucianist early in his life, Kōtoku now embraced a different eastern school of thought in Taoism. A key difference between these two thoughts lies in that Taoism sees the universe in “a continuous state of flux” and stresses “the unity and harmony of nature” while Confucianism focuses on “reforming society” and emphasizes “duty, discipline, and obedience.”<sup>49</sup> With Lao’s thought in mind, Kōtoku defined anarchism as “the manifest trend of the nature of human

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<sup>44</sup> Tierney, *Monster of the Twentieth Century*, 8.

<sup>45</sup> Tierney, *Monster of the Twentieth Century*, 9.

<sup>46</sup> Kōtoku Shūsui, “Discussion of Violent Revolution, From a Jail Cell,” trans. George Elison, *Monumenta Nipponica*, vol. 22, no. 3/4 (1967): 481.

<sup>47</sup> Kōtoku Shūsui, “Violent Revolution,” 468.

<sup>48</sup> Kōtoku Shūsui, “Violent Revolution,” 469.

<sup>49</sup> Josh, “Anarchism and Taoism,” *The Anarchist Library* (January 2005): 1-2, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/josh-anarchism-and-taoism>.

society” and believed that to perfect freedom and happiness, people must “advance in accordance with this trend.”<sup>50</sup>

Kōtoku argued that anarchists reject violence. He listed Kropotkin as an example. Kōtoku asserted that the Russian anarchist had a “completely gentle and kind” nature. He declared that he could never condone violence as he emphasized Kropotkin as a renowned scientist who had rejected nobility.<sup>51</sup> However, Kropotkin himself was ambivalent about the topic of violence and did not reject it. “Let the nobility and the tsar be displayed at once in all their bestial nakedness, and the rivers of blood spilled in one locality will not flow without consequences. Without the rivers of blood the social upheaval will not be accomplished.” These were the words of Kropotkin facing up to the fact that challenge to the state will unleash violence. He finished the statement acknowledging that “perhaps there is no better outcome for us than to drown ourselves in that first river which bursts the dam.”<sup>52</sup> It is evident based on his own writings and that of many historians including George Elison and Nobutaka Ike that Kropotkin had a profound impact on Kōtoku’s thoughts. Here he tried to deny his responsibilities for any attempted violence in the incident by presenting a partial view on Kropotkin which ignores radical aspects of anarchist thoughts. The claim that “anarchists reject violence” was contradicted by Kōtoku as he soon wrote that “it is true that the anarchist ranks have also spawned assassins.” The only defense he had was that the making of an assassin is not relative to the school of thought as he presented a Tu Quoque (appeal to hypocrisy) fallacy by suggesting that “if one is to say that a school of thought is assassination-centered simply because it has produced assassins, then there exists no ideology more violently murderous than imperial loyalism-nationalism.”<sup>53</sup> This defense

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<sup>50</sup> Kōtoku Shūsui, “Violent Revolution,” 469.

<sup>51</sup> Kōtoku Shūsui, “Violent Revolution,” 469.

<sup>52</sup> Peter Kropotkin, *Fugitive writings*, ed. George Woodcock (Canada: Black Rose Books, 1993), 67.

<sup>53</sup> Kōtoku Shūsui, “Violent Revolution,” 470.

failed to defend himself against the charge of being an assassin. But at least, it defended Anarchism against the false view that all anarchists are assassins.

Next Kōtoku described the nature of revolution. In his definition, revolution must mean “a fundamental change in the governmental system and in the organization of society.”<sup>54</sup> Using the Meiji Restoration which he believed to be a revolution as an example, Kōtoku followed his anarchist thought and believed that revolution is “a natural occurrence.” It is an occurrence in which “an antiquated system reaches the last stage of decay and wearily collapses, a new social organization arising to fill the vacated space.”<sup>55</sup> Under this belief, Kōtoku stressed that it would be “completely impossible to plan in advance how to bring a revolution about, or how to carry it out,” and so is to predict whether it will take the course of peace or war.<sup>56</sup> For his anarchist revolution, the only justification Kōtoku had was his belief that the present-day system had passed away, “a communist system will take its place.” He suggested that “the imperial family will freely be able to go its own way,” and the anarchist revolutionaries “must endeavor as best they can to avoid violence.”<sup>57</sup> These once again are weak statements defending the notion that his anarchist revolution would be mostly peaceful. It again shows what an idealist Kōtoku was. Though he again was mainly defending himself, Kōtoku’s expectation of a non-violent takeover and safe condition for the imperial family were utterly optimistic and would be proven unrealistic after the violent communist takeover and the execution of the Russian imperial family in 1917. These statements show Kōtoku’s complete rejection of lukewarm state socialism. He did not talk about any actions through the parliament and now had selected anarchism from his motley collection of different ideas previously presented in his first book.

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<sup>54</sup> Kōtoku Shūsui, “Violent Revolution,” 472.

<sup>55</sup> Kōtoku Shūsui, “Violent Revolution,” 472.

<sup>56</sup> Kōtoku Shūsui, “Violent Revolution,” 474.

<sup>57</sup> Kōtoku Shūsui, “Violent Revolution,” 474.

In this text, Kōtoku characterized the anarchist “revolutionary movement” as “an effort to train mental capabilities and cultivate ideological enlightenment.” He believed it can be accomplished by endeavors like “publication of newspapers and magazines,” “speeches,” and “public meetings.”<sup>58</sup> He considered activities by participants in the revolutionary movement to be different from the stirring of revolution, they are preparations for the revolution that would come “naturally.” Here, Kōtoku’s emphasis on ideology influence on society was consistent with his actions. Even before his very first book, Kōtoku had been tirelessly contributing intellectually from his writings. Even as his approach became hastier, the goal of his works since his first book which is to make “a small contribution to the establishment of truth and justice” was never changed.<sup>59</sup> This letter which is being read by future generations also served this goal for his ideological movement. However, Kōtoku changed his definition of “revolutionary movement” compared to that in his first book. As mentioned before, Kōtoku had advocated a worldwide revolutionary movement to fundamentally change the society from militarism to socialism. In 1901, “revolutionary movement” equaled revolution in his mind. After viewing revolution as a natural occurrence under influence of anarchism, Kōtoku changed his wording.

Kōtoku espoused the approach of “direct action” after embracing anarchism. In this letter, he was only able to explain this approach from the western perspective. Kōtoku suggested that the term “direct action” for the most part is used in reference to “a strike” rather than “violent revolution.” The strike would be used by workers to “perfect equipment in the factories, and to achieve a limitation of working hours” bypassing the parliament.<sup>60</sup> He also recognized a more extreme take of “active action” which is that “in a time of revolution it is fit that labor unions

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<sup>58</sup> Kōtoku Shūsui, “Violent Revolution,” 474.

<sup>59</sup> Kōtoku, “Imperialism,” 138.

<sup>60</sup> Kōtoku Shūsui, “Violent Revolution,” 477.



proceed to undertake everything.”<sup>61</sup> Kōtoku was ambiguous about the Japanese way of direct action and it shows his idealistic nature and lack of planning to lead the “direct action” movement in Japan. Kōtoku here only categorized direct action as a practice to accompany the revolution. But in his article for the newspaper *Heimin Shinbun* (*The Commoner's News*) written sometime before his imprisonment, he claimed that “the means to accomplish the revolution lie in the execution of a general strike” by which the workers “stop all movement of all organs of production and communication in the entire society.”<sup>62</sup> Kōtoku’s ambivalence on direct action echoed his point in his letter that “among those who espouse direct action, ends, means, and methods differ according to the particular person and situation.”<sup>63</sup> Kōtoku also tried to distinguish the difference between revolution, and uprising and disturbance as he claimed that uprising and disturbance need to be separated from revolution to avoid being tagged as a violent revolutionary. Though until now, Kōtoku has rejected violence in this letter, here he suggested a possibility of planning an uprising to save the poor if there is a need to save them.<sup>64</sup> After all, Kōtoku was more than willing to take various forms of “direct action.”

As mentioned before, both Nobutaka Ike and George Elison were critical of Kōtoku Shūsui. Kōtoku’s championing of direct action indeed exacerbated the devastating split to the Japanese socialist movement. However, the faction that continued to support a legal, parliamentary strategy became the minority after the split. A larger group had favored more radical tactics of anarchism. Kōtoku did have substantial support behind him at that time and Ike’s claim that he did not have a following of any size was inaccurate. The two historians asserted that Kōtoku was not beneficial to the socialist movement. This belief is valid as the

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<sup>61</sup> Kōtoku Shūsui, “Violent Revolution,” 477.

<sup>62</sup> Elison, “The Change in Thought,” 456.

<sup>63</sup> Kōtoku Shūsui, “Violent Revolution,” 477.

<sup>64</sup> Kōtoku Shūsui, “Violent Revolution,” 479.

government cracked down on both factions from 1907 and drove the entire movement underground during the High Treason Incident. Still, Kōtoku Shūsui made undeniable contributions to the ideological enlightenment of the public. The newspaper *Heimin Shinbun* which he founded, was the first socialist newspaper in Japan. It was able to publish anti-war thoughts throughout most of the Russo-Japanese War.<sup>65</sup> The paper also inspired others to continue the experiment of a radical opposition press. When Kōtoku published *Imperialism* at the age of thirty, he had published countless articles and editorials in various other newspapers and journals. For example, he had published his editorials on current affairs or investigative studies of social problems in the popular newspaper *Yorozu Chōhō* (*The Morning News*).<sup>66</sup> Most of Kōtoku's works were written in *kundokubun*, an adaption of classical Chinese. As a result, they exerted a strong influence on Chinese and Korean intellectuals.<sup>67</sup>

Kōtoku Shūsui, a socialist idealist, turned to anarchist ideas and the means of “direct action” under Western influence. As one of the prominent leaders, he caused turmoil in the Japanese socialist movement and was ultimately executed by the government. Although his impractical and ambiguous ideas failed to lead the socialist movement, Kōtoku's pioneering thought experiments and journalistic contributions left imprints on Japanese and East Asian socialist, anti-imperialist movements.

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<sup>65</sup> Tierney, *Monster of the Twentieth Century*, 4.

<sup>66</sup> Tierney, *Monster of the Twentieth Century*, 4.

<sup>67</sup> Tierney, *Monster of the Twentieth Century*, 11.

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