

THE “PATRIOTIC RUFFIANS” OF TAISHŌ JAPAN: KOKUSUIKAI

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Abstract

Japan witnessed increasing penetration of liberal ideas from the West from the 1900s. The Japanese state and conservatives deemed these ideas “Dangerous Thoughts”; the growing workers’ strikes and student protests were believed to be a result of these “Dangerous Thoughts”. As a result, a group of ruffians was put together following a meeting held by Mr. Tokonami to counter “Dangerous Thoughts” in the Taisho period (1912-26). It was believed that by banding these ruffians together as a patriotic society, they could be of immense help to the government, especially during times of turbulence. The organisation was known as *Kokusuiikai*. This paper looks at the *Kokusuiikai* and its role in the Taishō period.

KEY-WORDS: *Ruffians, Patriotic Ruffians, Kokusuiikai, Taishō Japan, Taishō Democracy, Labour, Kyokaku, Mr. Tokonami.*

INTRODUCTION

Japan witnessed a vibrant period of democratic movements from 1912 to 1926, called “Taishō Democracy”. This period is marked by several important movements that included women and labour.

A. Morgan Young's eloquent description of the period as an “entirely uneventful period that seemed to lie before the country; but it proved to be one of unprecedented activity, of undreamt-of prosperity, and of overwhelming misfortune” (Young 1928:340). Just as the era of Meiji Tennō is considered to be a new beginning following the end of the Shogunate, the era of Taishō Tennō is a time when ideas such as democracy, feminism, socialism, communism, and anarchism run amok.

Several important figures like Ozaki Yukio, Hara Takashi, Ōsugi Sakae, Itō Noe, Hiratsuka Raichō, and Kaneko Fumiko raised awareness and worked towards pressing issues of the time. As democracy thrived in Japan, there were several attempts to control and curb activities considered to be “threats”.

One such form of control was through what was termed “Patriotic Ruffians,” who were provided with government support.

This paper looks at one such group: Kokusuikai.

SOCIALISM AND LABOUR MOVEMENT IN JAPAN

According to Katayama Sen, the modern labour movement in Japan is believed to have begun in the summer of 1897, following the war with China. Japanese industries grew prosperous, prompting the working class to demand a wage increase. The modern industrial system was a new experience in Japan, where there was no legal restriction upon the labour movement or strikes; a fact proven by Katayama by providing the example of *Rodo-Kumiai Kiseikai*ⁱ, an organisation formed to create Trade Unions, which gained over two thousand members (Katayama 1918) in a short span of time. One of the first trade unions that was organised was the Iron Workers' Union in Tokyo on 1 December 1897, with over a thousand members. Similarly, Labour World was created as the organ of speech for the labour movement (Katayama 1918).

An indirect result of the labour movement was the successful passage of the Factory Bill. Takano Fusatarō provided a list of some essential points that were included in the bill (Fusutarō 1898).

The authoritative nature of the Employer-Employee relationship is another facet of the labour movement that was discussed by my writers and political activists of the time. This form of relationship caused miscommunication and incomplete articulation of issues or concerns of labour. For many of the progressive liberal labour leaders and workers, this was one of the basic problems facing Japanese industry (Taira 1988: 631).

One of the major unrests of this time was caused by the high cost of rice, a major staple in Japan. In 1918, a series of protests against the rising prices was launched. A. Morgan Young wrote: “The Terauchi governmentⁱⁱ had never been squeamish in the suppression of news. On any occasion, it would issue orders to the press not to print or to comment upon whatever it thought would be better left unpublished, and among these prohibitions, the news of strikes and of the spread of dangerous thought (by which socialism was meant) was frequently included. Mr. Inukai, the leader of *Kokuminto* or the Nationalist Party and reckoned one of Japan's more liberal politicians, protested vigorously against the attempt to mould the public mind with the hard hands of bureaucracy.” Young believes that when the news of strikes and rising prices of essential commodities broke, the anger of the masses soon came out. It is believed by Young that the Rice Riots first began in the fishing villages in the remote province of Toyamaⁱⁱⁱ, where angered fishwives raided rice shops on 4 August 1918. Following this

event, the Rice Riots spread across Japan. Authorities, to keep cities free opened shops for the sale of cheap rice, but these measures failed. After some failed attempts at controlling and suppressing these riots, the authorities finally found success in controlling them. However, the Terauchi Government resigned. (Young 1928:115-118).

The role played by the *Eta* community^{iv} during the Rice Riots was the most crucial aspect of this movement. After the Restoration, Etas were no longer officially recognised as a distinct caste, except under the terminology of *Shin-Heimin* or “new commoners,” but continued to reside in their own settlements (Young 1928:54). Katayama Sen called them the “most determined and able of the revolutionary fighters” as they proved themselves capable of leading unorganised mobs and guiding mass action (Sen 1924). They led the rioters and occupied cities such as Kobe, Osaka, and Kyoto.

The Rice Riots signalled the intensification of the nascent socialist movement in Japan.

With the labour movement slowly gaining momentum, the government also began to ramp up its efforts to provide a better quality of life. As reported by The Republican Journal on 3 February 1919, the Home Office of the Imperial Government was establishing a Relief Works Committee to deal with the problem of unemployment due to the cessation of war work.

Socialism had finally arrived in Japan.

ORIGINS OF KOKUSUIKAI

During this period, several strikes and protest movements took place that demanded better living conditions. There were discussions regarding the legality of trade unions and strikes, as well as the Police Regulations in the Diet^v just before it closed (Young 1928:168).

The government used various methods during this time to keep the growing dissent in check. One of these ways was through the formation of “patriotic societies” such as *Kokusuikai*. During this period, there was a consistent effort to build a sense of “patriotic fervour” amongst the masses.

This was exaggerated, especially when it became clear that the emperor would not return and the Crown Prince was appointed as the Regent. According to Young, from this point on, the Regent (Crown Prince) became the centre of the patriotic cult of which Mr. Tokonami (Home Minister) was the earnest promoter (Young 1928: 228).

In October 1919, the idea of creating a ‘patriotic society’ whose members comprised primarily of *Kyokaku*^{vi} (dare-to-dies) was devised. These persons, during the Edo period, were considered to be a type of low-class samurai. They were bullies and swashbucklers, but had a

sort of rough chivalry. During this time period, their most prominent function was settling quarrels between the daimyos and their train of coolies (Young 1928:172-173). Their descendants developed a hereditary inclination to become contractors' men and gangers. According to Young, it was conceived that the Kyokaku should be formed into a patriotic society in order to be of considerable use to the government during turbulent times, as they were likely to stand for "law and order and no damned nonsense" (Young 1928:173). The society that was created was named "*Kokusuikai*" or the National Essence Society. Its leader, Lieutenant General Kojiro Sato, author of the famous work "If Japan and America Fight" (as also reported by The Register, the English-language newspaper from Adelaide, Australia, on 1 November 1923), played a crucial role in its development.

For some journalists, especially overseas, the conception of *Kokusuikai* was a part of the Imperial Government's "White Terror," whose most famous incident was the "Anarchist Trial" of 1911 in which the government imprisoned and hanged a score of socialists on a false charge^{vii}.

According to Young, many labour organisations and leaders protested against its formation. They regarded it as an organisation of bullies designed to break up Labour meetings and overawe strikers (Young 1928:174).

The *Kokusuikai* were responsible for breaking up many assemblies that were organised by communists, socialists, and anarchists. The International Press Correspondence of COMINTERN provides an example of one such disturbance; women communists of Japan had organised assemblies and gatherings for the women's day campaign held in cities like Tokyo, Osaka and Kobe. One of the meetings that was convened in Tokyo and attended by over 1,000 people was broken up by *Kokusuikai*. They have been called "Japanese Fascists" or "Japanese Fascist Organisation" by Communists and Socialists (Kasparova 1924: 266) (Sen 1924: 126).

One of the main functions that the members of *Kokusuikai* envisioned for themselves was intervention. In some cases, members of the *Kokusuikai* offered their services of mediation to strikers and the management (factory administration). For instance, a strike at Yawata Ironworks caused 15,000 men to walk out. Members of the *Kokusuikai* rushed to Kyushu to mediate but were threatened by the strikers (Young 1928: 230). Another incident that highlights this function was the case of a strike at the Osaka Electric Light Works in May 1921, but soon discovered that the *Yuaikai*^{viii} had been tasked with this responsibility. However, they

were more successful in resolving the situation at Kawasaki Ironworks, where their services for mediation were accepted (Young 1928: 234-235).

One of the primary reasons for the reluctance of management, workers, and administration to accept the services of the *Kokusikai* to mediate was the changed conditions in which the organisation functioned. In the older Edo period, where there had been no police and the coolies did not resemble the strikers of the 20th century, the *Kokusuikai* was successful in making itself the arbiter of trade disputes (Young 1928:234). However, in the 20th century, the conditions witnessed changes in conditions that made the continued tradition of the *Kokusuikai* as the go-to body for mediation, especially amongst the lower classes, difficult.

The composition of *Kokusuikai* led to it often being caught in disputes with other individuals and organisations. These disputes took the form of physical assaults and intimidation. One example of such a dispute is mentioned by Katayama Sen in his monograph “ The Eta Movement: A Strong Revolutionary Factor in the Coming Struggle for Proletarian Emancipation in Japan”.

According to Sen, members of the *Suiheisha*^{ix} fought members of the *Kokusuikai* in Isogi County, Nara Prefecture (Sen 1924:126). The conflict that lasted for a few days was caused when a member of the *Kokusuikai* insulted a member of the *Suiheisha* at the latter’s wedding procession. The local executive of the *Suiheisha* demanded that the insults be retracted and proper apologies be made. However, this demand of the *Suiheisha* was not accepted, leading ultimately to mass action by the members of *Suiheisha*. The members of the *Kokusuikai* retaliated, culminating in the violent conflict. The conflict finally ended when a member of *Kokusuikai* wrote an apology (Sen 1924:126-127).

Such incidents seem to have been a very common occurrence with the *Kokusuikai*. Another instance of such disputes that the organisation found itself in is recorded by Young. The members of the organisation, following the debacle at Yawata Ironworks, returned to Tokyo where they showed their true mettle by pommelling Mr. Ozaki Yukio, whose offence seemed to have been his vigorous advocacy of universal manhood suffrage (Young 1928: 230-231).

The Polish Language newspaper “Dziennik Dla Wszystkich” or the “Polish Everybody’s Daily” based in Buffalo, New York, United States of America reported on 9th February 1923 that *Kokusuikai* found itself in trouble with the law following its attempts to break up several meetings of the Japanese working classes, leading to the arrests of several of its members.

Another incident reported by The Socialist, an English-language Melbourne, Australia-based newspaper, on 21 May 1920, affirms that members of the Kokusuikai attacked the Chief Manager of a labour organisation while he was near Asakusa in the morning before a meeting organised by the *Rikken Rodo-to* or the Constitutional Labour Party at the Ueno Park. Despite the attack, the victim, in his speech, declared that these “cowardly methods” used by the government to oppress the supporters of universal suffrage would not break his conviction; rather it would strengthen it further.

The common link that runs throughout these instances is the use of intimidation and violence to maintain the status quo. *Kokusuikai* became an integral tool for the members of the ruling classes. Despite these instances, we see that most organisations and individuals who were intimidated by *Kokusuikai* did not just accept the terms put forward by them; they responded to such intimidation and got immense public support.

A case in point is related to one of the events that was described above, following the clash of *Kokusuikai* with *Suieheisha*, members of the working classes and peasants supported and sympathised with *Suieheisha*. As a consequence of such popular support, members of the *Suieheisha* were persecuted, and the government began to crack down on the organisation (Sen 1924:127).

KOKUSUIKAI AND SAFETY VALVE THEORY

The aims and goals for which *Kokusuikai* was created seem similar to the function of a “Safety Valve”. The theory of the “safety valve” in the discipline of history was used by scholars to describe the role of the Indian National Congress (INC) for several years. As defined by Bipan Chandra “the myth of the safety valve is that the INC was started by A.O. Hume and others under the official direction, guidance and advice of no less a person than Lord Dufferin, the Viceroy, to provide a safe, mild, peaceful and constitutional outlet or safety valve for the rising discontent among the masses, which was inevitably leading towards a popular and violent revolution. Consequently, the revolutionary potential was nipped in the bud. The core of the myth, that a violent revolution was on the cards at the time and was avoided only by the foundations of the Congress (Bipan Chandra 1988:61)”.

Kokusuikai’s function to suppress outbursts of disgruntlement of the common masses against the ruling class gives us a false illusion that the organisation had been created as a “safety valve”. However, unlike the members of the Indian National Congress, who regularly used constitutional and peaceful methods to advance the cause of the Indian masses, members of

the *Kokusuikai* used violent methods and threats to achieve their demands. Ozaki Yukio, in his autobiography, notes one such incident. Ozaki writes that during his country-wide tour, he came across a leader of the *Kokusuikai* in Nagoya who made it known to Ozaki Yukio that there would be trouble if he attended the meeting on his tour (Ozaki Yukio 2001: 340). He still went to Nagoya but fell ill and could not leave his room on the second floor of the inn where he was staying. The *Kokusuikai* leader entered the inn and attacked Ozaki, who escaped (Ozaki Yukio 2001: 340).

The creation of the *Kokusuikai* was also not to provide the common masses, especially the working classes, with an outlet to release their disgruntlement. They were formed primarily to suppress any form of resentment against the ruling classes. While the *Kokusuikai* did mediate between the workers and the capitalist management during strikes, they primarily used physical assaults and threats to prevent any form of dissent from rising.

Considering the above-mentioned points, it is not hard to conclude that the *Kokusuikai* was a group that was not meant to act as a “safety valve” for the masses. Rather, it was created solely for the purpose of stopping any form of dissent against the government.

Tokonami Takejirō’s efforts to expel any form of dissent seemed not to have been very successful. Despite the repeated crackdowns by the government, socialists in Japan continued to organise meetings and organised protests. For instance, the Socialists organised a meeting at the Young Men’s Christian Association Hall at Kanda, Tokyo^x. However, members of an organisation, *Kokoku Isshinkai*, that was believed to have members of the *Kokusuikai*, attended the meet and assaulted the socialists.

One of the greatest strikes that occurred in Japan began amongst the electrical workers in the Kawasaki Dockyard, Kobe. Following attacks by a “gang of hired bullies”, the strike spread to the Mitsubishi yard and the Kawasaki yard. While the strike did not succeed and the workers returned to work, it is imperative to note that, despite its failure, the movement succeeded in gaining the support of the masses.

This suggests that even though there were attempts at suppressing the labour, socialist and reform movements, due to the unpopularity of organisations such as *Kokusuikai*, many of these movements gained popularity and sympathy amongst the masses.

CONCLUSION

The *Kokusuikai* was a society for the “Patriotic Ruffians”. Its inception was for the purpose of ensuring that the “patriotic fervour” in Japan continues and is not marred by the growing

dissent of Tokonami Takejirō. Despite its valiant efforts at suppression of any form of disgruntlement, the organisation only helped in strengthening “Taishō Democracy” by getting the different movements together for a common cause. Even though its existence is still relatively unknown, it played a crucial role during the vibrant period known as “Taishō Democracy”.

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ⁱ Rodo-Kumiai Kiseikai was created by Takano Fusatarō in 1897.

ⁱⁱ Terauchi Masatake was an important Military Personnel who became the Prime Minister of Japan in 1916. He is known for pushing through many important issues of the time including the Intervention in Siberia. Terauchi and his cabinet resigned due to the rice riots/Kome-Sodo.

ⁱⁱⁱ Toyama Prefecture is located in the Hokuriku region of Japan. Formerly known as Etchū province, it was established in 1871 and it borders the Ishikawa Prefecture to the west, Gifu Prefecture to the south, Nagano Prefecture to the east and Niigata Prefecture to the north-east.

^{iv} Eta is a community in Japan that has occupied the lowest rung of the Japanese Caste system. At present, the Etas and Hinins form the Burakumin.

^v The National Diet or Diet is the national legislature of Japan.

^{vi} According to a news report from Daily Standard, a newspaper from Australia in its 4 June 1921 edition that members of Kokusuikai comprised of gamblers, criminals and ex-convicts.

^{vii} This was reported in the Daily Standard, a newspaper from Australia in its 4 June 1921 edition.

^{viii} Yuaikai was a labour organization founded by Suzuki Bunji.

^{ix} The Suiheisha was the “Eta movement for emancipation” founded in 1922. The organization aimed at securing rights for members of the Burakumin community.

^x According to a report by *The Socialist*, an Australian newspaper in its 21 May 1920 edition, the meeting had been organized for the purpose of impeaching the government that was governing Japan at the time. It also aimed to arouse public support for the cause of immediate adoption of universal suffrage system.