

May 7, 2005

The Point in Dispute between Japan and Russia (3)

By ITO Kenichi

Japanese Motivation

From the Japanese point of view, the moral issue is paramount. It has two dimensions.

The first dimension concerns Soviet motives. Was the last-minute Soviet entry into the war in Asia in support of the just causes of the allied nations, or did the Soviets have ulterior motives of aggrandizement and expansion? If, as many Japanese suspect, the Soviet motive was primarily the latter, then what does this reveal not only about the nature of the Soviet war against Japan but also about current Soviet motives in Asia and Soviet long-term goals? How the Soviet Union settles the territorial problem will complete the answer to this question.

The second dimension concerns the unique historical background to the Northern Territories problem vis-à-vis all other territorial problems in which the Soviet Union is involved. The four islands of the Northern Territories are unique in the sense that they have never belonged to any country other than Japan and that the current Soviet leadership must find a solution to this problem in an international environment in which a territorial aggrandizement by military force is condemned strongly.

These issues represent two sides of the same coin. To begin with, let me first examine the nature of the Soviet war against Japan in August-September 1945. Many Japanese question the interpretation that there was one single conflict between 1939 and 1945, and see instead a variety of wars with different sources and implications. Were the Pacific and the European wars really two indivisible components of a single war? No, there was no arrangement between Japan and Germany on war objectives and strategies – let alone a sharing of them – in the preparation and in the course of their separate wars.

An analogy from the European war suggests itself. Was not the war between the Soviet Union and Finland a separate war from the rest of the war in Europe? Finland was hardly an aggressor. It was a victim of Soviet invasion. The purpose of the Soviet Union was to force a unilateral territorial demand on Finland. This purpose was clearly inconsistent with that of the allied nations in World War II as specified in the Atlantic Charter, which declared they would “seek no aggrandizement, territorial or other.”

The Soviet war against Japan appears similarly dubious. What was the purpose of the Soviet Union? To put it bluntly, it was the acquisition of territories. Edward Stettinius, who accompanied president Roosevelt to Yalta as secretary of state in 1945, testified,

I was told, among other things, that Stalin had said that it was clear that certain concessions desired in the Far East by the Russians were essential for Russian entry into the war against Japan. Without these conditions, Stalin had contended, the Supreme Soviet and the Russian people would wonder why they had entered the war in the Far East. They understood the German war because of the German attack on their country, but, since there had been no overt move by the Japanese in the Far East, concessions would be necessary to justify Soviet entry into the war.¹²

As a result, Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill signed a secret agreement called “Agreement on Terms for Entry of the Soviet Union into the War against Japan.” This agreement reminds the Japanese of the Secret Additional Protocol to the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, which was signed by Stalin and Ribbentrop in Moscow in 1939 prior to the Soviet invasion of Poland, Finland, and the three Baltic states. The contents of the secret Yalta agreement were released simultaneously by the three powers one year later.

In two or three months after Germany has surrendered and the war in Europe has terminated, the Soviet Union shall enter into the war against Japan on the side of the Allies on condition that:

1. the status quo in Outer-Mongolia shall be preserved;

2. the former rights of Russia violated by the treacherous attack of Japan in 1904 shall be restored, viz.: (a) the southern part of Sakhalin shall be returned to the Soviet Union, (b) the commercial port of Dairen shall be internationalized, the preeminent interests of the Soviet Union in this port being safeguarded, and the lease of Port Arthur as a naval base of the U.S.S.R. restored, and (c) the Chinese-Eastern Railroad and the South-Manchurian Railroad shall be jointly operated by the establishment of a joint Soviet-Chinese Company; and
3. the Kurile Islands shall be handed over to the Soviet Union.¹³

Had tsar Nicholas II reappeared wearing the mask of Stalin? This document was strikingly remote from the spirit of the declared principles of the Allied nations in World War II.

The second dimension of the moral issue has similar strong resonance in Japanese thinking. The Soviet Union is the only country in the world that sought – and attained – territorial aggrandizement in World War II. One must admit, however, that most of the acquired lands had at one time or another been under Russian dominance. For instance, Byelorussia and the Ukraine east of the Curzon Line of Poland, Karelia and Petsamo of Finland, Bessarabia of Romania, and the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia are all lands that belonged to Russia at one time in history. Within the Northern Territories, Southern Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands (from Shimushu Island southward to Uruppu Island) may correspond to this category. This hardly justifies Soviet behavior. Yet it does allow a certain, though lame, excuse.

Nevertheless, among the territorial spoils of World War II gained by the Soviet Union there are several lands that have never belonged to Russia. Zakarpathia-Ukraine of Czechoslovakia and the northern half of East Prussia of Germany fall into this category. The Soviets might be tempted to think that the Japanese should follow the suit of the Czechs and the Germans in the abandonment of the four islands of the Northern Territories. If so, they are making a gross mistake. There is an essential difference between the case of Zakarpathia-Ukraine and East Prussia and that of the four islands of the Northern Territories. Even though Zakarpathia and East Prussia did not belong previously to Russia, they have been disputed territories for centuries: Zakarpathia and East Prussia previously belonged to countries other than Czechoslovakia and Germany – i.e., Hungary and Poland respectively. But the four islands of the Northern Territories have never belonged to any country but Japan. The four islands of the Northern Territories are unique in the sense that they are Japan's *koyu-no-ryodo*.

Japan was certainly a militaristic and aggressive power at the time of Soviet entry into the war. Even so, as far as Japanese-Soviet bilateral relations are concerned, it is at least true that the Soviet Union started attacking Japan when “there had been no overt move by the Japanese in the Far East (that would) justify Soviet entry into the war,” as Stalin himself admitted.

In this case, the victims were clearly Japanese. The Red Army did not stop attacking the Japanese population even after Japan surrendered and disarmed itself on August 15, 1945. Many Japanese, mostly women, children, and the elderly perished under the guns and treads of Soviet tanks. The most notorious slaughter of thousands of unarmed Japanese refugees is the Ko-Ken-Miao massacre. The frantic evacuation from Soviet forces also separated many Japanese families, resulting in another legacy of the war. Under the joint sponsorship of the Japanese and Chinese governments, tens of thousands of *chugoku-zanryu-koji* (Japanese orphans left in China) are visiting Japan to locate the parents they last saw more than 40 years ago when they were infants.

The Soviets also took more than 570,000 Japanese, both soldiers and civilians, to Siberia as prisoners of war in complete disregard of article 9 of the Potsdam proclamation, which promised Japan as one of the conditions of the surrender that “the Japanese military forces, after being completely disarmed, shall be permitted to return to their homes with the opportunity to lead peaceful and productive lives.” Of the allied powers, the Soviet Union was alone in its noncompliance with article 9 of the Potsdam proclamation.

In his victory speech on September 2, 1945, Stalin defined his war against Japan as a reprisal for the Russo-Japanese War. But even this does not justify grabbing all of the Northern Territories; it can only justify a territorial claim to the land Russia lost in the Russo-Japanese War, i.e. Southern Sakhalin only. Whereas the Soviet Union is a party to the Potsdam proclamation defining terms for Japanese surrender, article 8 of which provides that “the terms of the Cairo declaration shall be carried out,” the Cairo declaration says that “the Allies covet no gain for themselves and have no thought of territorial expansion” and that “Japan will be expelled from all territories which she has taken by violence and greed.” It goes without saying that all the Northern Territories except Southern Sakhalin are most alien from the kind of territories that a country has taken “by violence and greed.”

Conclusion

Japanese revanchism against the Soviet Union is out of the question. But the perspectives discussed above suggest why, from the Japanese side, the Northern Territories issue remains a Gordian knot. Soviet territorial demands for the four islands of the Northern Territories lack even the minimum of self-restraint in their moral, legal, and political judgments. From Japan's perspective, it seems that the Soviets are making an even harsher territorial demand of Japan than was made of Germany which, after all, started war against the Soviet Union and killed more than 20 million Soviets. The Soviets are not depriving the Germans of their own *koyu-no-ryodo*, whereas they are demanding that the Japanese hand over their inherent lands after defeat in the war.

Under the statement of purposes and principles of the United Nations, all its members are endeavoring today to build an international society in which territorial aggrandizement by the threat or use of force is prohibited harshly. A Japanese-Soviet peace treaty permitting Soviet retention of the *koyu-no-ryodo* must be prohibited as counter to the ideal and the justice of not only Japan but also the international community as a whole. Thus, the reversion of the four islands of the Northern Territories is not a simple bilateral problem between Japan and the Soviet Union. It involves the fundamental values of international society in a more interdependent era.

General Secretary Gorbachev said in his speech at the Soviet Foreign Ministry on May 23, 1986, that if individual nations sought their own interests only and disregarded interests of others, it would become difficult to achieve healthy international relations. Let us hope that these words are genuine and that the Soviet Union is ready to move beyond the current stalemate, not only to a more active diplomatic style but to a just and permanent resolution of the issues that divide Japan and the Soviet Union. Easy prediction is dangerous, but no one can deny that relations between the two great nations have been left unattended for too long. (End)

(This is a reproduction of the article “Japan and the Soviet Union – Entangled in the Deadlock of the Northern Territories” by Prof. ITO Kenichi, President & CEO of the Japan Forum on International Relations, printed in the Winter 1988 issue of “The Washington Quarterly.”)

¹² Edward R. Stettinius, Jr., *Roosevelt and the Russians – The Yalta Conference* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1949), p. 92.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 351-352.