

## Who is Afraid of the Waking Red

¿Quién teme al rojo feroz?

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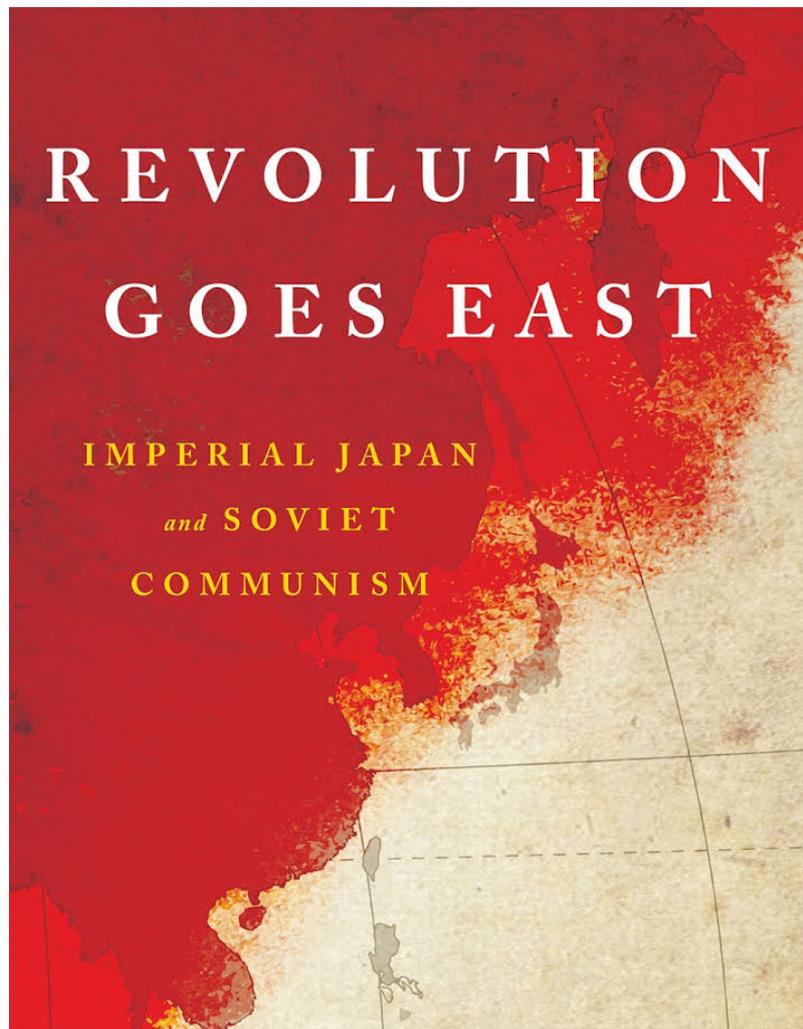
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EN RESEÑA DE ▶ A REVIEW OF

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Linkhoeva, Tatiana (2020). *Revolution Goes East: Imperial Japan and Soviet Communism*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 300 pp.

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TATIANA LINKHOEVA

It has been over a hundred years since the events examined in *Revolution Goes East: Imperial Japan and Soviet Communism*, by Tatiana Linkhœva, started to unfold, but, as the depressingly common refrain teaches us, it is still a source for reflection of our contemporary times. Just as in the 1920s, anti-communist discourse, the vilification of revolution, and the imposition of conservative policies have recently seen a rampant growth. Moreover, the flame of infighting within the Left keeps burning all too bright, hampering at every corner efforts to build a united front or, at least, a pragmatic alliance. Part of the reasons behind the incompatibility probably remains on incomplete explanations of this acrimony. The reasons why the Left is so divided has been a topic explored over and over again. We nevertheless still fail to properly understand the nuances of this circumstance. The present book is a worthy addition to this debate, with fresh ideas and approaches to the study of peace and conflicts. It provides an insight into how situations of confrontation and partisanism, like ideological divisions attributed to the rise of political socialism, are never as clear-cut as previous scholarship claim to be. Although incomplete (as no single work can aspire to such feat), this book may help readers think twice about previous ideas on where it all tends to go wrong.

This is a book detailing the impact of the Russian Revolution of 1917 in Japan during the 1920s. Linkhœva explores the knotty rhizome of reactions to the consecration of the new Soviet state and how the richness and plurality of debates that it sparked developed into fewer and more partisan positions throughout the decade. On the one hand, she studies the development of official positions within the Japanese government, from open confrontation to pragmatic recognition. On the

other, Linkhœva describes the rich tapestry of complex, mutually confronted, and sometimes contradictive stances of Japanese left-wing intellectuals, politicians, and activists from 1917 onwards. Their attitudes were determined by the deeply entrenched and eventually fatal debate – also happening in many different territories at the same time – over whether progressive forces should focus on national mobilization and pushing domestic agendas or whether they should be working instead towards an international revolution that would topple down capitalism and the old order simultaneously across the world. As Linkhœva suggests, the fascinating aspect of this debate is seeing how the precedent of the Russian Revolution acted as a point of reference for the two positions. This precedent was framed either as a source of emulation or as a cautionary tale for the way the Soviet state came to be in the following years.

Tatiana Linkhœva is at the moment of writing an assistant professor in modern Japan at New York University. Besides this book, she has also worked on the way the Japanese Left of the interwar period discussed the Chinese Revolution. Her next project is a comparative study between Soviet and Japanese ideas of empire and how they applied policies to Mongolian territories. The author makes a commendable work in fighting back common misconceptions, especially among Western scholars, on the rise of anti-communism in Japan and the collapse of the Japanese Left in the 1930s. According to Linkhœva, many of these misunderstandings are based on a limited grasp of the reasons motivating the different social agents engaging with these matters (the government, conservative groups, left-wing factions...). She defends that their positions were more motivated by pragmatism and geopolitical needs than what previous scholars have argued, too reliant sometimes on purely

ideological disagreements. Instead, the author concludes that anti-communist sentiment, despite all the fanfare, had little impact on the way Japan conducted its foreign policy, a practical strategy that had small qualms in dealing with antagonistic powers like the Soviet Union if that helped advance its own agenda. Linkhoeva also claims the relevance of taking into account the advances of revolutionary thought and action in the rest of East Asia (particularly in Korea, China, and the Mongolian territory) as an essential factor that was shaping Japanese intellectual thought and the state's political decisions. In the end, this book tries to combine a wide-ranging, great scale overlook of interactions across borders through meticulous historical study, most of the time using the life of significant individuals as conduits for her arguments. Besides this aspirations for the revisiting of a particular historical period, her work is an attempt of problematizing beliefs of unambiguous ideological divisions. One can see the value of these methodological and epistemic approaches also as basis for the study of other circumstances of conflict beyond the case of Japan where specific episodes of discord or historical disputes seem to lead to factionalism, when in fact, these partitions evolve in a graded scale of grays. The author accomplishes her ambitious objectives but with varying degrees of success.

Linkhoeva divides *Revolution Goes East* into two parts using a mix of chronological and thematic criteria. In the first part, the author describes Japan's domestic policy-making on how to react to the new Soviet state and to leftwing political representation. It builds up the foundations and defines the arduous trek towards diplomatic recognition with the Soviet Union. Chapter 1 illustrates the relationship between Japan and Russia from their earlier contacts in the eighth

century up until 1917. Linkhoeva explains how Japan saw Russia less as a direct military threat to its national integrity and more as a continuous menace to regional balance. This tension, as the author tracks down, has been at the core of their interactions since the eighteenth century: from disputes over the Kuril Islands (still mostly unresolved), the influence over the Korean peninsula, fishing and mining concessions, and the development of key infrastructures in Siberia. Despite the stormy relationship between these two neighbors, Linkhoeva points out that, in the end, pragmatism and an unavoidable need to cooperate and bear with each other trumped a real escalation of hostilities. Even after open war broke out between the two, as it happened between 1903 and 1905, a spirit of practical collaboration guided their actions. Japan did not want to humiliate Russia after their defeat. Instead, the peace agreements of 1907 had in mind the strengthening of Russia's position in the region to forestall the US advance on Pacific matters. The author will later refer to these arguments to explain how despite the difficulties, the zealous disposition of Japan's army, and the recent precedent of open conflict, the rapprochement between the Soviet Union and Japan during the 1920s was part of a historical trend. Linkhoeva strengthens her arguments by adding an overview of Japan's cultural interest in Russian literature, a point that, unfortunately, is not developed in more detail further down the book.

Chapter 2 focuses more profusely on Japan's official reaction to the 1917 Russian Revolution, their military involvement during the so-called Russian Civil War as the only foreign power to do so, up until their falling back from the country in 1922. The author refers to an abundant reservoir of Japanese official records to reconstruct these movements, the debates within Japanese elites,

and the rationale behind their decisions. She tells readers how Japanese media's animosity towards the Bolsheviks in the early years facilitated a military intervention, although this resolve was not free from opposition from inside the government. Among other noteworthy episodes included in this chapter, Linkhoeva recounts Japan's lobbying during the 1919 Paris Conference for the creation of a Siberian Republic. Japan tried to convince other Western powers that it was imperative to stop the expansion of communism to the East. This projected buffer state would be led by Aleksandr Kolchak, one of the leaders of the White Army, who, in turn, promised Japan generous concessions and debts. This experience is illustrative of the main array of arguments employed by the Japanese state when justifying their foreign policies towards Russia and later the Soviet Union: self-defense, retaliation, and regional safe-keeping.

Chapter 3 follows the development of the negotiations that led to the rapprochement between Japan and the Soviet Union in 1925. Linkhoeva argues that mutual diplomatic recognition was possible because Japanese and Soviet officials attempted to separate (not always with success and not without consequences) ideology from diplomacy: the Comintern's desires for international revolution from the Soviet government's agenda of ensuring their grasp of domestic power and stabilizing the country. The distance between the Comintern and the Soviet Union grew after the death of Lenin and the rise of Stalin, who was received among Japanese officials as a more conciliatory and germane leader than Trotsky. The author identifies the evolution of pan-Asianist thought in a sector of Japanese intellectuals as contributing to a climate of acceptance of this recognition, although the rapprochement ended up dividing this movement. The reasons behind this separation

were at the kernel of the central disputes happening throughout the 1920s: internationalism vs. nationalism. Linkhoeva proves how conservative principles prevailed and even gobbled up many in the Left by equating the needs of Japan to the agenda of the empire.

In Chapter 4, the author describes how worsening domestic conditions fertilized the field for the flowering and nurturing of communism in Japan, which led conservative forces to cry their fears while the government worked with the Soviet Union. This is one of the most excitingly complex chapters of the book. Linkhoeva traces different strains of anti-communism beyond conservatives, traditionalists, and far-right militant groups. She talks, for instance, about how Japanese liberals sought to dwarf communist beliefs by betting on the construction of a so-called 'society of rights' that would preserve the imperial state nonetheless. This zeal of confrontation paved the way for the passing of laws that ironically restrained civil rights. In 1922, Japan's legislative chamber issued the anti-leftist propaganda bill, which, after much debate, was reshaped to target only left-wing thought that was perceived to come from abroad. Linkhoeva argues that this bill created a binary conception that classified leftist ideologies essentially as a foreign threat, a logic with long-lasting consequences. But the most defining piece of legislation approved at the time was the Peace Preservation Law of 1925. It imposed penalties to those who harbored an intention to alter the national polity, the *kokutai*, of up to 10 years of prison. The vague wording of 'altering the *kokutai*' was used to avoid limiting the effects to specific ideologies like 'communism' or 'anarchism' and make it as broad as possible for their uses. In this chapter, the author offers a more complete view of the rise of the police

state in Japan: although unwillingly, liberal forces in Taishō Japan put so many efforts in distancing themselves from communism and socialism that they embraced and legitimated the nationalist-driven framework defended by conservatives.

The second part of the book is devoted to disentangling the evolution of different strands of socialism in Japan after 1917 and how their infighting contributed to their eventual demise. Chapter 5 tackles the always complex relationship between anarchism and communism during the 1920s. Anarchism had a longer and more grounded presence in Japan than communism, which really only took off after the Russian Revolution. Anarchism, although not lacking from intellectual backing (particularly among writers and other artists), was more focused on direct action. The failed attempt of assassination of the emperor in 1911 led many anarchists to go underground but also facilitated their rise to popularity. By following the lives of Ōsugi Sakae and Takao Heibe, Linkhoeva shows how closely related anarchists and communists were in the first years of the 1920s and how they eventually drifted away, ridden by conflicts. While Linkhoeva does not shy from describing the animosity between these two groups, I appreciate the efforts to depict a more nuanced relationship than what has been commonly portrayed. Cooperation was more common than disagreement between anarchists and Bolsheviks, especially when it came to working together in the promotion and defense of labor unions. In the end, at the core of their disputes we find once more the conflict between international or national action, the tune that keeps repeating itself over and over again.

Chapter 6 follows the birth of the Japanese Communist Party in 1922 as a branch of the Comintern and their growth into an

autonomous player that, despite common belief, acted independently from and even against the Comintern's directions. The evolution of the JCP came together with the realization that the model of the Russian Revolution could not be exported without changes to Japan, as the Soviet Union and the Comintern at the time thought possible. Instead, for a revolution to happen, the JCP was convinced they needed to develop a national, 'Japanese' model of seizing power and mobilizing the masses. Riddled by debates over whether their main enemy was the bourgeoisie or the old feudal structures, whether to push for mass-mobilization or worker-led action, whether to act together with other Asian parties or alone, the original JCP suffered an unsurprisingly internal meltdown. Yamakawa Hitoshi, one of its founders and main figures and defendant of a Japanese model of revolution, was expelled along with his followers. In the 1930s, the JCP grew more close to the Comintern and their idea of international revolution. At the same time, Yamakawa got ironically vindicated when the Chinese Communist Party proved a successful revolution different than the Russian model was indeed possible.

In Chapter 7, Linkhoeva discusses the more controversial but highly influential National Socialism movement in Japan. Takabatake Motoyuki serves in this case as the main figure whose thought and action shaped the ideas of this movement that reinterpreted socialism as a means to reinforce the nation, the elites, and the state rather than the working class. Takabatake and the national socialists' admiration of the Russian Revolution was paradoxically coupled with fierce anti-communism and anti-Sovietism, which justified and later legitimated Japan's imperial push abroad. As Linkhoeva suggests, national socialists' fierce vindication of a single

political force eventually led to the elimination of competition (both to the Left and to the Right). It deepened the divide between left-wing socialists on how to fit the nation in their plans and strategy, a conflict that I identify is still unresolved, not only for the Japanese Left but for many progressive parties across the world. In her conclusions, the author makes a brief incursion to events developing in the 1930s. As these are outside of the declared scope of the book, this part falls a bit flat and undeservingly incomplete. It is always hard to give an end to historical pieces such as the one developed by Linkhoeva without showing too much the partial arbitrariness of chronological divisions. In this section, however, she makes a useful recap of the different strands of anti-communist thought (liberal-conservatives and the warmongering army) that shaped Japan's foreign policy in the years leading up to the invasion of China.

All in all, this is a fresh and well-argued book, rich in primary and secondary sources, which tackles a complex topic with confidence. There are two criticisms regarding structure and style that I dare point out, although none of them affects the quality of Linkhoeva's contributions. The first has to do with the slight unbalance between sections. Some episodes in this book are harder to parse and too data-choked with statements, dates, and perhaps a more classical author-based style to history. The majority of the book is, however, more narrative-driven, providing a brisk and entertaining reading that does not compromise in depth. The second criticism – or maybe I should better say comment – is that I missed a bit more of signposting to what would happen in the 1930s. I understand and respect the author's decision to focus on the 1920s as opposed to the more researched 1930s, but her approach seems to reveal nonetheless that many of these debates and actions were

preparing the stage for the more dramatic scenario that would follow after Japan's removal from the League of Nations in 1933.

This book opens up many possibilities for the discussion of how a single historical event – in this case, the Russian Revolution – can influence intellectual and institutional action across a broad political spectrum. This circumstance of interpretative ambiguity needs to be a constant remainder when discussing matters of peace and conflicts. Historical events do not belong to particular factions or intellectual traditions. We must approach their influence from a standpoint of openness to their potential hermeneutic possibilities in becoming source and reference even for antagonic positions. These have, in turn, several echoes along the decades. Linkhoeva's work shows an effort to expose Japan's interest in Eastern Siberia and the Mongolian region. Hence, a potentially attractive book for readers who want more details on how this dangerous dream got partially materialized with the creation of the puppet-state of Manchukuo is Japan's Total Empire, by Louise Young. Those readers interested in seeing the development of Left-wing (and Right-wing) factionalism after World War II can refer to William Andrew's *Dissenting Japan*; and those who want a glimpse of how the hundred-anniversary of the Russian Revolution was celebrated in Japan can check out Heather Bowen-Struyk and Norma Field's ““Art as a Weapon”: Japanese Proletarian Literature on the Centenary of the 1917 Russian Revolution.”

As a concluding remark, I want to defend that any work that confronts ideas of easily identifiable partisan positions as hegemonic and uncontested, just as *Revolution Goes East* attempts to do, is more than welcome in our day and age. If that book also denounces previous attempts of shoehorning unproblematized cultural particularism as the

main reason why these ideas seem to ‘not fit’ in Japan, then it is not only welcome, but definitely meritorious of our attention.

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