

About Ōtsuka Kinnosuke (1892-1977) – his life, work and role in the relations between Japan and East Germany

Education

The Marxist economist Ōtsuka Kinnosuke was born in Kanda, Tōkyō in 1892 to a proletarian family. According to the curriculum vitae written by himself his parents never had attended school.

Ōtsuka went to the Kōbe Higher Commercial School (today Kōbe University) from 1910 to 1914 and he was even exempted from paying the school fees. However, because of a favourable article about the anarchist Emma Goldman and her views in the students' magazine („Shugisha 'Gōrudoman'” in “Kōbe kōtō shōgyō gakkō gakuyūkai””, no. 58, May 1912, p. 331-336) the headmaster of the school and the head of the library were reprimanded by the Ministry of Education. All editions of the students' magazine were confiscated and Ōtsuka was deprived of his privilege concerning the school fees.

Nevertheless, he continued his education at Tōkyō Higher Commercial School (today Hitotsubashi University) where he graduated in 1916. Directly after his graduation he started to work and teach at the same school.

From 1919 until 1923 Ōtsuka studied abroad at the Columbia University, New York, the London School of Economics and Political Science and the Berlin University (today Humboldt University) with a scholarship of the Japanese Ministry of Education. His stay coincided with a time of upheaval in America and Europe. He witnessed strikes and the discriminating treatment of black people in America, whereas in Germany inflation was at its height accompanied by strikes and social unrest. In London Ōtsuka attended lectures by the socialist and reformer Sidney Webb. Finally in Berlin Ōtsuka was introduced to Marxism and his interest for it grew rapidly. He started to collect socialist literature.

Work at university

In 1924 Ōtsuka became first an assistant professor and in 1927 a professor at the then Tōkyō University of Commerce (today Hitotsubashi University). Until 1926 he had finished the first complete Japanese translation of Alfred Marshall's “Principles of Economics” (“Keizaigaku genri”) which was published in four volumes. As Ōtsuka was able to understand German, he read Karl Marx's “Capital” and “Theories of Surplus Value” in the German original. In the following years Ōtsuka established himself as a scholar of Marxist economics through many publications. In 1927 he was actively involved in the foundation of the Tōkyō Institute of Social Science (Tōkyō Shakai Kagaku Kenkyūsho) whose director he eventually became (until 1930) and contributed in various ways to the proletarian cause in Japan e.g. by supporting the consumer cooperative movement. Although he was not an official member of the Japan Communist Party, he was according to the curriculum vitae written by himself part of a secret faction that operated in the underground. In 1931 Ōtsuka married Ishikawa Hideko who worked as a music teacher.

The debate on Japanese capitalism

In the course of time the situation for political dissidents became more and more difficult. The aim of the Peace Preservation Law (chian ijihō) enacted in 1925 was to control political opposition. It was specifically intended to suppress anarchist, socialist and communist activities. Any criticism of “kokutai”, the national entity unique to Japan with the emperor at its centre, was severely punished.

Nevertheless, under the leadership of the important Marxist theoretician Noro Eitarō a group of Marxist scholars set out to publish a comprehensive analysis of Japanese capitalism since the Meiji restoration. Noro, Ōtsuka and two others were the joint editors of the “Nihon shihonshugi hattatsushi kōza” (“Lectures on the history of the development of Japanese capitalism”) that consisted of seven volumes. Their enterprise took place at a time when Japanese imperialism and militarism were increasing rapidly. The Japanese invasion of Manchuria was already on its way and the publication of the first volume in May 1932 coincided with the so called May 15th Incident (goichigo jiken), when Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi was assassinated by young naval officers of the Imperial Japanese Army as part of an attempted coup d’état.

The publication plan of the “Lectures” had constantly to be changed as contributors were arrested, were involved in illegal activities or fell ill. Noro Eitarō had intended to write introductions for each main part of the “Lectures”, but this never came true. In addition due to severe censorship the “Lectures” could only appear in a highly revised form. The distribution of the fourth instalment was completely banned and from the fifth instalment onward numerous deletions or revisions were exercised by the authorities. The original publication of the “Lectures” was finished in August 1933, but it was not before 1982 that a restored original version of the “Lectures” including all censored parts was published by Iwanami Shoten. Despite all the obstacles the “Lectures” exerted an important influence on intellectuals and students and played an essential role in the debate on Japanese capitalism (Nihon shihon shugi ronsō) that deeply divided the Marxist theorists at that time.

In general the editors of the “Lectures” supported the so called 1932 Theses of the Comintern. These expressed a severe criticism of the Japanese imperialism and the current situation in Japan which was regarded as backward and feudal with the emperor system as the main obstacle for the two-stage revolution in order to bring about the proletarian revolution. Although the Japanese translation of the 1932 Theses were made public in the Communist newspaper “Akahata” only in July 1932 at a time, when the second instalment of the “Lectures” was already published, still the major part of the “Lectures” became a theoretical foundation for the 1932 Theses and therefore propagated the necessity for a two-stage revolution in Japan (first bourgeois revolution including the overthrow of the emperor system, then the proletarian revolution). As a consequence those within the Marxist movement who supported the ideas expressed in the “Lectures” (Japanese: kōza) were accordingly called the “Kōzaha”.

They were opposed by another school of Marxist economists, the “Rōnōha”, which was closely connected with the magazine “Rōnō” (“Labour farmer”). The Rōnōha argued in favour of a one-stage revolution, as from their point of view the Meiji Restoration had been the bourgeois revolution and feudalism already had come to an end. Hence the next step would be to bring about the proletarian revolution by first educating the masses.

The Arrest

During the ongoing debate Ōtsuka and his wife were arrested in January 1933 at an inn in Yugashima where he was working on the draft of the “Lectures”. He was accused of having violated the Peace Preservation Law by giving a financial donation to the Japan Communist Party. Also Noro Eitarō who suffered from tuberculosis was arrested in November 1933. Torture worsened his condition and led to his death shortly after in February 1934 while still in prison.

In July 1933 Ōtsuka’s first trial ended with the verdict of a two year prison sentence that was suspended for a probation period of three years. However, the prosecution was not convinced that the prisoner had renounced Communism in earnest. In the second trial Ōtsuka finally prepared – like hundreds of other imprisoned Communists at that time – a formal statement of recantation (tenkō,

literally: change of direction), but the verdict in November 1933 stayed the same: a suspended two year prison sentence with a probation period of three years. Ōtsuka was free again, but he remained under strict surveillance of the authorities.

The years from 1933 to 1945 were not easy. Ōtsuka did not only lose his position at university, but he was banned from all public posts. The Ōtsukas made their living thanks to the money earned by his wife giving private lessons, by translations Ōtsuka did and with the help of friends. Ōtsuka continued his studies as best as possible, but for the time being he turned to the more neutral themes of humanity and world history. Thomas More, Albert Einstein, Adam Smith and Richard Wagner are among the topics of his published articles. After the war a compilation of them appeared as the first volume of the paperback series "Iwanami shinsho aoban" ("Iwanami new books blue edition") under the title "Kaihō shisōshi no hitobito" ("The men in the history of ideas of human emancipation"). Between 1940 and 1941 Ōtsuka secretly burnt about 1000 Japanese and 500 European language books from his own library out of fear the books might be found by the "thought police" (shisō keisatsu) of that time, the Special Higher Police (Tokubetsu Kōtō Keisatsu). Much later in 1959 he compiled a catalogue of these titles and had it printed in 50 copies at his own expense ("Index Librorum Prohibitorum in the Pre-War Japan").

After the war

After the war in 1945 Ōtsuka was reinstated as professor at his former university. He took up his work as teacher and researcher again and published widely on socialism, economics and many other topics. In 1950 he was appointed as a member of the Japan Academy (Nihon Gakushūin). In addition Ōtsuka supported the activities of the Nichidoku Bunka no Kai (Japanese-German Culture Association, founded in 1954) that had the aim to foster the cultural exchange especially with the GDR. One must bear in mind that whereas Japan had given full diplomatic recognition to West Germany in 1955, diplomatic relations between East Germany and Japan were not established until 1973. However, the Nichidoku Bunka no Kai could not draw much attention to its limited activities and the contacts between the two countries remained mainly on a personal level of the members.

After Ōtsuka's retirement in 1956 he continued to give lectures at Keiō University until 1973. Simultaneously he was appointed professor at Meiji Gakuin University. The seminar he taught at the latter university had its own publication which was named after the famous boulevard in Berlin "Unter den Linden" ("Under the lime trees"). It was published in seven numbers from 1959 until 1965.

In 1962 Ōtsuka gave the first donation of Japanese books from his library to the Staatsbibliothek in East Berlin that was followed by five further donations. During the 1960s several Japan-GDR Friendship Associations (Nihon-DDR Yūkō Kyōkai or Nichidoku Yūkō Kyōkai) were founded in Ōsaka, Kobe, Kōchi, Fukuoka and Tōkyō. Ōtsuka was appointed as one of the official advisors (komon) for the Tōkyō Association (Nihon-DDR Yūkō Kyōkai) whose head he became in 1973.

After his retirement Ōtsuka also started to travel to Europe and Asia in order to attend conferences, for pleasure or because he was invited by institutes abroad as a guest researcher. Usually he was accompanied by his wife on his journeys. In 1956 he went to Rome, Cologne and did a tour of Europe. In 1959 Ōtsuka was invited by the Chinese Academy of Sciences for a one month stay. In the following year he was asked to attend the celebrations for the 150th anniversary of Humboldt University. In 1964 he not only visited North Korea and Peking, but stayed from November 1964 until February 1965 at Oxford University. Before finally returning to Japan in April 1965 Ōtsuka spent a longer time in East Germany.

Another stay in the GDR followed in 1966 when he and other representatives of the Japanese-German friendship organizations were invited to take part in the “Tage der Freundschaft mit dem japanischen Volk” (“Days of Friendship with the Japanese People”) – a propaganda campaign held from 12th to 15th September 1966 in Weimar and East Berlin including an exhibition of Japanese art, a symposium and other events. One highlight of the “Friendship Days” was the ceremony of granting a honorary doctorate of Humboldt University to Ōtsuka. In 1969 he also attended the celebrations for the 50th anniversary of the Asia Africa Department of the Deutsche Staatsbibliothek in East Berlin. The aim of Ōtsuka’s last journey in 1975 was again the GDR. During his stay the Liga der Völkerfreundschaft (“League of Nations’ Friendship”) which was the umbrella organization for all international friendship associations of the GDR, awarded Ōtsuka with the order “Stern der Völkerfreundschaft in Gold” (“Star of Nations’ Friendship in Gold”) that he gladly accepted. Whereas in 1966 he had rejected the Order of the Sacred Treasure, Second Class that the Japanese government had intended to bestow upon him.

Among his publications are many articles about his travels abroad. Ōtsuka’s experiences in East Germany were collected in the book “Aru shakai kagakusha no henreki – minshu doitsu no tabi” (“The pilgrimage of a social scientist – a journey to the democratic Germany”) which is one of the first detailed publication about the GDR in Japanese published in 1969.

Apart from his work as a researcher, Ōtsuka also established himself as a noted poet. Already in 1921 his first tanka (short poem) was chosen for a newspaper column and published under a pen name. One year later he became a member of the group of poets associated with the leading literary magazines of tanka poems “Araragi”. Ōtsuka continuously contributed poems to this magazine until 1927. However, after his studies abroad Ōtsuka’s viewpoint as a poet had shifted to a more political position. He published an article entitled “Musansha tanka” (“The tanka of the proletariat”) in the literary magazine “Marumera”. Despite several interruptions Ōtsuka continued to write poetry until after the Second World War. During his stay in prison in 1933 he even managed to smuggle his poems out of there and had them published one year later using the name of a colleague as a pen name. The two collections with Ōtsuka’s poems “Asaake” and “Jinmin” were published in 1947 and 1979.

Ōtsuka Kinnosuke died in 1977. The last donation of books from his collection was given to the Staatsbibliothek by his widow in 1986. Only three years after his death Ōtsuka’s collected works were published in ten volumes (“Ōtsuka Kinnosuke chosakushū”). In addition several of his former students came together to establish the Ōtsukakai (Ōtsuka Society). The Society publishes its own periodical, the “Ōtsukakai kaihō” (shelf mark: Zsn 131470) and keeps the memory of Professor Ōtsuka Kinnosuke alive to this day.