**Sakhalin: the Japanese Under Soviet Rule**

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Mariya Sevela gathers oral recollections from the people of Karafuto, a Japanese colony on the island of Sakhalin from 1905 until the arrival of the Soviet army forty years later.

The island of Sakhalin in the Sea of Okhotsk is a microcosm of Russo-Japanese relations. ‘Discovered’ almost simultaneously by the Russians and the Japanese in the mid-seventeenth century, it witnessed several shifts of rule between 1855 and 1945. Following Japan’s victory over Russia in 1905, by the Treaty of Portsmouth Sakhalin was divided at the 50th parallel. While the northern section remained Russian, the Japanese colony of Karafuto was established on the southern part of the island.

Following the terms of the February 1945 Yalta Agreement between Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan on August 8th, between the American atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It thus broke its five-year neutrality pact with Japan signed on April 13th, 1941. Compensation for fighting the Japanese in Manchukuo, Karafuto and Chishima promised to be considerable – South Sakhalin and the Kurile Islands were to become Russian once more.

The Soviet attack on Karafuto began on August 9th with an artillery bombardment of the Handenzawa frontier post that lasted three days. Fighting continued from August 11th to 25th, when the Soviet army took over the Karafuto capital, Toyohara, following landings by amphibious forces at the ports of Toro, Esutoru and Maoka. This was ten days after the Emperor had announced Japan’s capitulation and seven days after the Supreme Command Headquarters in Tokyo had ordered all Japanese forces to cease fire. Partial Japanese military resistance continued, however, while refugees from the occupied areas streamed towards Toyohara. Sixteen days of fighting left thousands dead on both sides; over 18,000 Japanese were taken prisoner and some 300,000 civilians were kept on the island by Soviet forces. The forty-year-old Japanese settlement of Karafuto was at an end.

The battle for the Kurile Islands finished a week later on September 3rd. It was the end of the war with Japan and of the Second World War. It was also the beginning of a ‘confused epoch’ on the island of Karafuto/Sakhalin.

At the time of the Soviet ‘liberation’ of South Sakhalin, it was inhabited by nearly half a million people: Japanese, Koreans (mostly forced labourers), White Russians, Poles and the island’s indigenous peoples – Ainu, Nivkhi and Ul’ta. From 1942, Karafuto had been incorporated into the Japanese home islands (naichi) and was no longer the responsibility of the Ministry of Colonisation (takumushô). It thus gradually became more and more an integral part of Japan itself.

A portion of the population, mainly women, children and the elderly, managed to get off the island during August. For some of them, however, the passage across the Soya Strait was a grim one; three refugee ships were torpedoed by a Soviet submarine near Hokkaido with heavy loss of life. Nevertheless, more than 100,000 did escape, reducing Karafuto’s Japanese population to some 300,000 by the time the war was over, though figures vary according to the source.

The period following Karafuto’s occupation by the Russians was chaotic. A military government was established under General I. Alimov, who was soon replaced by General M. Purkaev. Karafuto’s Governor Otsu Toshio was placed under house arrest and then imprisoned near Khabarovsk in Siberia, together with other community leaders. In September the ‘Civil Administration Department of South Sakhalin and the Kurils’ (minseikyoku) was created in Toyohara under the supervision of Colonel Dmitri Kryukov, with eleven branches throughout the island. The local press was banned and replaced by the Soviet Japanese-language newspaper – Shinseimei. Radio sets and cars were confiscated; telephone and mail services were stopped; a curfew was imposed. The military were either sent to labour camps on the mainland or on North Sakhalin. The élite – bureaucrats, publishers, company managers and other community leaders – were eventually also sent to camps, but not before being made to serve as advisers to the new government in the process of reconstruction. The records show that the decision to use the Japanese as a workforce was taken at once. A document dated September 15th, 1945, says:

Considering the fact that we can neither bring on immediately the necessary workforce for the local industry, nor create acceptable living conditions for them at the present moment, we must temporarily use the Japanese administration, their engineers and workers. Otherwise the economy of this region will be completely ruined.

In schools, the teaching of social sciences was replaced by a new subject: ‘Introduction to Marxism-Leninism for Young Communists’. Japanese children were made to sing songs praising Stalin, while adults, struggled to learn Russian to avoid being detained or ‘accidentally’ killed because of a language barrier. Meanwhile, the fate of the Japanese and Korean workforce remained uncertain. Were they to be repatriated, or were they to remain to form a ‘Japanese region’ on the island, thus joining the family of Soviet republics? This question remained unanswered for over a year.

The Russians were determined that the island was to be renamed, reorganised and re-settled. Its past was to be erased, its history rewritten. The rouble officially replaced the yen in March 1946; by June all towns, villages and streets had new names.

The ‘transition’ and ‘cohabitation’ had started; the forced cohabitation of two races, the conquerors with the conquered. The cohabitation was literal – the Japanese were not only forced to share their land, but also their housing with those who were arriving from distant lands such as Siberia or the Ukraine, intending eventually to take their place.

The repatriation of the Japanese was announced in October 1946, and took place in large numbers until December 1948, continuing at a lesser pace until 1950. More than 200 ship loads crossed the La Perouse (Soya) strait to the ports of Hokkaido, transporting nearly 313,000 people. All possessions had to be left behind and neither Japanese nor Soviet currency could be removed. (The same rules applied to photographs and printed material, the only exception being brochures on the Soviet Constitution that upon arrival were confiscated by the Americans.) So Karafuto residents reached post-war Japan with nothing and with no homes to go to. All they got was a modest one-off sum of money with which they were to start a new life in a ‘homeland’ that many of them had never seen before.

Meanwhile, in February 1946 the South Sakhalin oblast was created as part of the Khabarovsk region, later turning into the Sakhalin oblast in January 1947. It consisted of the whole of Sakhalin island together with the Kuriles. Japanese Karafuto had become Soviet Sakhalin.

In one of the twenty-seven articles of the draft San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951, which was intended to end the state of war between Japan and the former Allied Powers, Japan ‘renounces all right, title and claim to the Kurile Islands, and to that portion of Sakhalin and the islands adjacent to it over which Japan acquired sovereignty as a consequence of the Treaty of Portsmouth of September 5th, 1905’. The ambiguity of the document, however, and the absence of any mention of the Soviet Union as the rightful proprietor led the Soviet delegation to walk out of the ‘Japanese Peace Conference’. Consequently, the treaty was never signed by the Russians and thus was created what would later become known as the ‘Japanese-Russian Territorial Dispute’. While Japan’s territorial claims to the Kuriles have created serious political tensions between the two countries, Karafuto has just become a painful reminder of Japan’s lost war, without any official hope of future recovery. If recent rumours that the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs intends to open a consulate on Sakhalin are true, this would be a final acknowledgment of Russian sovereignty in the island.

The memory of Japanese Karafuto is, however, kept alive in contemporary Japan to an extraordinary extent. Numerous associations of former Karafuto residents are active today in the name of a part of Japan that ceased to exist fifty years ago. Indeed, in the last few years there has been a ‘Karafuto boom’ in Japan: memoirs are being published in increasing number, inspired by today’s freer access to Sakhalin. The process of remembering inevitably focuses on the period of ‘transition and cohabitation’.

Karafuto Renmei, the Union of former residents of Karafuto, counts over 6,000 members and has thirty-six branches all over Japan. The typical member’s age is between seventy and seventy-five. A special members’ directory provides not only personal data, but the name of the person’s ‘home’ town or village in Karafuto. Karafuto Renmei publishes a monthly newsletter, re-prints old books on Karafuto, organises trips to Sakhalin and holds an annual commemoration – Karafuto Day – on August 23rd, the official date of the Soviet occupation of Karafuto, alternately in Tokyo and Sapporo. The commemoration includes a Shinto memorial ceremony and a luncheon in a luxurious hotel, where people are seated according to their place of origin. Lunch is accompanied by nostalgic, tearful speeches, Banzai eruptions and the cry: ‘Never forget Karafuto!’

Apart from this main association, over a hundred others exist. Every (former) Karafuto town has an association, as does every school. The relatives of the victims who were on one of the three ships torpedoed by the Russians have an association, as do the prisoners of war who were kept for several years in a camp in Okha (North Sakhalin). Yet another is busy arranging trips to Japan for those few Japanese who still live on Sakhalin today. Each of these associations has an annual meeting for its members. One such occasion that I participated in was a gathering of those who had graduated from the same elementary school in Honto (today’s Nevelsk) in 1945. They had organised a musical weekend, performing the songs of their childhood on stage, all formally dressed, in front of an audience of ex-classmates, their teachers and the headmaster. They came from all over Japan for this occasion, having rehearsed for several months.

The number of people who, once retired, devote their time to Karafuto-related research and consider it of prime importance is also quite substantial. When asked why their past was of such importance to them, the most common answer was that they saw their lives as divided into two halves: before and after the repatriation, and had never felt entirely at home in Japan – remaining ‘immigrants’ in their own country. A sixty-seven-year-old man, who was planning to move back to his native Odomari (today’s Korsakov) to rent an apartment in a building where his house used to stand and to start a Japanese language school for Russian children, replied, when I asked why he would make such a momentous effort: ‘Just as a salmon goes back to their original waters, so I should like to die where I was born’.

The role of Japan in the War and its subsequent defeat remain highly sensitive and controversial issues in Japan today. The general belief that the war was conducted by a group of military figures, who were later convicted and executed by the Allies, and that war atrocities were therefore nothing but the natural consequences of this, is strongly implanted in the national consciousness. It is only recently that timid voices have started to make themselves heard among Japanese historians, arguing that oral sources are essential to reconstruct this ‘dark period in the history of Japan’, precisely to counter the comfortable official silence. The growing insistence that attention should also be given to the foreign victims of the war, for example the Korean or Dutch ‘comfort women’, is a crucial sign of a breath of fresh air in the study of contemporary history of Japan.

In a country that still has not come to terms with its past, where the war is hardly ever discussed, and where the post-war generations are generally both ignorant of the subject and uninterested in it, I found that my elderly informants, after initial distrust and timidity, were grateful to find a listener and were mostly eager to communicate their often painful but also sometimes pleasant memories, something they could not share with their own children and countrymen. Many of the interviews would start with words like: ‘We have never told this to anybody from the outside. However, those years were crucial. We do see our lives as being divided into two halves – before and after the repatriation’.

I started by becoming a member of the ‘Union of former residents of Karafuto’. Once a member (the only non-Japanese and by far the youngest), I myself became part of this ‘family’, whose members often have only one thing in common: they had all lived on Karafuto in the first half of this century. Belonging to the same group for a modest annual fee of $20 significantly smoothed away racial, cultural and age differences.

Long hours were spent discussing the events that had taken place fifty years earlier. The following examples illustrate the general atmosphere of the time, having made all the necessary allowances for the limits of reliability of oral sources.

The fact that Karafuto was not considered by the Japanese as a colony made the situation there more like the Japanese settlement on Hokkaido than those in China or Korea and explains the strong tendency to consider it as kokyô (one’s native land). It was also clear from the interviews that, for the Japanese residents of Karafuto, the Russian presence on the island before the Russo-Japanese War of 1904 was just as remote and insignificant as is the Japanese presence for those Russians born on Sakhalin since 1945. For both peoples, the history of the island started with them.

The degree of similarity between Japanese eyewitness accounts and Soviet records, documents, autobiographies and newspapers is striking. Interpretations may differ, but the official memory of the conquerors about the years of ‘cohabitation’ is surprisingly close to that of the conquered.

The tales of violence, murder and rape that I had expected to hear were hardly mentioned, if at all. The records tell us that they took place, but lasted a relatively short time and were under control by October 1945. The military instructions concerning the treatment of the Japanese civilians were clear and strict – the Red Army had no intention of repeating what had happened in Berlin the same year. Colonel Kryukov who supervised Russian occupation of Sakhalin records Soviet policy in his memoirs

… We passed a secret resolution to be obeyed by all the military formations: the Japanese administrative and economic bodies would be kept temporarily, but under the control of our Department. It was said in the resolution that South Sakhalin and the Kuriles had been Russian lands from time immemorial, brought back to the Motherland. Everything found on them …belonged to the State, and those who would steal or spoil any of it would be judged as criminals. It was suggested that no offence should be permitted [on the part of the Russians] towards the Japanese population, their being free citizens and not war prisoners: there should be no interference with their national habits and traditions, one will respect all their rules while entering their houses, will not touch their possessions or provisions, will pay them according to the fixed prices when buying from them; no relations will be tolerated with their women, even with the consent of the latter; their shrines and temples will neither be visited [by Russians] nor destroyed. It was stated that those who violated the above order were to be punished most severely. … At the beginning, it provoked hostile reactions from a number of commanders, who were still acting as they pleased and took what they liked in their zones. … These cases were not rare; that is why we summoned the commanders of all the units … and gave them proper instructions.

What my informants all remembered was their amazement at how miserable the ‘conquerors’ looked. Women would exclaim ‘poor things!’, when referring to the Soviet soldiers and shake their heads with a sigh. Indeed, the Soviet Army, having won the war against Germany, is remembered by the Japanese as marching into Karafuto wearing rather weird uniforms. Either the bottom or the top was wrong. They noticed with surprise that the Russian soldiers were wearing monpe (Japanese peasant pants) and other Japanese clothes obviously stolen on the way. The soldiers were genuinely poor and stole everything, which often left people, especially in the rural areas, with not much to wear. Otherwise, wrist-watches, fountain-pens, knives, shoes and suitcases proved to be popular. These incidents of robbery ranked among the most unpleasant memories of the Soviet army’s presence in Karafuto.

However, one could clearly detect a feeling of contempt and superiority on the part of the Japanese. As one of them told me: ‘How could you fear or respect such an enemy? They were poor, dirty, illiterate – beasts, in one word, but they weren’t mean … Frankly, we expected it to be much worse! They were the winners, after all’.

The Soviet settlers (pereselentsy) from 1946 onwards, arriving in Sakhalin in increasing number from all over the USSR, not only worked with the Japanese, but frequently lived in their houses, sharing kitchens and bathrooms. Apart from the Party officials, these were often people who had themselves lost everything during the war. Often they would arrive with no shoes on their feet, with just a sack containing their belongings. Here, for the first time, the Japanese were to witness Communist society in practice, with the poor and the rich side by side: the class differences were striking. However, the desire to build a better life than on the war-torn continent was strong and the new comers worked hard. The rapid organisation and opening of schools and free medical services were welcomed by the Japanese, whose own doctors were known to be excessively expensive.

But the Japanese were most shocked by the loose living and lack of morals of the Soviets. They seemed to have no respect for family structure or chastity. One of them said:

It’s probably also something to do with Communism – nobody belongs to anybody, so you can have as many men or women as you like. But then they are so physically active, that after the age of thirty they look completely used up. Japanese could never be the same. You probably have to eat a lot of meat to be that lustful.

Another person remembered:

When leaving Sakhalin in 1947 and getting permission from the authorities, I was asked about my family – ‘This is my wife and my children’, I said. ‘But are they your children?’ asked a suspicious Russian. ‘Well, yes, they are’, I answered, surprised. The Soviet official explained: ‘If they are your wife’s children, it doesn’t necessarily mean that you are the father, you know’.

Yet, this apparent contempt towards the Russians was strongly interlaced with a feeling of sympathy or even attachment to this ‘white but poor enemy’. Unlike the Americans, they were socially inferior and, therefore, pitiful and even likeable. Russian military, were often mentioned with fondness. ‘They were good, simple people. We made friends and were sorry to part with them’ – was a common comment.

In Japan today, expressing respect or even admiration for the American occupiers, for those who introduced democracy, is generally acceptable. However, expressing the same kind of positive attitude towards the Russians, who have always represented (and proved to be) a potential threat from the north, is anything but politically correct.

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