

Social Conflict and Control, Protest and Repression (Japan)

By [Andrew Gordon](#)

Summary

Social protest surged in Japan during World War I. Labor strikes, union organizing, and an incipient student movement were the most notable forms through 1917. In the summer of 1918 a spike in rice prices led to a nationwide wave of protest, the so-called Rice Riots. Japanese intellectuals wrote that the global trend toward democracy was coming to Japan. The state responded with both relief through discounted sales of rice, and harsh suppression of protest and jailing of protestors. But social movements gained in force in the 1920s. A range of social issues had emerged to new and ongoing prominence.

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Introduction

Social protest surged in [Japan](#) during the final years of the First World War and in its immediate aftermath, including labor strikes, union organizing, and riots. These actions drew on older traditions of protest and older concepts of moral economy. They were also shaped by new ideas and practices – results of Japanese engagement with global trends since the late 19th century. In this context, the war and its conclusion had significant impact, both direct and indirect, on social protest and the responses to it. Intellectuals debated the character and meaning of these upheavals, and their relation to democracy and to the political order, while many politicians and elite bureaucrats shifted to a more accommodative approach to social and political challenges.

Emerging Traditions and Practices of Protest, and State Responses

In Japan as elsewhere, rich traditions of social protest pre-dated the advent of industrial capitalism. The most important actions in early modern Japan (the Tokugawa period, 1600–1868) were peasant protests, ranging from petitions and peaceful appeals, to violent actions such as the smashing of a rice merchant's home and the distribution of his rice at a "fair price" set by the rioters.¹ The nationwide "rice riots" of 1919 drew on these traditions, but were also informed by new developments of the modern era.

Industrial workers, whose protests soared in numbers in the last years of World War I, had also been building a modest new tradition of strikes and union organizing for some decades. By the eve of the war, heavy industrial laborers in shipyards, arsenals, steel works, and mines had learned to coordinate activities and carry out disputes effectively. They drew upon ideas and tactics with recognizably pre-modern antecedents. In the actions of workers at the Uraga Dock Company around the time of the [Russo-Japanese War](#) (1905), according to a newspaper reporter, a "time honored sense of obligation (*giri*)" drew workers together in their occasional protests.² The term *giri* represented a critical social value with roots in the past. Tactics included petitioning and the selection of representatives, and the use of a petition signed by all those in a workshop called to mind the custom of the village petition, often a prelude to a peasant protest in Tokugawa times.

New elements included leadership or support by men who in some cases had studied organizing strategies in Europe or the [United States](#), and in some cases, such as that of [Katayama Sen \(1859-1933\)](#) and [Takano Fusatarō \(1869-1904\)](#) had spent time abroad. The first sustained union organizing emerged just before the Great War, led by [Suzuki Bunji \(1885-1946\)](#), a university graduate and Christian social reformer. He modeled his organization on British institutions of worker self-help called Friendly Societies. Named the Yūaikai (literally, Friendship Association), Suzuki's organization grew from a group of thirteen men meeting in a Tokyo church basement in late 1912 to a union of 20,000 by 1917 with branches in factories and mines nationwide. From 1913 women were accepted as "auxiliary" members. They were offered full membership 1917, when they numbered 1,500. Through 1917 the group disavowed striking as a tactic, promoted self-help and self-improvement, and peacefully sought the cooperation of owners and managers to improve working conditions.

Impacts of the War, Direct and Indirect

In contrast to the utter disaster it brought to Europe, World War I offered opportunities to Japan. It cut European traders off from Asian customers, giving a huge boost to Japan's newly

industrializing [economy](#). Between 1914 and 1918, Japan's industrial output rose from 1.4 billion to 6.8 billion yen. Exports surged; overseas sales of Japanese cotton cloth rose 185 percent during these years. Industrial employment ballooned from 850,000 to 1.5 million. Major corporations recorded their highest profits ever. With laborers in scarce supply, wages rose sharply. Unfortunately for workers and consumers, prices rose even faster. Japan experienced its worst inflationary surge in modern times. Between 1914 and 1920, the retail price of rice increased 174 percent, while wholesale prices overall rose almost 150 percent. The economic ground for social protest was fertile.

Japan's political ground shifted as well during and immediately after the war, toward greater support for, and expectation of, more democratic politics. Just before the war, a Movement for Constitutional Government, promoted by members of the Diet in the Seiyūkai party, led by [Hara Takashi \(1856-1921\)](#), had forced the ruling oligarchs to concede [cabinet positions](#) and a measure of policy control to elected politicians. Their movement drew momentum from numerous public rallies as well as a street politics of demonstrations and some riots.³ During the war, elected politicians, most prominently [Katō Takaaki \(1860-1926\)](#) of the Kenseikai (Constitutional Association), took steps – most notably the infamous “[Twenty-one demands](#)” presented to [China's](#) government in January 1915 – both to expand the reach of Japan's empire and win a greater voice for the Diet in both foreign and domestic policy.⁴

Both during the war, and with greatest force immediately after, liberal-minded intellectuals argued that a democratic awakening was underway globally and in Japan. The most prominent was [Yoshino Sakuzō \(1878-1933\)](#). His famous 1916 essay, “On the Meaning of Constitutional Government and the Methods by Which It Can Be Perfected” made the strong claim that “the trend toward constitutional government is worldwide and can no longer be resisted.”⁵ The tortured logic by which Yoshino sought to reconcile the absolute sovereignty granted the emperor by Japan's 1889 constitution with a political system “rooted in the people” offers good evidence that some resisted this trend. The end of the war in a victory for the democratic nations certainly bolstered the position that what some commentators called a “mass awakening” was underway.⁶

Further to the political left, the [Russian Revolution](#) of 1917 had the most profound impact on those seeking not only a political system that served ordinary people, but one where actions by the people would be the engine for change. Socialist ideas had already entered Japan early in the 20th century, winning modest but much-noticed support among young men and women. Some radically minded young men had joined the Yūaikai while still students in 1914 and risen to leadership posts by 1917. They saw the Russian Revolution as an epochal global

event, and it gave them impetus to transform the moderate “Friendly Society” into a militant union. One of them, [Nosaka Sanzō \(1892-1993\)](#), ran a contest in the Yūaikai monthly magazine to identify the best worker essay responding to the revolution. The winning essay, actually written under a pen name by [Hirasawa Keishichi \(1889-1923\)](#), “likened it to a great light in the world.” Nosaka gave second prize to an essay he wrote himself, in the voice of a factory worker, and published under a pen name.⁷ In December of 1918, inspired both by the Russian Revolution and, like their liberal teachers, by the end of the war in a “victory of democracy,” many of these youths came together to found the New Man Society (Shinjin-kai). This group formed the vanguard of a Marxist-inspired student movement, which flourished through the late 1920s and remained a significant underground force into the 1930s.⁸

Labor Movement and Labor Strikes

Japan’s labor movement changed dramatically from 1917 through 1919 in the realms of ideas and actions. Until this time, despite pressure from increasingly radical young activists such as Nosaka, the Yūaikai leaders disavowed strikes. They called for respect as members of the nation, or *kokumin*, rather than a separate class of workers. In a play written by Hirasawa Keishichi, a sympathetically portrayed worker made this point when he refused to join what he saw as an ill-advised strike:

The Japanese blood is not fit for shouts of socialism.... The time has come for the Japanese people to take back their souls as Japanese. The enemy of Japan’s worker is not the government or the capitalist. Japanese workers should not act as workers. We should act as humans and people of the nation (*kokumin*).⁹

In 1917, however, predating the November 1917 revolution in [Russia](#), actions at hundreds of productions sites nationwide revealed that thousands of working men and women were no longer inclined to politely appeal for improved conditions. Before this year, no more than fifty strikes were reported in any given year, involving no more than 10,000 participants in total. That count leaped to 398 strikes with 57,000 participants in 1917, 417 strikes and 66,000 strikers in 1918, and 497 actions involving 63,000 men and women in 1919. Most of these actions took place in the machine industry, shipbuilding, and mines, where the workforce was mostly male. But a surge in protests also took place at textile mills, where most operatives were young women living in tightly monitored dormitories, expecting and expected to work only a few years. Before 1917, no more than fourteen strikes took place in spinning mills and weaving sheds, involving at most 2,000 workers each year. From 1917 to 1919, textile factories witnessed more than fifty strikes each year, with a peak of 30,000 participants in

1918. In a clear response to the surge in wartime prices, 80 percent of strikes – and more than four-fifths of strikers – demanded wage increases. Smaller numbers of actions, about 5 percent each year, sought shorter working hours, opposed pay cuts, or sought redress from unfair supervisors. About two-thirds of the strikes either won all their demands or ended in compromise (most often a wage increase short of the full demand). This was a sharp turnaround from previous years, when fewer than half of strikes ended in full or partial gains.¹⁰

This surge of protest came from the bottom up. It pulled the organized labor movement toward greater militancy and a more critical view of capitalism. Unions led few of these actions. No data exists on this point until 1922, when unions organized one in four labor strikes, and it is certain the proportion was lower in earlier years. But the Yūaikai leader, Suzuki Bunji, was occasionally asked by a “strike group” to mediate a dispute. Through such experiences, and at the instigation of more radical younger leaders, the Yūaikai shed its skin as a moderate “Friendly Society.” It began supporting the assertive labor unions already being organized in workplaces and federated by industry. In fall of 1919, the organization adopted a new name, the Friendly Society Greater Japan Federation of Labor (Dai Nihon Rōdō Sōdōmei Yūaikai), in 1921 abbreviated to simply Japan Federation of Labor.

Rice Riots

The strike wave of 1917–19 was a sign of major social change, to be sure.¹¹ But the most momentous social upheaval of this era, one which also inspired the labor movement toward greater militancy, were the protests that have come to be called the Rice Riots. They took place in the summer and fall of 1918, beginning in late July 1918 in a small fishing village in Toyama prefecture with a protest led by wives in the fishing families. Protests spread rapidly to major cities, farming villages, and mining towns. By the end of September 1918, “riots” had taken place in forty-two of forty-seven prefectures. Rallies protesting rice prices in major cities drew as many as 50,000 attendees and sometimes ended in riot. No comprehensive and precise count of events and participants is possible, but at a minimum protests took place in forty-nine cities, 217 towns, and 231 villages, with upwards of 700,000 participants, and more likely over one million.

The actions of so-called rioters varied. They did not all fit a common-sense definition of riot. They included peaceful marches on government offices and boycotts of grain shipment, as well as more classic tactics of grain riots also found in many other times and places: attacks on rice wholesalers or retail sellers, destruction of rice stores, and the forced sales of rice at a “fair” price determined by the crowd.¹² It makes sense to characterize all these events with

the single capitalized expression Rice Riots insofar as they took place over a limited time, with the price of rice the major issue. But, in addition to noting the variety of tactics, and the fact that not all incidents turned violent, one must divide these events into five distinct categories based on location and context.

The first were the riots along the Toyama coast in late July and early August 1918, which set off a wave of actions elsewhere. These were notable for the role of women, who led twenty-three of thirty protests recorded in Toyama, at a time when modern capitalism had begun to transform a traditional industry and shake up gender roles. Far more than in the past, wealthy fishing bosses employed hired male laborers on fleets ranging far from their home harbors. The wives not only managed the household economy in the absence of their husbands; they often worked as stevedores loading bales of locally produced rice onto boats for shipment elsewhere. These women were outraged not simply at the escalating cost of rice, which far outran their own wages combined with those of their seasonally employed husbands. They attributed the rice price increase to an artificial scarcity caused by the export of the grain. Their tactics were a mix of old and new, reflecting this changing economic structure. They petitioned local officials and merchants to sell rice at a discount, a time-honored tactic of protests in Toyama (and elsewhere) in the 19th century and before. They also boycotted the shipment of rice by refusing to load it. This led to some tumultuous conflicts with local police, and the temporary jailing of protestors. It also won them relief in the form of discounted sale of rice.^{[13](#)}

In early August 1918, just as the Toyama protests were subsiding, due to both relief and police suppression, a series of rallies, sometimes followed by riots, took place in major cities. The first urban rice riot came in Nagoya, not that far from Toyama, beginning on 9 August 1918 and lasting several days. In short order citizens of Osaka, Kobe, Hiroshima, and then Tokyo raised voices of protest at the unreasonable rice prices and a political system that failed to serve the people. The protesters echoed older traditions with calls for relief from high prices, and in confrontations with rice merchants where they enforced the immediate sale of rice at “fair” prices. In some cases, they looted or destroyed rice stores. At the same time, speakers at rallies attended by many thousands of city-dwellers asserted modern political rights explicitly, in a spirit of what can be called “imperial democracy.” Judging from the records of those arrested, attendees were mainly from the most impoverished population of temporary migrants, day laborers, or the unemployed. Most numerous were factory laborers, and those engaged in traditional crafts and trades as artisans or retail sellers. These urbanites heard speeches attacking the cabinet for its inadequate economic policies, the police for violating the right to assemble and protest, and the nouveau rich (*narikin*) capitalists for exploiting the people. Echoing Hirasawa Keishichi’s speeches and play of the

previous year, one speaker in Nagoya proclaimed:

Has not the national prestige of Imperial Japan been promoted abroad in wars against China and Russia? ... We are people of the nation (*kokumin*) in whose veins runs the blood of the Meiji emperor. But today, because of the soaring price of rice, we find it hard to live. This situation is due to the worthlessness of the present cabinet's rice regulation policy.¹⁴

Protests and riots subsided, as in Toyama, due to a combination of the arrest of thousands of alleged leaders, and the emergency import of rice to the cities, with sales at discounted prices managed by municipal governments.

From mid-August through September 1918, the most numerous protests took place in farming villages throughout most of Japan (few took place in the northeast). As with the first protests in Toyama, these incidents mixed calls on landlords and officials to respect a customary moral economy with demands reflecting the penetration of a national and global market economy to the countryside. Tenant farmers on the one hand demanded that retail rice merchants lower their prices and called on officials to provide relief through discounted sales. On the other hand, they called for rent reductions. This demand reflected anger that high rents, collected in kind through sharecropping arrangements, denied tenant farmers the opportunity to take advantage of inflation by selling their produce on the market.¹⁵

The final domestic configuration of a "rice riot" were the coalmine protests. The majority were actions in the mines of southwestern Honshu and the southernmost island of Kyushu, with a few protests in the Jōban coalfields of Fukushima prefecture. Rising rice prices sparked these disputes, but they built on the energy of the strike wave of the previous year and on an emerging protest tradition reaching back to the 1880s and 1890s, when the *zaibatsu* (financial combines), led by Mitsubishi and Mitsui, vastly expanded this industry both for domestic consumption and for export. In this wider context, demands went beyond calls for wage increases at a time of price inflation to address longstanding discontent at dangerous and harsh working conditions and abuse of miners by their managers and labor bosses.¹⁶

The rice riots in Japan's colonies constitute a fifth and very important category of protest, relatively neglected in Japanese scholarship and entirely overlooked in the Anglophone literature. These protests took three main forms. First, in [Korea](#) in particular, rising rice prices – sparked in part by the sourcing of Korean rice to supply Japanese troops engaged in the Siberia Expedition – were a major cause of a spike in labor strikes by Korean workers. The number of strikes rose from eight in 1917 to fifty in 1918, with the largest a strike by the streetcar drivers in colonial Keijō (today, Seoul) in August 1918 successfully demanding higher wages. A second set of actions in Korea were demands for sale of discounted rice, and

in some cases attacks on rice merchants and enforcing of “fair price” sales. These took place as the colonial government was beginning a program to deliver rice to Keijō and sell it at a discount. The most violent protest took place when the supply of relief rice ran out at one distribution center located at a Keijō elementary school. A crowd of about 1,000 Koreans destroyed the school building. The third form of protest, found in Shanghai, [Taiwan](#), and Keijō, consisted of demands that the Japanese cease the inflation-causing export of locally produced rice back to the home islands. In some particular cases, these demands were successful. But they could not, in the end, prevent the import of huge amounts of rice to Japan from Korea, Taiwan, China, and [Vietnam](#), to increase the overall supply and allow discounted sales of so-called “foreign rice” (*gaimai*). The historian Imoto Mitsuo and his colleagues logically argued that these actions fed into the far more widespread anti-Japanese demonstrations of March 1919 in Korea – the famous 1 March 1919 movement of peaceful protests, violently suppressed by colonial authorities – as well as China’s 4 May 1919 movement opposing Japanese imperialism.¹⁷ More research would be valuable to trace this lineage of protest.

Running through all of these riots is a powerful combination of historically rooted appeals to honor a traditional moral economy with demands framed by the constitution of a modern [empire](#), calling for reform of the new capitalist system. In an important recent paper, Tomie Naoko showed that intellectuals at the time made the case in the print media that the riots were “a de facto quest for citizenship” under the Meiji constitutional order.¹⁸ Calls for the sale of rice at fair prices sought to restore a moral economy that had eroded in the modern era. Demands for respect as citizens or fair treatment as workers sought to realize the promise of modern rights.

Responses of State and Capital

As noted in passing above, the response of the state to the rice riots was what Japanese idiom calls the “candy and whip” (*ame to muchi*) approach. The “candy” included large imperial and corporate donations to enable distribution of relief rice, as well as sale of rice at a discount to those judged needy by local officials. The “whip” ranged from state bans on public meetings and censorship of press reports of the riots, to the mobilization of military police and [infantry](#) sent to major cities and mines. Police or troops killed more than thirty protestors around the country. They detained over 20,000 people and charged more than 8,000 with rioting or related offenses. Some of those arrested were brutally interrogated. In speedily concluded trials, most got off with fines, but thirty rioters received sentences of life imprisonment at hard labor. The Justice Ministry focused most attention on rooting out ideologically motivated rioters. By mid-September 1918, calm had returned to almost all the

sites of protest or riot.¹⁹

While the period of rioting was brief, the impact of the social protests of the final years of World War I was long-lasting. Prime Minister [Terauchi Masatake](#) resigned on 29 September 1918, replaced by Hara Takashi heading Japan's first political party cabinet. Hara, among the most cautious and equivocal of the party leaders, had joined the ruling alliance. The sole survivor among the oligarchs who built the Meiji political order from above was [Yamagata Aritomo \(1838-1922\)](#). A man not given to displays of emotion or fear, even Yamagata was "terribly upset" by the Rice Riots, according to a visitor in August 1918. He had no choice but to turn reluctantly to the once upstart politician, Hara, as the only man who could control the masses.²⁰

Policies of accommodation would continue, such as the founding of the Harmonization Society (Kyōchōkai) in 1919, jointly funded by the state and major corporations, and the Ōhara Institute for Social Research, founded by an industrialist concerned to address labor and other social issues. A Social Bureau was created in the Home Ministry in 1920, the first state agency with the explicit mission to resolve these newly prominent social "questions" (*mondai*) – the labor, farmer, and women "questions" most prominently. But labor unions and labor strikes continued apace, as did the founding of tenant unions and tenant protests, and demands for universal suffrage for men and for women. The first May Day celebration in Japan took place in 1920, and an underground Communist Party was founded in 1922.

The government continued its double-edged response throughout the decade. On the one hand, harsh crackdowns on the left continued, particularly targeting those suspected of membership in the Japan Communist Party. On the other hand, the government granted universal manhood suffrage in 1925, and passed a Labor Dispute Arbitration Act and a Peasant Arbitration Act in 1926. In 1931 the Diet's House of Representatives approved bills that would have granted legal protection to labor unions and tenant farmer unions. Neither bill became law, as the more conservative House of Peers rejected them. But all these steps together gave a new legitimacy to acts of collective protest. In the aftermath of the social turmoil of World War I, a set of social "questions" – labor, farmer, and women most prominently – had emerged to new and enduring prominence.

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Notes

1. Vlastos, Stephen: Peasant Protests and Uprisings in Tokugawa Japan, Berkeley 1986. ↑
2. Gordon, Andrew: Labor and Imperial Democracy in Prewar Japan, Berkeley 1991, p.

74. ↑

3. Najita, Tetsuo: Hara Kei in the Politics of Compromise, Cambridge, MA 1967 remains the best source on this crisis in English. Hara's given name is usually rendered as Takashi. ↑
4. Dickinson, Frederick R.: War and National Invention. Japan in the Great War, 1914-1919, Cambridge, MA 1999, pp. 84-116. ↑
5. For a partial translation of this essay, see Sakuzō, Yoshino: Democracy as Minponshugi, in: de Bary, Wm. Theodore / Gluck, Carol / Tiedemann, Arthur (eds.): Sources of Japanese Tradition, volume 2, part 2, New York 2006, pp. 163-180. ↑
6. Duus, Peter: Party Rivalry and Political Change in Taishō Japan, Cambridge, MA 1968, pp. 110-118. ↑
7. Large, Stephen: The Yūaikai. The Rise of Labor in Japan, Tokyo 1972, pp. 95-97. Nosaka describes these machinations in his autobiography: Nosaka, Sanzō: Fūsetsu no ayumi [My Journey through Wind and Snow], Tokyo 1971, pp. 277-78. My thanks to Tatemoto Hiroyuki of the Ohara Institute for Social Research for providing this citation. ↑
8. The best account of the pre-war student movement in English remains Smith, Henry Dewitt II: Japan's First Student Radicals, Cambridge, MA 1972. ↑
9. Matsumoto Gappei, Nihon shakai shugi engeki shi [The History of Socialist Theater in Japan], Tokyo 1975, p. 406 ↑
10. All statistical data taken from Rōdō undo shiryō iinkai [Labor Movement Documentation Committee] (ed.): Nihon rōdō undo shiryō [Documents of the Japanese Labor Movement], volume 10, Tokyo 1959. Strike and participants numbers, pp. 440-41; breakdown by industry, pp. 446-47; data on the cause of strikes, p. 468; and data on results, p. 495. ↑
11. The author thanks Lawrence Gu for providing valuable information for this section. ↑
12. This summary of the riots is from Lewis, Michael: Rioters and Citizens. Mass Protest in Imperial Japan, Berkeley 1990, pp. 15-16. Lewis' book remains the fullest and best study in English. ↑
13. Ibid., pp. 37-81. ↑
14. Ibid., p. 111 for the translation of this quote, and pp. 82-134 on urban riots in general. I changed the translation of kokumin from "citizens" to "people of the nation," which I see as closer to the sense of the term. See Gordon, Labor 1990, pp. 60-61 for detail on the riots in Tokyo. ↑
15. Lewis, Rioters 1990, pp. 135-191. ↑
16. Ibid., pp. 192-241. ↑
17. Mitsuo, Imoto (ed.): Zusetsu. Kome sōdō to minshushugi no hatten [The Rice Riots and the Development of Democracy], Tokyo 2004, pp. 497-510. ↑
18. Naoko, Tomie: 1918 nen kome sōdō ni okeru futastu no 'seizon ken'. Moraru ekonomi to shiteizunshippu [Two "rights to survive" in the 1918 Rice Riots: Moral Economy and

Citizenship], in: Fukushi shakaigaku kenkyū [Studies in the Sociology of Welfare] 14 (2017), pp. 95–119. ↑

19. Lewis, Rioters 1990, pp. 27–33. ↑

20. Gordon, Labor 1990, p. 61. ↑

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Citation

Andrew Gordon: Social Conflict and Control, Protest and Repression (Japan), in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer D. Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2018-05-02. DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.11253](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.11253)

External Links

- [First World War and Japan, Rice Riots, Modern Japan in Archives \(National Diet Library, Japan\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Japanese Government, "Twenty-One Demands", 26 April 1915 \(USC US-China Institute\) \(Primary Source\)](#)

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Author Keywords

rice riots; strikes; unions; moral economy

GND Subject Headings

[Japan ; Weltkrieg \[1914-1918\]](#)

LC Subject Headings

[World War, 1914-1918--Japan](#)

Rameau Subject Headings

[Guerre mondiale \(1914-1918\) ; Japon](#)

Key Person(s)

[Aritomo, Yamagata](#); [Takaaki, Katō](#); [Sakuzō, Yoshino](#); [Takashi, Hara](#); [Sen,
](#)

[Katayama; Fusatarō,
 Takano; Bunji,
 Suzuki; Sanzō,
 Nosaka; Keishichi,
 Hirasawa; Terauchi, Masatake](#)

Key Location(s)

[Nagoya](#); [Toyama](#); [Tokyo](#)

Title

Social Conflict and Control, Protest and Repression (Japan)

Author(s)

[Andrew Gordon](#)

Article Type

Handbook Article

Classification Group

Regional Thematic Article

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