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Murder of an Anarchist Recalled: Suppression of News in the Wake of the 1923 Tokyo Earthquake

The Asahi Shinbun

The murders recalled below were facilitated by the enormous earthquake, with countless aftershocks in the ensuing 24 hours, that hit the Tokyo-Yokohama area at about noon on September 1, 1923. Chaos ensued as the population took to the streets, dodging debris and fallen buildings, and spreading rumors as they ran. Cooking fires had been burning in most homes, and when the buildings collapsed, the fires spread rapidly, sooner or later killing over 100,000 people and leaving 70-80% of the population homeless. Among the rumors spread in the days and weeks following the shock was the report that Korean residents were looting, setting fires, and committing other crimes. The rumors led to the formation of local vigilante organizations, some of which set out to punish Koreans and ended up killing large numbers – at least several hundred, and perhaps several thousand. The confusion also seems to have provided an opportunity for police to arrest and interrogate not only looters and rioters but others they considered to be leftwing troublemakers. Among the latter rounded up on September 16 by military police under the command of Captain Amakazu Masahiko were the well-known socialist-anarchist writer and activist Osugi Sakae, his wife Ito Noe, who was also a writer and editor, and their young nephew, Tachibana Munezazu. Their strangled bodies were found several days later in an abandoned well.



Osugi Sakae

When recounted today, eighty-some years later, the incident and its suppression by media under the thumb of government censorship provide the occasion to reflect on more recent human rights abuses at the hands of government agents and the circumstances that allow them to continue. J. Victor Koschmann

The black-and-white photo shows three wood coffins stacked on top of each other.

Each has a name scrawled on it. The one in the middle bears the name "Sakae," for Osugi Sakae, who led the anarchist movement in the Taisho Era (1912-1926). The others show the names of his wife, the prominent feminist Ito Noe, and his 6-year-old nephew, Tachibana Munezazu.



Ito Noe

The three were abducted and murdered by military police led by Capt. Amakazu Masahiko on Sept. 16, 1923. The attack occurred during the wave of violence that swept Tokyo after the Great Kanto Earthquake. Martial law had been imposed, and police seized the opportunity to murder dissenters. Amakazu regarded Osugi as an enemy of the state.

The photo was taken when their bodies, which the military police handed over to Osugi's younger brother Isamu and other relatives, arrived at the crematorium in what is now Tokyo's Shinjuku Ward on the evening of Sept. 25. However, under martial law, the media were allowed to report only that "Osugi Sakae and two others" were killed by Amakazu and his men until their first military court hearing on Oct. 8.

On the back of the photo was a memo in pencil that said that if the names of the "two others" were not erased, the newspaper carrying the photo would likely be banned.

The Sept. 27 evening edition of the Tokyo Asahi Shinbun carried the photo but masked the names of Osugi's wife and nephew. Nevertheless, sales of the

newspaper were banned. When the story appeared again in the Asahi's monthly compact edition, the newspaper had to black out the right half of the photo and delete the caption. According to a former journalist with the Jiji Shinpo newspaper who covered the incident, the names on the coffins were written by Yasunari Jiro, a journalist friend of Osugi.

The three men in the photo are not identified, but the Sept. 27 evening edition of the Tokyo Asahi Shimbun said Wada Kyutaro, Osugi's fellow anarchist, and others had been at the crematorium. In an apparent retaliation, Wada attempted to kill Army Gen. Fukuda Masataro, former martial law commander, on the first anniversary of the on Sept. 1, 1924. But he failed.

Sentenced to life in prison, Wada hanged himself in February 1928 in his cell at Akita Prison, where he was confined in harsh conditions.

Yasunari, Osugi's friend, was a tanka poet and literary journalist. One of his poems says:

"Born in a country
Where power of words is said to thrive
Incredible it is
That we are not allowed to speak out."

Yasunari took part in the compilation of the encyclopedia that Heibonsha Ltd. started to publish in November 1931. He wrote the "Amakasu Incident" entry himself. In it, he dispassionately described the different punishments given to Amakasu and Wada.

While Wada was sentenced to life in prison for wounding Fukuda, Amakasu was given a 10-year term for the death of Osugi and the two others. He was released on parole three years later, and, after staying in France for two years on the Army's secret funds, traveled to northeast China in 1930.

Amakasu got involved in the establishment of Manchukuo and exerted a considerable influence over the puppet state of Japan, from behind the scenes. Amakasu committed suicide on Aug. 20, 1945, days after Japan's capitulation to the Allies in World War II.

In 1973, 50 years after the incident, Yasunari published an essay about Osugi under the title "Museifu Jigoku" (Anarchy hell). He died the next year at the age of 88. Yasunari seldom talked about the incident, but his granddaughter, Yasunari Nagiko, 62, recalls him recommending she read the complete works of Osugi.

In July 2003, nearly 80 years after the incident, Nagiko received word that Osugi and Ito's second daughter, Sukanuma Sachiko (formerly Osugi Emma), had died. She had never met Sachiko, but attended her funeral in Fujisawa, Kanagawa Prefecture. She said she felt she must attend.

"(In those years) the Japanese had allowed society to deteriorate into one where people went so far as to kill those whom they did not like," Nagiko says. "The fate of both Sakae and his daughter was tossed about in the waves of society at that time."

This article appeared in the IHT/Asahi Shinbun on September 7, 2007 and at Japan Focus on November 5, 2007.

See also Sonia Ryang, [The Tongue That Divided Life and Death. The 1923 Tokyo Earthquake and the Massacre of Koreans.](#)

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