

TREACHEROUS WOMEN OF IMPERIAL JAPAN



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At the turn of the 20th century, between the late Meiji and early Taishō eras in the Empire of Japan, 26-year-old Kanno Sugako stood witness to the Red Flag Incident, where Imperial police forces attacked a small demonstration of left-wing political activists in downtown Tokyo. She watched as her friends and comrades were beaten and imprisoned, and she was thrown in jail herself for simply being present.

Though identifying as a pacifist for most of her life, following the Red Flag Incident, Kanno Sugako became involved in a plot to assassinate the Japanese Emperor.

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Drawing upon her life experiences growing up during the Taishō period—struggling under poverty, being cast as an outsider in Japanese society, living in then-occupied Korea and witnessing the mistreatment of the native people—Kaneko Fumiko was to become one of the most treacherous agitators against the Empire of Japan. She was known for publishing writing that criticized Japanese imperialism in Korea, as well as her advocacy of direct action. As a young adult, she plotted for the assassination of the Japanese Emperor and several members of the royal family.

After the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, mass public anxiety erupted as Japanese citizens feared that their colonial subjects would use the opportunity to start a pro-independence rebellion. In response, the government carried out mass arrests—mostly of Koreans—as well as those perceived to be enemies of the Japanese Empire. Kaneko Fumiko was targeted, and she was subsequently sentenced to death for high treason. Though later commuted to a life sentence, Kaneko refused the pardon, tearing the decree to shreds in front of the prison guards and refusing to thank the emperor. On July 23, 1926, at the age of 23, she was found hanging in her cell.

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