

The Kurile Islands Issue. Clash of Cultures or Clash of Interests?

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Introduction

The continuing and deepening controversy over Japan's Northern Territories underlines the historic paradox that despite their physical contiguity, Japan and the USSR are far apart politically and psychologically.[1]

The [Kurile Islands](#) are a political and administrative part of the Sakhalin Oblast in the Russian Far East region. The group of islands, (a total of fifty-six) ideally connect the Russian Kamchatka peninsula with the Japanese island of Hokkaido. The fifty-six islands are sparsely populated, indeed we can find villages and small towns only in the five largest Islands, which are in the southern part of the archipelago. In the northern part only Paramushir was inhabited for a long time but, today, its population has moved to the continental mainland and the island's only inhabitants are a small number of frontier guards and some lighthouse keepers.[2] The length of the Kurile islands (which extend from Kamchatka to the port of Nemuro in Japan) is about 1,200 km. The name Kurile is derived from an Ainu [3] word, *Kur*, meaning people. In Japan these islands are know as *Chichima*: 'The 1,000 islands'. Japan lays claim to the Southern Kuriles, Iturup, Kunashir, Shikotan and the Habomais, which cover about 5,000 square kilometres. In these

islands we find the most suitable conditions for a good standard of life: the winters are not so freezing, and during spring and summer luxuriant vegetation creates a pleasant environment.

The dispute over the '*Northern Territories*' or '*Southern Kuriles*' [4] started at the end of the eighteenth century with the first meetings between Japan and Russia. Today, after more or less two hundred years the problem is not yet resolved. A number of factors are deeply involved in this dispute and there are legal, strategic and economic problems, but I think the main issue that does not permit the complete resolution of this problem focuses on the Japanese and Russian ethnic, cultural and historical differences.

We can agree with Kimura Hiroshi, when he wrote that the '*Northern Territories* issue is merely a spin-off from these more fundamental differences,' [5] but sometimes the cultural differences, like identity, culture, and historical background can be more difficult to understand and resolve than legal and strategic problems.

The geographical disposition of the Kurile islands, in one of the most remote places in Asia, has helped both Japan (that, in the late of eighteenth century, started with official expeditions and surveys) and Russia, (that in the same period advanced its expeditions from the Kamchatka peninsula toward the south) and in the belief that they were the island's discoverers settled there.

In fact, when Japan and Russia had the perception that 'other' persons apart from the indigenous inhabitants the Ainu, had settled the islands, a spirit of revenge and protection arose in that they believed they should defend their own territory. The inevitable first unofficial meeting between the empires was characterised by incomprehension and suspicion, especially on the part of the Japanese who did not trust those who subsequently were called '*Red Ainu*'. [6]

Finally, in the nineteenth century, after long official meetings, the two empires signed a series of legal treaties and agreements that agreed to share the sovereignty of the islands. Although both parties accepted the

terms of the treaties, the Japanese were not completely satisfied, these decisions felt like a heavy loss of their indivisible and inalienable empire.

In order to emphasise their possession, the Japanese government has often used a legend written in the *Nihongi* or *Nihon Shoki* regarding a mythical expedition to the north which took place in ancient times. 'Abe Hirafu's expedition against the Ezo and Mishihase barbarians in AD 658-60 brought what is today the Soviet Far East under Japanese suzerainty.'^[7]

Naturally, this kind of proof is not accepted by the Russians, who claim possession of the islands on the grounds of legal documentation and official treaties.

The fact that Russia has based, and now is basing their claims on legal documentation does not conceal the fact that the Russian people also believe and feel that the Kurile islands are an integral part of their territory.

The aim of this article is not a political analysis of this territorial problem and how this has influenced bilateral relations between Japan and Russia, but principally how the new generations of Japanese and Russians think about this old dispute, and how the cultural differences and different historical backgrounds have influenced the perception of this problem.

Brief History of the Kurile Islands

The history of the Kurile Islands is very complex, confused and inextricably connected with the heritage of Sakhalin Island. For different reasons, Russians from the North, then the Japanese from the South started, more or less at the same time, to colonise these islands. At that time the Russians with the purpose of extending their political influence and gaining new markets for trades, were looking for new territories. These reasons drove the Russians, into the wild territories of the Far East, where, during some expeditions organised under the patronage of Tsar Peter the Great, they discovered the Kurile Islands. Indeed, as Rees has emphasised, these first expeditions were anything but easy, 'The exploration of the Kuriles, which was initially organised by the Russian authorities, faced great geographical

difficulties. Supplies were hard to get to the adventurers involved, state policy was secondary to the amassing of private Yasak'.[\[8\]](#)

The Kuriles were not uninhabited and Russians met the local population called Ainu, whom they subjugated. However, the Russians were not alone in battling through this wilderness looking for new territories. It seems that the Dutch explorer Maarten Herritsen Vries, had visited the Islands as well as Sakhalin. However, the Dutch influence seems to have been limited to these short visits. The Russians were more determined to explore these lands, and after Peter the Great's death, the expeditions continued. In the late 1760s, the Russians had reached Iturup (which in Japanese would be Etorofu); by the end of the eighteenth century they had established outposts throughout the Kuriles.

The reports on the geographical, ethnographic and anthropological situation in the territories that the Russian explorer sent to the Tsar and his entourage were accepted with great interest, although the Russian government was mainly interested to open new economic opportunities and establish reciprocal trade. Japan of which the Russians virtually knew only the geographical disposition seemed to be a valid candidate for this new venture. However, they knew practically nothing of the cultural and political situation of Japan, and their attempt at establishing an economic relationship failed. Japan was anything but interested in trading exchange particularly with a country they regarded as a possible dangerous enemy. In particular the Russian presence in the Kuriles was what concerned Japan's authorities most. Japan had discovered the Kuriles, as we have seen, more or less at the same time as the Russians, but this was not what Japanese people considered fundamental. What they considered fundamental was, and I can say today still is, that the Kuriles were geographically near the imaginary border that automatically would transform something into a Japanese 'something'.

This is what Hasegawa explained quite clearly:

Until Russia moved south, they (*Japan*) [9] had felt no need to establish clear borders with their neighbours. In fact, until then they had no concept of *national borders*. During the Tokugawa period, the Matsumae domain was given jurisdiction over Ezo, but Ezo's demarcation was vague, comprising a large area that included Hokkaido, Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands[10]

Usually in official documents or in public speeches, the Japanese government refers to the Kurile Islands with the denomination 'Inherent Territory'. [11] This concept involves all territories near Japan, the borders of these territories for Japan do not need to have a definite delimitation, the borders are imaginary, and they arrive and start where Japanese culture arrives and starts.

In the Kurile case, the Japanese idea of 'Inherent Territory' was not matter of geographical position, but also of economic and cultural relationship with the local populations that inhabited such territories. The cultural exchanges and economic trad that Japan has had with the Ainu are a sufficient (from the Japanese point of view) demonstration that the Kuriles are part of their 'Inherent Territories'. In fact, Japan because of such relations, considered the Ainu, their own ancestors. Of course, ethnologically speaking this is not true but this contention still contributes to the endless dispute, therefore the abstract, but not unreal, dimension of cultural differences which is at the heart of the problem. Hence, some Japanese scholars have argued that in the '*Nihongi*' or '*Nihon Shoki*' (chronicles of Japan) completed in 720 BC, there were indications that the islands were part of Japanese territory. [12] Yet in this dispute, historical documents and others references have been often adapted and interpreted according to the different opposed theories and constituted as claims.

Soviet historians have justified their claim to these islands not on the basis of the proximity of the lands; indeed Russians do not have such a concept of 'Inherent Territory'. In contrast, they argued that they could prove that they

were the first to discover such a remote region. [13] However, Japan tried to contest such a historical explanation, arguing that the Russian influence on the Islands had probably reached only the northern part of Urup Island, but not Iturup. Officials and scholars of the Japanese Shogunate government who visited Iturup in 1798 confirmed that not a single Russian was to be seen on the island and that there was nothing to indicate that such an island was part of Russian Empire.[14] In 1754, Japan established some trading stations in the islands. [15] Although Japan had a long tradition of autarchy and its foreigner relationships were kept to a minimum, the nation could not avoid to having some political contacts in the islands with their counterparts, the Russians.

This news about the Kuriles caused the *Bakufu* (the Japanese government during the Tokugawa period) to take drastic and immediate actions. In 1798 they organised an expedition to Sakhalin, the Kurile Islands and Hokkaido, so that they could verify if the Russians had definitely established colonies. The Japanese government was fearful of an organised invasion by the Russians. For this reason, they tried to reinforce and centralise control of the controversial territories and in 1799 the government, removed the legal jurisdiction of the lord of Matsumae over Hokkaido, Kunashir, Iturup, and all Northern Territories placing them under the direct rule of the *Shogun*.

Despite the reticence of the *Shogun*, the Russians seemed very eager to organise trade with Japanese merchants. For instance, during 1804-05, the Russian Nikolas Rezanov, who was the head of the Russian-American Company, tried to negotiate an agreement with Japanese officials in Nagasaki harbour. He made regular demands to the Japanese administration for permission to trade. These were requests that the shogun was only too eager to reject. This of course did not satisfy Russian expectations and although there is no reliable evidence, it seems that in 1807 Nikolas Rezanov organised, a kind of raid against Japanese garrisons in Sakhalin and the Southern Kuriles. Four years later, Japan took revenge.

A Russian officer, Captain Vasilii Golovnin arrived at Tomari, on the Kunashir Islands, where he was captured along with his sailors and kept prisoner for two years, until 1813, when the Russians apologised for the raids against the Japanese posts, saying that they were not authorised by the Russian government.[16]

After the conclusion of this incident, relations between Japan and Russia were normalised and both countries seemed to lose interest in the territorial issues concerning Kuriles and Sakhalin. Yet by the mid-nineteenth century, Great Britain and the US took an interest in Japan and the Kuriles as well, finally having success in forcing Japan to open its harbours to US and British traders. This, of course, pushed the Russians towards a renewed interest in the Kuriles and new relationship with Japan.

From 1852 to 1853 Russia organised diplomatic visits to Japan with the intention of discussing economic collaboration and, in particular, the issue relating to their borders. The Russian vice-Admiral Evfimii Putiatin carried out the negotiations with the Tokugawa government, yet the Kuriles issue challenged the success of such a mission, because both sets of diplomats pursued their territorial claims. On the other hand, the Americans had better fortune and the Japanese signed the Kaganawa treaty on 31 March 1854, which allowed Americans to use a certain number of Japanese ports for trade.

The outbreak of the Crimean War, however, put the Russian government in a very difficult position as far as the Far Eastern region was concerned. They needed definite borders for the defence of their territories. Russia proposed to Japan an urgent agreement that substantially shared sovereignty over the islands. The agreement was finally signed on 7 February 1855, in the port of Shimoda. Russia had to share with Japan the sovereignty of the Kuriles, so that Habomai, Shikotan, Kunashir and Iturup were assigned to Japanese rule, and the Northern islands to Russian control. As far as Sakhalin was concerned, sovereignty became a shared possession between the two

empires.

Moreover, the Russians gained access for their traders to the three Japanese ports of Shimoda, Hakodate and Nagasaki.

If the division of the Kuriles seemed to put an end to the problems that Russia and Japan had experienced, bringing a certain normalisation to their diplomatic relationships, the shared control of Sakhalin resulted in difficulties of management, creating in a short time, good reasons for new conflict. In 1862, in St. Petersburg, a Japanese diplomatic delegation asked officially for a solution to this controversial situation. In 1867 a new Japanese delegation proposed that Russia acknowledge Japanese sovereignty over Sakhalin. Of course, the idea that such a request would be accepted was practically impossible. Finally after frequent negotiations a solution was found. In 1875 Japan acknowledged Russian sovereignty over Sakhalin, while Russia recognised Japanese sovereignty over all the Kurile Islands. This came to be known as the St. Petersburg treaty, which for the first time led Japan to feel that its concept of 'Inherent Territory' was in part being respected.

From the St. Petersburg Treaty to the San Francisco Peace Treaty

In the twentieth century, Japan and Russia have fought in a total of five wars, in which Japan did not miss the opportunity to gain sovereignty over the contested northern territories which remained under Russian sovereignty. In the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, in which Japan was victorious, it acquired the southern half of Sakhalin below the fiftieth parallel as well as other Russian concessions. Then there was the Japanese intervention in the Russian Far East, just after the Soviet Revolution, (1918-22), in which Japan occupied the northern part of Sakhalin Island. However, due to political turmoil and changes, which had marked Russia, now the Soviet Union, in 1925, Japanese-Soviet relations started to normalise and a new convention was signed at Peking. In this treaty, Japan recognised the Soviet Union and agreed to withdraw from the occupied North Sakhalin. For a certain period the two countries stopped fighting each other and tried to

maintain a certain status quo. Yet two new wars would damage the relationships between Soviet Union and Japan, the border's war in Lake Khasan (1938), and in particular the so-called Nomonhan War (1939), in which Russia resisted the Japanese attack.

With the outbreak of World War II in Europe, Russia was again forced to find a solution to limit its possible battlefronts. Of course, there was the Non-Aggression Pact with the Nazi Germans, but they knew very well that it was only a temporary truce. However, Japan as well was quite interested in an agreement with the Soviet Union, due to the problems that Japan had in China and the deteriorating relationships with US.

In Moscow on 13 April 1941, the Japanese Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yosuke, Ambassador Tatekawa Yoshitsugu and Russian Foreign Minister Viacheslav Mikhailovich Molotov finally signed the so-called Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact.

During the Second World War, pressure to involve the Soviet Union in the war and an invasion of Japan had increased.¹⁷ Before the Tehran Conference, in which the USSR participated, Roosevelt, Churchill and Chiang Kai-Shek met together in Cairo from 23 to 27 November 1943. In Cairo, the three powers discussed the post-war disposition of the Japanese Empire. It is interesting to observe what the Cairo Declaration stressed as far as the Pacific Islands were concerned:

.....Japan shall be stripped of all the islands in the Pacific which she has seized or occupied since the beginning of the First World War in 1914, and that all the territories that Japan has stolen from the Chinese, such as Manchuria, Formosa, and the Pescadores, shall be restored to the Republic of China. Japan will also be expelled from all the other territories which she has taken by violence and greed.....[18]

Indeed, as Rees, for example, has observed, 'there is no way in which the

Kuriles could fall within the terms of the declaration'.¹⁹

Stalin attended the Tehran conference on 28 November 1943 and clearly affirmed that after the defeat of Nazi forces, he would join the Allies in the war against Japan. This allowed Stalin to outline, during the Yalta Conference in February 1945, the conditions under which the Soviet Union would enter into the new war. We can find them in Article 2 of the secret protocol of the Yalta agreement. The agreement declares that:

Art. 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 as well as all islands adjacent to it shall be returned to the Soviet Union.

Art. 3: 'The Kuril Islands shall be handed over to the Soviet Union.' It added: 'The Heads of the three Great Powers have agreed that these claims of the Soviet Union shall be unquestionably fulfilled after Japan has been defeated.'
[20]

It is on these points that the Soviet Union, then Russia, are basing their current opposition to Japanese sovereignty over the Kuriles.

In other words, the Kuriles are a tangible sign that Japan lost the war, and their hegemony, not only political, but also cultural, over the Pacific area. On 26 July 1945, the Potsdam declaration gave the last ultimatum to a dying Japan. Truman, Churchill and Chiang Kai-Shek signed it. The article 8 stated:

The terms of the Cairo declaration shall be carried out and Japanese sovereignty shall be limited to the islands of Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu Shikoku and such minor islands as we determine.^[21]

However, considering the fact that Japan had to give up sovereignty over the

Kuriles, it is not really clear that such islands were claimed as an integral part of the Soviet Union. Hence, the Japanese government argued that the Potsdam treaty referred only to general and vague 'minor islands as we [*the winners*] [22] determine'. There was not any explicit reference to Kuriles islands. Indeed, the Japanese stated that, the Potsdam declaration makes only clearer what had just been decided in the Cairo Declaration, in which, however, there is not a direct reference to the Kurile and Sakhalin as Russian territories. Furthermore, there are other important points that the Japanese government use to justify its territorial claim. The USSR broke the neutrality pact on 8 August 1945. The Red Army launched a massive offensive against the Japanese forces in Manchuria, the Kurile Islands, Sakhalin and Korea. Yet on 14 August, Japan surrendered, and Soviet troops invaded and completely overran the Kuriles. Only on 2-4 September 1945, Japan could argue that, from its point of view, this invasion was not supported by any kind of legality, and it was perpetuated when they surrendered.

After Stalin's death, the two countries began the first steps towards a new phase of normalisation. In August 1953, the Soviet Prime Minister, G. M. Malenkov, tried to sound out Japanese intentions about future diplomatic relations. He envisaged the possibilities of developing diplomatic and trading relationships with Japan, but he did not neglect to stress that a clear obstacle to better Soviet-Japanese relationships was the United States influence and their control of Japan.[23]

Malenkov completely avoided speaking about the territorial issues that Russia and Japan had debated. This would be a diplomatic trend characterising Russian diplomatic action towards its former enemy in the long term. Indeed what they wanted to stress was that the territorial issue did not exist.

The Soviet government established the Sakhalin district on 2 January 1947, the new district consisted of Sakhalin and the Kurile islands. From 25

February 1947, the new territories were finally included in the Soviet constitution.

In 1951, the controversial peace treaty of San Francisco ratified the end of American occupation in Japan, but no solution was found to the Japanese territorial issues. In fact, article 2c of the Japanese peace treaty stated:

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 5 September 1905.[24]

This article seemed clearly to state that Japan had to renounce all the Kuriles Islands including the Habomai islands, Shikotan, Kunashir and Iturup. The Japanese government argued that this treaty failed to make clear the geopolitical definition of the island chain, stressing that, from the Japanese point of view, article 2 of the Shimoda treaty, the term 'Kurile islands' was used only to refer to the islands North of Iturup. (Etorofu).

The Japanese government, for instance, in 1965 declared that the term *Kurile Islands* has been used in all the treaties regarding the Kurile Islands, and meant the 18 islands north of Iturup (Etorofu) and excluded Etorofu and Kunashiri.[25]

Yet, for the Soviet Union, then Russia, the issue was settled irrevocably in 1945. In 1956, after several years in which relationships between Japan and Soviet Union were practically non-existent, a Joint Declaration was signed between the two countries. The state of war ended, diplomatic, economic, and cultural exchanges were established but regarding the territorial problem no solution was found.

The Japanese idea of the Kurile Islands

In January 1981, Prime Minister Zenko Suzuki's cabinet decided to proclaim

February the 7th the 'Day of the Northern Territories'. The date was not by chance; on 7 February 1855 the Shimoda treaty was signed. The Shimoda treaty is very important for Japan. In fact, in this treaty, for the first time, a marked division of the Kurile Islands between Japan and Russia was established. Recently, official and unofficial meetings, marches, and protests have been organised by patriotic associations and some political groups. Today, the Japanese people continue to claim the same political, economical and cultural rights to the Kurile Islands as at the time of General McArthur's administration.

In 2002, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, on the so-called Northern Territorial Day, declared that he would

Continue pushing Russia to return the four disputed islands, a decades-long dispute preventing a peace treaty formally ending World War II. We must make it clear that the four islands belong to us, but we should not be impatient. We should continue our negotiations patiently.

At the same time as his speech, right-wing parties organised some rallies, national flags and banners were used, while slogans such as 'Return the Northern Islands!' were shouted.

The Prime Minister is, of course, strongly supported by the former habitants of the Kuriles as this extract from an article shows:

I spent my childhood and youth, the happiest years of my life, on the island," Minoru Yokota, a former resident of Kunashiri Island, said during the rally, 'I wish I could go back there, though (the return) would not be easy.'[\[26\]](#)

The Northern Territorial problem is not exclusively the domain of ultra-conservatives. The Japanese Communist Party, explained their political

position with a message, sent to the 'National Convention calling for the Return of Northern Territories'

The message said:

The recent Russo-Japanese territorial controversy indicates that neither unilateral concessions nor tricky diplomatic efforts have resulted in steps toward a fair solution of the territorial issue. The former Soviet Union was responsible for this Russo-Japanese territorial issue for having unjustifiably demanded Japan's cession of the Chishima Islands to it under the Yalta Treaty, ignoring the principle of territorial non-expansion. The United States and Great Britain were also responsible for having approved this, and the Japanese government is responsible for having to renounce its territorial rights to these islands under the San Francisco Peace Treaty. Not to speak of Habomai and Shikotan islands, which are part of the Hokkaido Prefecture, the entire Chishima (Kurile) Islands, from Kunashiri and Etorofu islands in the south to Shumshu Island in the north is historically part of Japan under the 1875 Sakhalin-Chishima Exchange Treaty, a product achieved through peaceful negotiations.

We must be free from this erroneous post-war disposition in the 20th century. It is absolutely necessary for us to correct this, and to squarely call for the return of the islands. The need now is for us to establish Japan's diplomacy based on international law that will help convince the Russian people of our righteousness, and also help gain a major public support for this aim.[\[27\]](#)

The 'Northern Territorial Day' is not the only commemoration day in relation to the Second World War territorial losses, there is also the 'Karafuto Day' on the 23rd of August, the official date of the Soviet occupation of Karafuto, now Sakhalin. Like the associations for the return of the 'Northern Territories', there are numerous associations of former Karafuto residents. It is important to observe, that although the Japanese government is not actively working on the possible return of Karafuto, the people that formally

lived there have asked for the same support that the Japanese government shows as far as the Kurile Islands are concerned,

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."[\[28\]](#)

These documents show how the claim to the islands has been profoundly important to Japanese society and how it is so heavily involved in this process. Some scholars have analysed the economic, strategic and political reasons that impel the Japanese government to continue this old dispute (although also supported by the population). Yet, it is important, I think to understand why a great proportion of Japanese society (and not only the former, now very old Kurile inhabitants) feels such emotional ties with these remote and poor islands.

The historical heritage of Japan, so different from that of its neighbours could give an answer to this dilemma.

The historical heritages of countries like China, Russia and Korea have suffered from foreign invasions. Such invasions have had strong political, social and economic impacts on the conquered lands. Yet Japan did not experience these processes, as it was never conquered, so that, for instance, she did not change her political system. Of course this peculiar absence of violent contact with others, has marked her understanding of the concept of territory and border. Professor Ito Abito who is an anthropologist working at University of Tokyo, has pointed out.

When the Yamato court (4th AD-6th AD) came to prevail throughout the archipelago, a sense of indigenous identity, gradually manifested itself in the islands' inhabitants. At the same time, however, the inhabitants of the farther fringes of the archipelago during the early period of the Yamato state appear in records under independent names, as ethnic minorities. On the other hand, one could also say that by incorporating local ethnic minorities on the northern and southern peripheries under their rule, they have, in effect voluntarily relinquished their racial homogeneity. One could also say that in the effort to further unity by making the ethnic minorities thus incorporated under their rule into subjects under an emperor system, the illusion of a uniform, homogeneous single race was elevated into a kind of national ideal. In Japan following the Meiji Restoration, which sought to create a modern state and society stressing the correspondence between the concept of race and awareness of the land and the nation, the ethnic identity of the Ainu and the Ryūkyūans has in a sense been denied.[29]

From this point of view, Japanese people tend to play down all the difference that characterised Japanese society to emphasise an homogenisation that is unreal and imaginary. Now, it is not difficult to understand how the Ainu were considered 'Japanese', although less civilised, but still part of Japanese ethnicity. However, these are not the only factors that have helped Japan to develop this peculiar attitude towards border and national identity. Indeed, geographical aspects play an important role. Japan has borders, which are only virtual ideas with the ocean being the only true border. They have tangible lands but imaginary geopolitical lines, which define where Japan starts and when Japanese sovereignty finishes. This fact has helped Japanese people to develop an idea of borders that tend to be flexible and more linked to cultural aspects than physical barriers (rivers, and mountains, for instance). At the beginning of the history of Japan as in many other cultures in such a region, relationships and sovereignty were marked more

by economic exchanges than territorial divisions, as the so called *basho* system (a ritual exchange of gifts that linked one group to another) can show. Japan had the first contact with the Ainu under the feudal system of the Tokugawa period. Hence, according to Professor Ito Abito, the Ainu population has a 'Japanese identity' and the Japanese are strongly linked with Ainu culture. Moreover, the Japanese maintain that the four islands were discovered, settled, cultivated, and permanently populated by people of Japanese roots, hence they are legally part of Japan, and from these assertions their point of view is that Russian sovereignty is absolutely unjustified. However, for Russia, which bases its understanding of sovereignty upon treaties and political annexations, this sounds foolish and unacceptable.

What Russians think about the Kurile Islands

Russian history is profoundly different and in stark contrast with Japanese history. For example, the first annexations of Sakhalin and the Kurile islands in the eighteenth century were based on the fact that the Russians thought they discovered and settled them first, and not because the territories were an 'inherent' part of the Russian empire.

If Japan, as we have seen, tends to emphasise the ethnic homogeneity of its population, (even through dubious anthropological interpretations), linked with the concepts of 'territorial homogeneity' and 'inherent territory', the Russians can affirm that its population is multiethnic, without endangering Russian territorial integrity. Indeed, it is not because the people are Russian that their lands are part of Russia, but because historical and political events permitted this.

The Soviet Union was the last great World Empire. Its borders stretched from Europe to Asia, from the Arctic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. Within these borders lived 120 different ethnic groups divided into fifteen Republics and various autonomous regions. Today, the Russian Federation is a large multiethnic, multifaith and multicultural state comprising more than 176

nationalities.

The Russian Empire before the revolution, the Soviet Union, and now the Russian Federation could be considered the most multiethnic country in the world. The multiethnic Russian concept underpinned the seventeenth century Russian migrations toward the East. When the Russian explorers settled the Kamchatka peninsula and the Kurile Islands for the first time, they forced the local Ainu population to pay a tax called *yasak*.

The tax was the first step toward a complete colonisation, and a clear symbol that the Ainu had become Russian subjects, as living in a territorial part of the Russian Empire. These newly discovered territories were soon included within the Siberian Department, which was directed by an administrative agency. Villages, houses and schools were built and during the middle of the seventeenth century, Russian Orthodox missionaries had begun to convert the Ainu.

In order to consider a territory as part of Russia, it should be annexed to Russia's political and economic system. This concept is in complete opposition to the Japanese idea of annexation. We can define the latter as 'cultural annexation', so that, for instance, since Japan considered the Ainu to be Japanese people (although less civilised) they started to consider the Kurile Islands as Japanese territory.

After the Second World War, the Kuriles and Sakhalin were internationally acknowledged as Russian territories based on the western idea of sovereignty. Indeed the Japanese concept of 'inherency' did not have many opportunities to persuade the victors in the Second World War of its universal validity.

The Russian government wanted to mark the legal acceptance of these territories into the Soviet Union, changing their Japanese names into the Russian versions. So that the Japanese Etorofu became the Russian Iturup, Tomari City was now Golovnino, and so on. A journalist, Andreas Rüesch who recently visited the Kurile Islands described the results of this attempted

to transform these Islands into a Russian place with a Russian lifestyle.

After annexing the Kuriles, Stalin had all the Japanese expelled. About 20,000 inhabitants were reportedly booted out of the South Kuriles alone back then. All traces of them were systematically erased; temples and shrines were destroyed, the simple Japanese wooden houses collapsed on their own. Aside from a few gravestones, there is nothing on Kunashir today to remind people of the period of Japanese settlement, which went back to the 19th century. An inscription on a memorial to Soviet soldiers states emotionally that, with the landing of Soviet troops, 'Old Russian territory' was 'liberated' and united forever with 'Mother Russia'.[\[30\]](#)

This Russian attitude shows that despite the superficial imposition of communist propaganda, the Russians also, considered these territories to be their sovereign lands.

After the second World War, Russian citizens started to re-settle the islands. In fact, the Soviet government encouraged immigration with financial assistance and better salaries:

Today, the end of the Soviet Union has brought the collapse of financial assistance and the fish processing industry on the South Kuriles, which had previously provided work for thousands. The economic situation is collapsed, and often the Kuril inhabitants can't move to the islands.

This particular situation, created in the Kuril inhabitants a sentiment of disaffection toward the Moscow government, and often, local politicians advocated separation from Russia.

"Mayor Sema, elected in 1997, proposed leasing the disputed islands to Japan. Speaker Lukyanov of the local parliament went even farther and demanded the formal return of the territories. A consultative plebiscite was held in which a majority of the voters reportedly favoured a transfer to Japan.

[\[31\]](#)

Rüesch has emphasised that, although there are some political movements that support Japanese sovereignty, and although some local people living in the Kuriles would appreciate the economic advantage that this might mean, the majority of the Russian population of these remote islands show a great attachment to the islands and its Russian identity. Still today, despite the Russian government showing increasingly less interest in the economic and social development of the Kurile Islands, the Russian newspaper 'Pravda' reported on November 2004 that a group of almost 4000 residents of the Sakhalin region and the Kurile Islands made a massive protest demonstration against a possible return of the Kurile Islands to Japan.

Members of the Russian public organization 'For the integrity of the Russian Eastern Territory' took part in the demonstration too, as well as members of the Liberal and Democratic party of Russia (LDPR), the Communist Party (KPRF), the Fatherland, and others.[\[32\]](#)

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that the so-called Kurile Islands issue, is linked to cultural aspects that have affected the political history of such a dispute. In order to demonstrate this point I have outlined the historic and geopolitical relevance of this area. Then, I have shown the deeply different understanding of the concepts of both sovereignty and borders that the two countries have. This is a very important point because my contention is that the issue, before basing its reasons on territorial claims, is rooted in a symbolic discourse. On the one hand, Japan, after its humiliating defeat in the Second World War, has seen in the Northern Territory the possibility of affirming its non-western values of political and identity policies. On the other hand, Russia, which suffered the collapse of its economic and political system is not ready to hand over what seems to be the last symbol of its

hegemonic power in the region. Of course, this reality is not something that we can read directly in the political documents of both parties, but it is no less real. Historians today need to look at other disciplines in order to understand the historical situation, which would be difficult to explain through only archival documents. Anthropology and social sciences, as Anderson [33] has shown in the case of Nationalism, can assist a better and deeper understanding of the historical facts. This has been my approach to the Northern Territories issue, which otherwise would remain a political and historical 'mystery'. However, it is my opinion that this territorial dispute, which is not, as I have shown, merely territorial, would be difficult to resolve because of the cultural implications that affect any economic and political effort to resolve it.

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- [2] See the online article 'Bears to settle down on desert North Kuril Island', *www.Pravda.ru* (2004.05.04), <http://english.pravda.ru/news/russia/04-05-2004/56921-0>.
- [3] The Ainu were the native inhabitants of the Kuril islands, Sakhalin, and the north part of Hokkaido island in Japan.
- [4] After the end of the second World War, and the Soviet annexation of the Kuriles, the Japanese government started immediately with the claim, and to emphasise the possession of such islands within the Japan national entity they renamed the four islands with a new terminology 'Northern Territories'. Russia, of course, did not recognise this term and today does not. The islands after the annexation acquired Russian names and became part of the territorial integrity of Russia, so the Japanese Northern Territories are

know by Russians as the Southern Kuriles.

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[18] See the text of the Cairo Declaration 22-26 November 1943 on the web site <http://www.taiwandocuments.org/cairo.htm>.

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[20] See the text of the Yalta (Crimea) Conference. 4-11 February 1945 on the web site <http://www.taiwandocuments.org/yalta.htm>.

[21] See the text of the Potsdam (Berlin) Conference 17 July-2 August 1945 on the web site <http://www.taiwandocuments.org/potsdam.htm>.

[22] Italics mine.

[23] David Rees, *The Soviet Seizure of the Kuriles* (New York: Preager, 1985), p.105.

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Link

L'isola di Onekotan - Arcipelago delle isole Curili

[[figure]]figures/2007/tani/tani_2007_01.jpg[[/figure]] L'isola di Onekotan - Arcipelago delle isole Curili.

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Carta delle Isole Curili

[[figure]]figures/2007/tani/tani_2007_02.jpg[[/figure]] Carta delle Isole Curili.

[Indietro](#)

Illustrazione di un magazine giapponese (2005)

[[figure]]figures/2007/tani/tani_2007_03.jpg[[/figure]] Illustrazione di un magazine giapponese (2005).

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