

Reporting the ‘High Treason Incident’ (1910): Politics and debate in The *Yomiuri Shimbun*

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Introduction

Under the Constitution of the Empire of Japan, the Penal Code (Title 2 Chapter 1 Section 73) regulates that “anyone who harmed or will harm the Emperor, the Empress Dowager, the Grand Empress Dowager, the Empress, the Crown Prince, or the Grandson of the Emperor is brought to the scaffold”. ‘High Treason Incident’ (1910) is the case in which 12 persons including Kotoku Shusui and Kanno Suga were executed, 12 persons including Sakamoto Seima were imprisoned for life, and 2 persons including Nitta Tōru were sentenced to jail terms.

There are many researches about the ‘High Treason Incident’ and the details of the Incident were investigated by specialists or organisations like Itoya Toshio or *Taigyaku Jiken no Shinjitsu wo Akirakani suru Kai (Organisation making the High Treason Incident Clear)*ⁱ after the Pacific War. By these results, the following details were cleared: first, Miyashita Takichi plotted to kill the Emperor and tried to make and test the bomb, Niimura Tadao and Kanno were somewhat positive and Furukawa Rikisaku was passive to Miyashita’s plan. Second Kotoku had no relationship to Miyashita’s plan and the other people were unconcerned to the plan itself.

In addition, there are also some other researches and the relationship between the ‘High Treason Incident’ and the mass media is an important field of study. For example, Yamaizumi Susumu sheds light on the importance of the role of newspaper reports in the beginning of the Incident (Yamaizumi 1994, pp. 63-87) and Ogawa Toshio examines changes over time of newspaper reports through manuscripts or cuttings of Ishikawa Takuboku, who was a poet and a proof reader of the *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun* (Ogawa 1995, pp. 259-279; Ogawa 1996, pp. 129-184; Ogawa 1997, pp. 139-195).

In this report one can examine how newspapers reported the ‘High Treason Incident’ at the time, focusing on the *Yomiuri Shimbun*.

From the first report of the ‘High Treason Incident’ to the restriction order of the report

First of all, let us overview the proceedings of the report of the ‘High Treason Incident’.

It was the *Jiji Shimpo* of 27th May 1910 that first reports the high treason incidentⁱⁱ. The article of the *Jiji Shimpo* was titled as “Arresting Socialists” and reported as “socialists lay their identities as workers and penetrated the Akeshina Sawmill which is under the jurisdiction of the Nagano Dairin-ku and formed a terrible plot with the secret bomb-making, but they arrested by the Matsumoto Police Office”. After this arrestment Wada Ryohei, the deputy prosecutor of the Nagano District Court, and Ohara Naoshi, the prosecutor of the Tokyo District Court, inquired them and cleared the followings: Miyashita Takichi, Niimura Tadao, Kanno Suga, and Furukawa Rikisaku plotted together in October 1909 that they would plant a bomb to the Emperor in November 1910, Nitta Toru made a tin can by Miyashita’s order, and Niimura Zembei, senior brother of Niimura Tada, sent a *yagen*, the crushing tool for to Miyashita. By these evidences, Wada and Ohara decided this case was the assassination attempt of the Emperor (Ogawa 1996, p.132). And in 31st May, the Nagano District Public Prosecutors’ Office turned over 7 subjects, Miyashita, Niimura brothers, Kannno, Furukawa, Nitta,

and Kotoku Shusui, to the Prosecutor-general of the Supreme Court (Ogawa 1995, p.262). However, all newspapers were forbidden to run a detailed story about this case by the Tokyo District Public Prosecutors Office on 2nd June. Most newspaper publishers learned first the case through this restriction order with a few exceptions (Ogawa 1996, pp.176-177).

Partial lifting of the restriction order to the report discussing the ‘High Treason Incident’

Partial lifting of the restriction order was done on 3rd June. It was based on reasons such as: first, at 3: 40 A.M. on 2nd June, the person called Harrison sent a telegram to the *New York Herald* saying “Socialists’ serious plot to the government of Japan was exposed” (Yamaizumi 1998, p.79), and the government of Japan had to correct the content of this telegram. Secondly Japan, a member of the international society, could not be in defiance of international opinions (Ikeda 2001, p.52).By this partial lifting of the restriction order, newspapers reported this case from 4th June. They reported the arrestment of Kotoku and his conspirators like “Arrestment of socialists” (the *Shinano Mainichi Simbun*), “Plot of the nihilist’s party” (the *Yomiuri Shimbun*), “Domiciliary

visit of socialists” (the *Jiji Shimpō*), or “Bloodcurdling serious plot” (the *Tokyo Nichi-nichi Shimbun*). The restriction order was lifted partially, however, there was a limitation of the Newspaper Law which regulated activities of the newspaper. By this reason it was difficult for the newspaper company to report this case was the high treason incident. For that reason the newspaper companies had to contrive how to report this case that was not a bomb-making incident but a serious case. Newspapers of 4th June used a phrase “Unprecedented serious incident in Japan” (The *Yomiuri Shimbun*) or “Bloodcurdling serious plot” and “Daring and serious plot in Japan” to express the importance of the case.

Later on the newspapers reported the proceeding of the case with the official announcement of the authority and original research in range of the restriction order. It was 21st September when the newspapers implied this case as the high treason incident (Ogawa 1997, p.144). The *Jiji Shimpō* run the article titled as “Trial of socialists” and said as follows: “we cannot know the plea of subjects, but there will be special tribunals” and “in which Mr. Suehiro Genseki, a Supreme Court justice will take a preliminary court, the Supreme Court will judge the case, and the first trial is the last trial”. In original reports, it was the case that socialists made bomb and the police authority arrested them. If this report was true, the law applied to this case was the

Explosives Control Act and the first trial would not have been the last trial. The main point of this article was: if the ordinal three-tiered judicial system was applied and the special tribunals in which the first trial would be the last trial was set, this case must be the high treason incident to which the section 73 of the Penal Code was applied.

The *Hochi Shimbun* of 22nd September cleared that point with the article titled “Special tribunals in the Supreme Court”. In this article, the *Hochi Shimbun* implied that this case must be the high treason incident quoting the letter of Kanno to her lawyer of the treason and used double size characters to the phrase “felony to the Imperial Family” (Ogawa 1997, p.149). After this article, some newspapers like the *Tokyo Nichi-nichi Shimbun*, and the *Shinano Mainichi Shimbun* run the same kind of article of the *Hochi Shimbun*, and it was said that Kotoku and his conspirators had caused the high treason incident (Ikeda 2001, p.53). In addition, in foreign countries some newspapers reported that the high treason incident was caused in Japan using the article of the *Hochi Shimbun* and being based on the article of the *New York Times* placed on the Reuters dispatch (Ogawa 1997, p.149). The high treason incident in Japan was reported not only in Western countries but also South American or Asian countries (Ogawa 1997, p.150), but the government of Japan denied such reports (Ikeda 2001, p.53).

From acknowledgement of occurrence of the high treason incident to exclusion of Kotoku and his conspirators

It was 9th November when the Japanese government acknowledged this case as the high treason incident (Ikeda 2001, p.53). On the day, Matsumuro Itasu, the Prosecutor-general, assembled the representative of newspaper companies at 10 A.M. and declared that all reports about this case would be applied the section 42 of the Newspaper Law—when one blasphemes the dignity of the Imperial Family will face two years of imprisonment and be fined up to 300 yen. This time, news censorship was imposed.

When the first trial took place on 10th December, newspapers reported particularly, but the Supreme Court did not invite anyone in evidence and kept the trial secretly. Then most articles had to depend on the official announcement of the authority and every report of respective companies consequently was analogous. It must be a cause of the criticism to write down official announcements and to make articles through the *Shiho Kisha Club* (Press Club of Ministry of Justice) or the *Marunouchi Kisha Club* (Marunouchi Press Club) (Ikeda 2001, pp.52, 54). Prosecution demanded a penalty in the 13th trial of 25th December. That time the *Jiji Shimpō* run the comment of

Matsumuro, “in judicial terms, all defendants are appropriate to the section 73 of the Penal Code, that is to say the capital punishment, then we expect the Supreme Court to apply this section to them”.

In 18th January 1911, 24 of 26 defendants were sentenced to death, but for 12 defendants including Sakamoto Seima the death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. 11 condemned criminals including Kotoku were executed on 24th January and Kanno on 25th January. With this the ‘High Treason Incident’ called “Unprecedented serious incident in Japan” were closed for the time being.

Articles on the ‘High Treason Incident’ in the *Yomiuri Shimbun*

In this section, let us examine articles on the ‘High Treason Incident’ in the *Yomiuri Shimbun*.

It was the article of 4th June 1910 titled “Plot of the nihilist’s party” in which the *Yomiuri Shimbun* first reported this case. As already examined, the first report on this case was published in the *Jiji Shimpo* of 27th May 1910. The *Yomiuri Shimbun* reported this case 8 days after the article of the *Jiji Shimpo*, because the restriction order was announced officially on 2nd June and it was lifted partially on the following day. Perhaps

it was the lack of manpower and finance that made impossible for Yomiuri Shimbun, one of the local newspapers in Tokyo, to try the original report, even if they recognised the importance of the case.

After this first report, article about this case was decreased and there were a few articles like an arrestment and convoy of Morichika Umpei, a former office staff of the Okayama Prefecture Government and associated with Kotoku (17th June 1910) or comment on daily lives in the cage talked by Ishikawa Sanshiro, who faced 4 months of imprisonment in the Chiba Cage and condemned for a penalty of 60 yen. Now, news censorship was imposed (31st June 1910). It was basic tendency for many newspaper companies to run the same kind of articles (Ogawa 1996, pp. 138ff.), because running articles based on the original gathering activities of the newspaper company was controlled by the authorities.

As already mentioned, the *Jiji Shimpō* (21st September) and the *Hochi Shimbun* (22nd September) implied this case as the high treason incident. But the *Yomiuri Shimbun* did not report such information and it was 25th September when it mentioned about this topic in the column titled “*Yotaroku*” (*Silly notes*). In this column, the author pointed out that there are no other sections in the Penal Code except sections 73, 75, 77, and 79 which regulate the first trial to be the last trial and some foreign media get an inkling of

the fact that this case must be the high treason incident. Such indications must be based on the article of the *Hochi Shimbun*, but the latter part of this article author gave his original view: it is ridiculous that Kotoku and his conspirators “acted foolishly and unprecedentedly in the history of Japan” and at the same time “attitude of authority is not admirable”. Because establishing the special tribunals in which the first trial will be the last trial is the behaviour like “striking a head of frog with a hammer” and the authority has to “show his generous-minded attitude”. And he also pointed that as “Dr. Terry of the Tokyo Imperial University mentioned the judicial officers in Japan was completely pinned down with the letter of law” and “if they happen to meet the case which is not regulated in the law”, they could not take the trial. It was the implied criticism to the authority that they were not flexible because this case was unprecedented in the history of Japan. “*Yotaroku*” was a short column; that time it was different from the present editorial which represents the official opinion of Yomiuri Shinbun. But even such a short column, presenting candid advice to the authority is memorable action for us. It is also interesting that the *Shinano Mainichi Shimbun* run a short overview in which a rigid attitude of the government to socialism was demanded, since it must be a clue for us to think the attitude or recognition of newspaper companies to socialism at the time.

The next memorable run in the *Yomiuri Shimbun* is the article titled “Empire of Japan and Nihilism” (19th November 1910). The article is composed of two sections: the first part discourses of intellectuals —Inoue Tetsujiro, Hozumi Nobushige, Okuma Shigenobu, Kato Hiroyuki, and Shimamura Hogetsu. The second part is entitled “Short history of nihilist’s parties in Japan”. Here a brief history of socialism and nihilist’s parties in Japan are described from publishing of the *Heimin Shimbun* edited by Sakai Toshihiko and Kotoku to the conflict between parliamentarism and anti-parliamentarism via Kotoku’s trip to the USA and *Kinki-kan Akahata Incident* of 1908. By this special article, it was discussed that “nihilism is unsuitable to the national structure of Japan”. On the other hand “Short history of nihilist parties in Japan” showed that socialism or nihilism were not the terrorist and gradually developed with some bumps and detours, and also implied that it must not be terrible notion. It was the special featured article with a just cause of being “lighthouse of thinking world and compass of educational world”. But *Yomiuri Shinbun* has not featured socialism or nihilism using full-page of the front page in the past. It concludes that if the ‘High Treason Incident’ did not occur, it would be impossible to run such an article.

In contrast, there are two notable articles titled “Dispel a misconception: Hoping the truth will be cleared in suitable time” (editorial of 8th January 1911) and “Proximity of

the Imperial Family and Subject” (opposite editorial of 9th August 1912).

The editorial “Dispel a misconception” points out that the restriction order and information control by authorities in this case forgive the situation in which speculative information is conveyed within Japan and overseas, and it harms national interests of Japan. It also proposes that “we hope the truth will be cleared in suitable time”.

The opposite editorial “Proximity of the Imperial Family and Subject” which run after the death of the Meiji emperor claims the importance not to cause the next high treason incident under the new emperor. For even the reign of the Meiji emperor, who was the history itself, the high treason incident was occurred and the new emperor will not have such a characteristic. It also mentions to the importance of education.

The opposite editorial of the *Jiji Shimpo* titled “Control of socialism” (22nd September 1910) criticised hard information control and suppression of free speech by the government and the Ministry of Education by ignoring the truth of the incident, which was common attitude among newspaper companies (Ogawa 1997, p.152). “Dispel a misconception” also follows this attitude and “Proximity of the Imperial Family and Subject” points out that the high treason incident is not a rare crime but the possible one which will occur when conditions permit. As another assignment in “Proximity of the Imperial Family and Subject”, one of the main causes is the isolation between the

emperor and the subjects, which is a stinging criticism to the education system at the time and to the authorities. In the opposite editorial, the ‘High Treason Incident’ is dealt as the symbol of absence of mental combination between the emperor or the Imperial Family and the subjects, and the defect of the education system.

Conclusion

It is well known that the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, a local paper in Tokyo in that time, stood upon the position of British way of constitutionalism and opposed to the Meiji oligarchy. In fact the tone of The *Yomiuri Shimbun* was so liberal that it was often shut down by the authority.

From the view based on this background, we could say that the *Yomiuri Shimbun* criticised not only the attitude of the authority which held a closed-door court and controlled information about the trial, but also blamed the media which regarded anarchists as the absolute vice. An editorial titled “Dispel a misconception: Hoping the truth will be cleared in suitable time” (8th January 1911) was symbolic in The *Yomiuri Shimbun*’s attitudeⁱⁱⁱ.

As a conclusion, we could also say that The *Yomiuri Shimbun* was at its element as a

liberal newspaper in reports on "High Treason Incident". At the same time, it was the origin of the future shape of The *Yomiuri Shimbun* which had many editorial staffs and reporters who felt and had sympathy for socialism and communism and was called as "Haven of socialists and communists" in the 1920s.

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ⁱ Cf. Kanzaki 1968-1969; Itoya 1970.

ⁱⁱ Cf. Shimizu 1989.

ⁱⁱⁱ The *Yomiuri Shimbun* continually ran articles of stringers in USA or France which reported that local socialists or left-wing organisations asserted their opposition to capital punishment of the person accused in the "High Treason Incident". By these articles, The *Yomiuri Shimbun* intended to argue that "High Treason Incident" was not only the problem of internal affairs but also a kind of international affairs, then the authority had to offer them a fair trial by which they would accept situation. On this point, we will examine in another time.