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**Resisting the Rightward Turn:
Marxist Analysis of Imperialism in Early Shōwa Japan**

*Michael Kosei Delphia*¹

The political left in late imperial Japan is infamous in the historiography of modern Japan for its turn to nationalism and imperialism. Scholars have brought various examples to light, ranging from the use of socialist planning in the Empire and the employment of anti-imperialist artists and intellectuals in Japanese colonies.² One of the more shocking cases of this turn was the mass defection of Japanese Communist Party (JCP) members in 1933 and 1934 after the arrests of key leaders, who then publicly renounced their Marxist views and instead voiced support for Japanese imperialism in Asia.³ While these cases point to the failures of the Japanese left in rejecting imperialism, this begs the question: were they imperialist all along? English-language scholarship has examined individual cases of Marxist and nationalist syncretism or early signs of imperialist language to explain the defections of the 1930s. From this scholarship emerges a historiographical narrative that emphasizes ideological failings and weakness of Japanese state ideology as causes for leftist defections.

However, a look at the publications and articles from the Japanese left in the period before the mass conversions of the mid-1930s reveals vibrant anti-imperialist ideology and writings, a far cry from the situation only a few years later. The two main factions of the Japanese left at the turn of the 1930s, the *Kōza-ha* and the *Rōnō-ha*, both rallied against imperialism and apologia for the Japanese Empire. Their publications, including the JCP's newspaper *Akabata*, *Kōza-ha* essays on Japanese capitalism, and the *Rōnō-ha*'s official periodicals, offer a view into anti-imperialist rhetoric and theory that crossed faction boundaries. Analysis of these sources from the two main factions of Japanese Marxists at the turn of the 1930s reveals how they critiqued imperialism through sophisticated Marxist-Leninist analyses and resisted shifts toward nationalism and imperialism that affected others on the left,

¹ Michael Kosei Delphia is a senior at the University of Michigan whose primary research interest lies in Japanese imperialism in 1930s Northeast China, focusing on topics such as colonial mass politics and the role of colonial ideologies.

² While these instances are beyond the scope of this paper, for more information refer to Annika A. Culver, *Glorify the Empire: Japanese Avant-Garde Propaganda in Manchukuo* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013); and Janis A. Mimura, *Planning for Empire: Reform Bureaucrats and the Japanese Wartime State* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

³ Germaine A. Hoston, "Tenkō: Marxism & the National Question in Prewar Japan," *Polity* 16, no. 1 (1983): pp. 96–98, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3234524>.

complicating historiographical narratives of ideological weakness or the inevitability of rightward turns in interwar Japan.

Imperialism and Leftism in Interwar Japan

The 1920s and early 1930s were a time of turmoil in Japan. The Taishō Era (1912-1926), under the reign of the Taishō Emperor, saw the election of the first prime minister from a commoner background and the later enactment of universal male suffrage in 1925. This apparent success in liberal politics, known as “Taishō Democracy,” was tempered by economic issues that revealed the weakness of the Japanese economy, along with increased state repression of leftist politics. The commodity production boom during World War I disappeared once European industries recovered, while the 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake annihilated whole districts in the Japanese capital of Tokyo. When the nation entered the Shōwa Era in late 1926, issues continued to surface both in and outside Japan proper. The Shōwa Financial Crisis of 1927, which originated in unsustainable reconstruction bonds issued after the 1923 Earthquake, shook the world of Japanese finance capital. The worldwide Great Depression only amplified these economic woes through the collapse in demand for Japanese goods.⁴ Running counter to the development of electoral politics was the establishment of the 1925 Peace Preservation Law. The law granted broad jurisdiction for Japanese law enforcement and secret police to persecute any potential threats to the Japanese political status quo, which included the political left.⁵ State surveillance and persecution of communists and socialists intensified, with over 50,000 arrests of suspected leftists made in the five years between 1929 and 1933 for violations of the Peace Preservation Law.⁶

The socioeconomic changes occurring in Japan also affected the development of Japanese imperialism. By 1920, Japan had held several colonies in Asia, such as Taiwan, Korea, the Kwantung Leased Territory in northeast China, and the post-WWI prize of former German Pacific islands. The Sino-Japanese War, Russo-Japanese War, and WWI resulted in Japan joining the stage of Western imperialist powers. While anti-Japanese movements in China and colonial Korea shook the young empire after the Treaty of Versailles, militarism intensified in the 1920s and early 1930s. Military expeditions to North China culminated in the takeover of northeast China in 1931 and the

⁴Germaine A. Hoston, *Marxism and the Crisis of Development in Prewar Japan*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 3-17.

⁵Elise K. Tipton, *The Japanese Police State: The Tokkō in Interwar Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1990), pp. 62-63.

⁶Tipton, *The Japanese Police State*, p. 156.

establishment of the puppet state of Manchukuo, marking the start of explosive expansion that only subsided with Japan's defeat in the Second World War.⁷

Within this context of rapid change and capitalist-imperialist crisis, Japanese communism and leftism emerged in earnest throughout the 1920s and early 1930s. The JCP was founded in 1922 as a response to the Russian Revolution and the expanding reach of Japanese imperialism.⁸ However, conflict emerged within the party, and disagreements were found between Japanese cadres and the Communist International (Comintern), the Soviet organ that promoted and developed international communism.⁹ This led to the initial dissolution of the party in 1923, re-establishment by Soviet-aligned members in 1926, and the eventual fracture of the communist movement into the Comintern-aligned *Kōza-ha* ("Lectures faction") in the JCP and the *Rōnō-ha* ("Labor-farmer faction"), which remained outside the party. In the late 1920s, the two factions engaged in the "debate on Japanese capitalism," which revolved around the nature of the Japanese economy and development.¹⁰ The two groups would argue over whether Japan was a feudal or capitalist society, whether Japan consequently required a two-stage or one-stage revolution and more. However, state repression intensified as the debate continued into the early 1930s.

The repression of the Japanese left and the use of state violence led to waves of communists renouncing leftist ideology in favor of imperialist apologia. While many major leaders of the movement were arrested by 1932, the public conversion (*tenkō*) of JCP leaders Sano Manabu and Nabeyama Sadachika in 1933 led to further waves of *tenkō* from other leftists (who became known as *tenkōsha*).¹¹ Through the use of the Peace Preservation Law and infiltration of leftist organizations, Japanese secret police rounded up suspected communists and used psychological tools, familial pressure, and, in some cases, torture to obtain admissions of guilt and conversion.¹² This repression decimated the Japanese left as the nation continued its descent toward further imperialism and war.

Historiography of the Left and the Rightward Turn

Given this context of the rise and sudden fall of interwar Japanese communism, much research has been done on Marxist thought within Japan during the 1920s and 1930s, both as part of broader studies of Japanese Marxism and studies of the late Taishō and early Shōwa periods. In English,

⁷ Hoston, *Marxism and the Crisis of Development in Prewar Japan*, pp. 17-19.

⁸ Tatiana Linkhoeva, *Revolution Goes East: Imperial Japan and Soviet Communism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020), https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/255/oa_monograph/book/73082, p. 163.

⁹ Linkhoeva, pp. 177-184.

¹⁰ Hoston, *Marxism and the Crisis of Development in Prewar Japan*, pp. 35-42.

¹¹ Tipton, *The Japanese Police State*, p. 26.

¹² Tipton, p. 27, pp. 149-150.

Germaine A. Hoston's research in the 1980s shed light on the various debates that consumed the Japanese left in the 1920s and 1930s. One of Hoston's key contributions to the literature of Marxist analysis of imperialism during the period was her research into Takahashi Kamekichi's theory of "petty imperialism." Takahashi was an economist whose research, Hoston argues, posed a challenge to the JCP before the start of the debate on Japanese capitalism.¹³ In 1927, Takahashi wrote "The Imperialist Position of Japanese Capitalism" (*Nihon shihon shugi no teikoku shugiteki chii*). Here, Takahashi contended that as Japan was not a fully developed capitalist nation and was closer in form to colonized countries than Western colonizers (a "petty" imperialist power rather than a full one), Lenin's definition of imperialism could not be applied to it.¹⁴ Hoston identified key similarities between Takahashi's analysis and conclusions, including the rationalization of later Japanese expansionism and the domination of the rest of Asia. To Takahashi, the role of Japan and its people was that of a liberating power that would protect the developing world from Western powers through military occupation, thus enabling Japan and Asia to escape the contemporary deadlock of capitalism.¹⁵

This use of Marxist theory to justify Japanese imperialism forced Japanese communists to confront the potential for multiple paths of development outside of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy. JCP theorists who later joined the *Kōza-ha* and *Rōnō-ha*, regardless of affiliation, initially failed to refute Takahashi's argument that Marx and Engel's models for development were inadequate to analyze Japan and Japanese imperialism.¹⁶ Hoston argued that this theoretical defeat was a key catalyst for the debate on Japanese capitalism, as two competing ideas of development were created to refute Takahashi. In studying this debate and its origins, Hoston highlighted the role of Japanese particularities that affect development, both real and imagined, as central to the development of Japanese Marxist theory.

Hoston also researched the *tenkō* of Japanese leftists, focusing on the role of ideology in the conversions. Hoston argued that the root cause of the mass *tenkō* was the ideological strength of the Japanese *kokutai*, a concept often translated as "national polity." The concept of *kokutai* held that the Japanese nation-state was an organic structure organized around national identity and the emperor

¹³Hoston, *Marxism and the Crisis of Development in Prewar Japan*, "The Challenge: Takahashi Kamekichi and the Theory of Petty Imperialism," pp. 76-94. Hoston also analyzes the theory in her article "Marxism and Japanese Expansionism: Takahashi Kamekichi and the Theory of 'Petty Imperialism,'" *Journal of Japanese Studies* 10, no. 1 (1984): pp. 1-30, with a greater focus on the theory's relation to Marxism developmentalism.

¹⁴ Takahashi Kamekichi, "Nihon shihon shugi no teikoku shugiteki chii," in *Sayoku undō no rironteki hōkai* (Tokyo: Hakuyōsha, 1927), pp. 44-46, <https://dl.ndl.go.jp/pid/1442892/1/30>.

¹⁵ Hoston, *Marxism and the Crisis of Development in Prewar Japan*, pp. 87-88.

¹⁶ Hoston, *Marxism and the Crisis of Development in Prewar Japan*, pp. 91-94 and Takahashi, pp. 92-93.

system. To Hoston, “the *kokutai* supplied both the ‘excuse’ and ‘acceptance’ of the [JCP] leaders’ [*tenkō*],” as the role of the nation in Japanese society superseded Marxist internationalism in the minds of *tenkōsha*.¹⁷ Hoston’s research showed Japanese leftists as unable to overcome the national question, succumbing to nationalism and imperialism.

Since Hoston’s analyses of the debate on Japanese capitalism, various authors have studied the role of the debate and its actors within broader Japanese intellectual traditions and analyzed how participants conceptualized Japanese development. In their contribution to studies of modern Japanese thought, Peter Duus and Irwin Scheiner connected both the *Kōza-ha* and *Rōnō-ha* to older traditions of liberalism, anarchism, and socialism, arguing that humanist aspects of 1920s Japanese Marxism were built on these earlier movements.¹⁸ Andrew Barshay focused on the works of *Kōza-ha* thinker Yamada Moritarō, arguing that the analyses of the *Kōza-ha* faction failed to account for the role of Japanese state ideology in reproducing capitalism in the country.¹⁹ Another scholar, Gavin Walker, also analyzed Yamada Moritarō’s works for their value in analyzing the differences between Japanese and British capitalism, which subsequently led to differing forms of imperialism.²⁰ The work of these scholars offers great insight into the details of the debate on Japanese capitalism and how the two factions argued over the nature of Japanese domestic development in Japan. However, while these scholars do not focus on *tenkō*, they center their arguments on Japanese particularities and ideologies that subverted the left, reinforcing the narrative of ideological vulnerability.

In recent years, the scholarship of Tatiana Linkhoeva has provided new angles into the debate on Japanese capitalism and contemporaneous leftist thought. Her volume on interwar Russo-Japanese relations and the impact of the Russian Revolution on Japanese politics and society contains research into another strain of Japanese leftism akin to Takahashi’s “petty imperialism,” that of Takabatake Motoyuki’s national socialism in the early to mid-1920s. Linkhoeva argued that the Russian Revolution and the success of Leninist vanguardism influenced a subset of Japanese leftism that saw Leninist ideas as helpful in achieving an anticapitalistic and socialist nation divorced from class

¹⁷ Hoston, “Tenkō: Marxism & the National Question in Prewar Japan,” p. 115.

¹⁸ Peter Duus, and Irwin Scheiner, “Socialism, Liberalism, and Marxism, 1901-31,” in *Modern Japanese Thought*, ed. Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 660-664.

¹⁹ Andrew E. Barshay, *The Social Sciences in Modern Japan: The Marxian and Modernist Traditions*, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2004), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1ppgsh>, pp. 86-91.

²⁰ Gavin Walker, “The Feudal Remnant and the Historical Outside,” in *The Sublime Perversion of Capital: Marxist Theory and the Politics of History in Modern Japan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822374206-002>. pp. 47-49, p. 51, p. 67.

struggle, Marxist dialectics, and internationalism.²¹ Like Hoston's research on petty imperialism theory, Linkhoveva drew a line from the 1920s to the wartime mobilization of leftists, as many of Takabatake's followers and ideas were incorporated into the wartime imperial system. However, Linkhoveva directly challenged Hoston's argument that late Taishō era nationalism linked to *tenkō* was a product of *kokutai* thought unique to Japan, instead demonstrating that Taishō nationalism in the case of Takabatake and national socialism was a strategic move to appropriate existing forms of legitimacy.²²

From the previous research of scholars, a distinct historiographical narrative forms around the interwar Japanese left. Hoston's analysis of "petty imperialism" and the mass *tenkō* of Japanese leftists offers a narrative that the seeds of imperialism and nationalism were ever-present within Japanese leftism. Barshay, Walker, and others provide detailed analyses of intellectual continuity within the ideas of the participants in the debate on Japanese capitalism. Yet, their focus on Japanese circumstances and state ideology reinforces the view of Japanese leftism as uniquely vulnerable to a shift toward the right. From these works, an idea of a "slippery slope" begins to form, in which the conditions for the rightward turn were not only set in the minds of Japanese leftists before *tenkō* but were also integrated into a longer tradition of political thought that centered questions of development around Japanese particularism. In this view, small cracks in leftist theorization catalyzed slips and falls into an inescapable descent to the right. In this narrative, Takahashi and those who underwent *tenkō* prove that nationalism was destined to win over Marxism in the pre-war Japanese left because of Japan's historical context, aided by individual failings in theorization.

Amid this, Linkhoveva's questioning of the narrative of the supremacy of Japanese political ideology raises important questions. If nationalist and imperialist interpretations of Marxism emerged in the early-mid 1920s and leftists abandoned orthodox Marxism in the early 1930s through *tenkō*, what happened in between during the debate on Japanese capitalism itself? Did the debate lead to differences between interpretations of Japanese imperialism? The existing literature focusing on imperialism glosses over this period, while the literature on the debate itself focuses on theories of domestic development. If the turn of the decade saw the intensification of Japanese imperialism, which began its path to total invasion of Asia, the attitudes of the Japanese left, especially the anti-imperialist *Rōnō-ha* and *Kōza-ha*-led JCP at this moment, must be understood.

Against Empire from Within

The *Kōza-ha* era JCP published materials, such as *Akahata* ("Red Flag"), that provide views into the faction's rhetoric and activism. Established in early 1928 as the official organ of the JCP, *Akahata*

²¹ Linkhoveva, *Revolution Goes East: Imperial Japan and Soviet Communism*, pp. 185-210.

²² Linkhoveva, pp. 193-94.

served as the party spearhead for reaching the masses, published twice a month.²³ The influence of the Comintern on the party at this time was salient, seen through some of the closing words of the introduction to the founding issue: “Destroy the bourgeois dictatorship and construct the dictatorship of the proletariat! Long live the Third International!”²⁴

While primarily focusing on domestic struggle, *Akahata* dedicates many anonymously penned articles and cartoons to resisting Japanese imperialism. Out of these, two common themes, which Linkhoeva identifies as key Comintern objectives at the time, begin to emerge.²⁵ Akahata emphasized the importance of achieving revolution in Japan to foster the Chinese revolution, along with the urgency of preventing Japanese military action against the Soviet Union. In the article “The International Situation and the Role of Japanese Imperialism,” published on 22 April 1931, the anonymous author states that “Japanese imperialism is the main pillar of counter-revolution in the Orient.”²⁶ The author asserts that while Japanese imperialism was relatively young by 1931, it had already violently oppressed Taiwan and Korea through “intimidation and massacres,” along with “applying military pressure against China.” The author applies the Leninist concept of imperialist war and the re-division of the world by decrying Japanese preparations for war against America. Japanese plans against the Soviet Union were particularly worrying to the author, as the Siberian Intervention of 1918-1922 provided Japanese military planners with maps and information that could be used again against the Soviet Union. With an impending “Second World War” between imperialist powers over the capitalist re-division of the world, the author highlights the important duty of the Japanese proletariat to overthrow Japanese imperialism. The JCP took a firm stance, advocating for the defense of the Soviet revolution and stopping the violence of imperialism.

Other articles in *Akahata* emphasize the importance of defending revolution elsewhere in Asia and of solidarity. In preparation for “International Anti-War Day” on August 1, 1931, the June 7 *Akahata* issue of the same year published an anti-war special edition.²⁷ The edition focuses on various issues regarding Japanese imperialism, with extensive use of cartoons. In one cartoon, a prominent Japanese proletarian figure picks up a miniature representation of the current Japanese prime minister, while another figure representing the Chinese Red Army chases down small Western imperialist figures

²³ George M. Beckmann, and Genji Okubo, *The Japanese Communist Party 1922-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), p. 140.

²⁴ Akahata Honkyoku, *Akahata vol.1*, Reprint, vol. 1 (1928/2/1-1931/10/5) (Kyōto: San’ichi Shobō, 1954), p. 5. All translations from *Akahata* are my own.

²⁵ Linkhoeva, *Revolution Goes East*, pp. 181-84.

²⁶ Akahata Honkyoku, p. 88.

²⁷ Akahata Honkyoku, *Akahata vol.1*, pp. 149-161.

with a bayonet.²⁸ The cartoon is labeled “Defend the Chinese Revolution!” and is accompanied by an article outlining twenty revolutionary demands. Of these, No. 5 calls for protecting the Chinese and Soviet revolutions, No. 6 calls for an end to intervention in northeast China (Manchuria), Korea, Taiwan, and the rest of China, while No.7 demands total independence for Taiwan and Korea. Another article in the anti-war edition titled “Defeat Chiang Kai-shek, the minion of world imperialism! Support the Chinese Red Army!” further emphasizes the importance of fostering the Chinese revolution while accusing Japan of supporting Chiang in his anti-Communist efforts across China.²⁹

In an article written after the Wanbaoshan Incident of mid-1931, a clash between Korean and Chinese settlers in Manchuria that led to anti-Chinese riots in Korea, *Akahata* points out the role of Japanese imperialism in encouraging ethnic conflict.³⁰ The article calls for the Chinese, Korean, and Japanese proletariat to unite against the true enemy of Japanese imperialism instead, with a cartoon of the three groups fighting against Chinese reactionaries, the Japanese government, and the Japanese bourgeoisie. The cartoon description declares, “Long live the development of the Chinese Soviet! Long live the establishment of the Korean Soviet! Long live the establishment of the Japanese Soviet!”

However, anti-imperialism in the JCP was not limited to its mass media, as *Kōza-ha* theoreticians closely analyzed contemporary Japanese imperialism. The 1932-1933 *Lectures on the History of the Development of Japanese Imperialism* series (henceforth the *Lectures*) was the seminal publication of the *Kōza-ha*, from which the faction took its name. The series contained lectures and essays on various issues through Marxist-Leninist perspectives, including “History of Colonial Policy” by Akisasa Masanosuke. Akisasa was a member of the JCP who later became a leader of the party in its waning days, remaining loyal to the cause even in the face of the mass *tenkō* of 1933.³¹ In “History of Colonial Policy,” Akisasa offers an overview of the history of Japanese colonialism. The analysis is deeply rooted in Leninist language and analysis from Lenin’s *Imperialism*, discussing ideas such as the re-division of the world between imperialist powers, the role of finance capital in imperialism, and the use of railroads for colonial control.³² Lenin argued in his original 1916 pamphlet that Japan was a second-rate and emerging imperialist power (far behind in imperial-financial development than the

²⁸ Akahata Honkyoku, p. 151.

²⁹ Akahata Honkyoku, *Akahata vol.1*, pp. 153-154.

³⁰ Akahata Honkyoku, pp. 181-82.

³¹ Beckmann and Okubo, *The Japanese Communist Party 1922-1945*, p. 239, p. 244.

³² Akisasa Masanosuke, *Shokuminchi seisakushi*, Fukkokuban, Nihon shihon shugi hattatsushi kōza 2 (Tōkyō: Iwanami Shoten, 1982), 3, pp. 18-20 and Vladimir Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism: A Popular Outline*, 1917, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/imp-hsc/>, pp. 57-74.

four ‘pillars’ of world finance capital – Britain, America, France, and Germany).³³ In his 1920 preface, however, he acknowledged the post-WWI rise of Japan, placing it among the three “powerful world plunderers armed to the teeth” who were redividing the “booty” of the world, alongside Britain and America.³⁴ Akisasa took this a step further, arguing that Japan had become a first-rate imperial power with the greatest aggression and violence out of all colonial powers.³⁵

While Akisasa argued this egregiousness of Japanese imperialism stems from the semi-feudal nature of Japanese capitalism, a distinguishing tenet of *Kōza-ha* thought, Akisasa’s writing is strongest in its orthodox Leninist analysis of Japanese colonial policy. Akisasa analyzed the subsumption of Korea into Japanese colonial rule through economic development corporations and the importance of Korea as a commodity and capital export market for Japan.³⁶ The policy of “cultural rule” in Korea, lauded by Social Democrats for its openness to cultural activity, is decried as a path toward assimilation and the weakening of the Korean liberation movement.

Along with direct rule in Korea, Akisasa also detailed Manchuria as a site of indirect colonial domination.³⁷ Industrial and finance capital, spearheaded by bodies such as the South Manchuria Railway Company, Oriental Development Corporation, and the Bank of Chōsen (colonial Korea), expanded Japanese imperial control in Manchuria. Recognizing the role of capital and the Japanese state’s encouragement of Korean migration to Manchuria in imperialist expansion, Akisasa identified the region’s key role in future Japanese designs. While acknowledging the former status of Japan as an object of imperialism as Takahashi did, Akisasa points out examples such as the Anglo-Japanese alliance and the developed nature of Japanese capitalism as it relates to imperialism (e.g., monopolization, cartelization) as reasons why Japan was a true imperial power, not a “petty” one.³⁸ “History of Colonial Policy” is a Leninist, anti-imperialist text without the rightward turns seen in Takahashi and Takabatake’s theories.

While the strong anti-imperialist stance of the *Kōza-ha* can be explained through Comintern influence, what about the opposing *Rōnō-ha*? As the *Rōnō-ha* rejected the JCP over divisions such as the supremacy of Comintern internationalism over the Japanese revolution, were there significant differences in their analyses of imperialism? Despite their fundamental differences in approaching the

³³ Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, p. 43, p. 61.

³⁴ Lenin, p. 6.

³⁵ Akisasa, p. 4.

³⁶ Akisasa, pp. 23-29.

³⁷ Akisasa, p. 30.

³⁸ Akisasa, *Shokuminchi seisakushi*, p. 21.

issue of Japanese development, *Rōnō-ha* literature shows how their analyses of imperialism converged considerably with that of the *Kōza-ha*.

The *Rōnō-ha*'s eponymous magazine, *Rōnō*, was founded in December 1927 to counter the Comintern-aligned JCP and the 1927 theses of the party.³⁹ Unlike *Akahata*, *Rōnō* was published more as an academic journal, with articles written in a style like the *Lectures*. In his founding message for *Rōnō*, Yamakawa Hitoshi uses Leninist language to write that the bourgeoisie in Japan has “assembled on a large scale a powerful political reactionary and imperialist force,” with “monopolistic finance capital” leading the way.⁴⁰ While the rest of the message focused on the need for “correct” leftist activism, a jab at the *Kōza-ha* and the JCP, the importance of anti-imperialism is a clear throughline.

Articles published in later volumes of *Rōnō* further expanded on the Leninist analysis of the *Rōnō-ha*, including “The Resident Manchurian Korean Expulsion Incident and Japanese Imperialism” by Ohara Michio, published in the February 1928 edition of *Rōnō*. Ohara analyzed the expulsion of Koreans (with Japanese citizenship) from Manchuria by the Chinese warlord regime of Zhang Zuolin as a result of Japanese imperialist actions, like the analysis of the Wanbaoshan Incident in *Akahata*.⁴¹ Specifically, Ohara identified the imposition of Japanese citizenship onto Koreans and the subsequent export of their labor to Manchuria as a means to depress wages and slow capitalist development in China.⁴² The export of Japanese excess capital to northeast China expanded imperialist control and economic hegemony, a mechanism Lenin identified as key in linking finance capital to imperialism.⁴³ The solution to Japanese domination of Manchuria, Ohara argues, is action demanding the bourgeois government in Japan to relinquish control over all Koreans, along with forging unity between proletarians of the three East Asian countries to unite in solidarity and build the foundation for revolutionary struggle.⁴⁴

Other *Rōnō* writers confronted issues in Manchuria through Leninist, anti-imperialist lenses. The November 1927 edition of *Rōnō* contains Kan Shinpachi's article titled “Monitor the Manchurian-Mongolian Railway Negotiations,” covering the contemporary Sino-Japanese diplomatic

³⁹ Beckmann and Okubo, *The Japanese Communist Party 1922-1945*, p. 135.

⁴⁰ Hōsei Daigaku Ōhara Shakai Mondai Kenkyūjo, ed., *Rōnōha kikanshi Rōnō (1)*, vol. v.1 1927 and v.2 1928 no.1-2 (Hōsei Daigaku Shuppankyoku, 1973), p. 7.

⁴¹ Ohara Michio, “Zaiman senjin tsuihō jiken to nihon teikoku shugi,” *Nōrō* 2, no. 2 (February 1928): pp. 48–50, p. 75.

⁴² Ohara, pp. 49-50.

⁴³ Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, pp. 33-44.

⁴⁴ Ohara, p. 50.

dispute over railways in northeast China.⁴⁵ Kan utilizes a Leninist analysis of the role of railway imperialism in northeast China, as Akisasa Masanosuke did in the *Lectures*. Instead of seeing the negotiations as a diplomatic issue between the two states of Japan and China, Kan paints a picture of the Japanese bourgeoisie using the state and railroad capital to advance the physical infiltration of China in the face of Chinese anti-imperialism and boycotts of Japanese goods.⁴⁶ Kan also notes the looming presence of Anglo-American imperialism in China as a backdrop to these negotiations, alluding to the concept of the imperialist re-division of the world. Like Ohara and Akisasa, Kan effectively uses Leninist thought to break down the structures of Japanese imperialism in northeast China.

A Specter of Imperialism?

When analyzing *Akahata* along with theoretical works from both the *Kōza-ha* and *Rōnō-ha*, it is difficult to find explicit moments of imperialist apologia or nationalism as seen in previous research into the ideologies of Takahashi Kamekichi and Takabatake Motoyuki. Takahashi was able to co-opt Leninist thought in his theory of “petty imperialism” to justify Japanese imperialism, such as the five points of imperialism that he argued Japan did not fulfill.⁴⁷ In addition, Takahashi also interpreted Marxist progressive history in a way that justified the need for Japan to further develop through colonialism and dominate the rest of Asia. The anti-imperialist Japanese left, in turn, fought against Takahashi’s theories by directly refuting and attacking his ideas, as Hoston detailed, but also through theory that demonstrated Japan’s imperialist nature as shown above in *Akahata*, the *Lectures*, and *Rōnō*.⁴⁸ *Akahata* dedicated articles to calls for action against imperialism with anti-imperialist campaigns. At the same time, Akisasa argued that Japan was an imperialist power that used financial capital and railway expansion to join the Western powers in carving up the world. Articles in *Rōnō* likewise deconstructed the edifices of state diplomacy in northeast China to reveal the mechanisms of Japanese imperialism underneath. These writings were careful not to portray Japan as a leader for Asia, as Pan-Asianism often entailed, but instead stressed the role of the Japanese proletariat in supporting greater causes.

Both wings of the anti-imperialist Japanese left also resisted the turn toward nationalism that Takabatake underwent. Linkhoeva detailed how Takabatake was able to reject Marxism yet envision a

⁴⁵ Kan Shinpachi, “Manmō tetsudō kōshō wo kanshi seyo,” *Rōnō* 2, no. 11 (November 1927): pp. 60–63.

⁴⁶ Kan, “Manmō tetsudō kōshō wo kanshi seyo,” pp. 62-63.

⁴⁷ Takahashi, “Nihon shihon shugi no teikoku shugiteki chii,” pp. 46-51.

⁴⁸ Hoston, “Marxism and Japanese Expansionism,” p. 11, p. 16.

Leninist, nationalist vanguard as the solution to establish socialism in Japan and secure the nation's future.⁴⁹ The writings of the *Kōza-ha* and the *Rōnō-ha* demonstrated a strong rejection of this ideology of nation over class struggle. The authors of these texts emphasized the struggles of colonial subjects under Japanese domination and the need for transnational solidarity between proletarians. In *Akahata*, in particular, the rhetorical importance of the Chinese revolution and defense of the Soviet Union as critical steps for world revolution subordinated the Japanese nation-state to the greater cause. It linked domestic revolutions to ones beyond the borders of Japan. Like with Takahashi's imperialist turn, the writings of Japanese Marxists in the *Kōza-ha* and *Rōnō-ha* demonstrate a rejection of Takabatake's nationalist turn in the late 1920s and early 30s.

Analysis of texts from the *Kōza-ha* and *Rōnō-ha* of the Japanese anti-imperialist left of the late 1920s and early 1930s reveals complex analyses of Japanese imperialism through Leninist frameworks, along with resistance against turns toward imperialism and nationalism seen in other figures of the contemporary Japanese left. Additionally, these texts reveal extensive commonalities between *Kōza-ha* and *Rōnō-ha* ideology when approaching imperialism. These findings corroborate existing literature contending that the Japanese left of the time was theoretically sophisticated and effectively used Leninist ideas, demonstrating its prevalence not just in ideas of domestic development but also in those regarding imperialism.

Despite these findings, however, the reality of mass conversion away from Marxism in the mid-1930s and the incorporation of former communists into wartime imperialist structures cannot be ignored. If Japanese Marxists of all types submitted to the imperial fascism of the 1930s and 1940s in the end, does it matter that they rejected imperialism and nationalism for a short period beforehand? While the efforts of these leftists in the specific moment of the late 1920s and early 1930s may appear to be in vain if considered an anomaly in the history of pre-war leftism, this moment questions narratives of submission to the Empire as an inevitable turn. The findings above undermine the idea that an undercurrent of state ideologies created an environment in Japan where anti-imperialist leftism was doomed to fail or that the ideology of the interwar left was bound to have critical flaws or failings. Narratives of the supremacy of *kokutai* as an indigenous ideology over Marxism gloss over the effects of opportunism and coercive violence in invoking *tenkō* while also denying the authenticity of held Marxist and anti-imperialist beliefs. Instead of accepting turns to nationalism and imperialism as inevitable slippery slopes, seeing the diversity of ideologies and actors where some succumb early, some move gradually, and some refuse to change can contribute to a better understanding of ideology and personal subjectivity beyond just the world of the *Kōza-ha* and *Rōnō-ha*.

⁴⁹ Linkhøeva, *Revolution Goes East*, pp. 187-96.