

The Narrative of the Northern Territories in the Socio-Political Discourse of Contemporary Japan

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Abstract

The article analyzes the Japanese official narrative about the Northern Territories, which is widespread in Japanese society as a key factor in the formation of the bad image of Russia in Japan. Of particular importance from the point of view of the emotional effect on public consciousness is the thesis that the Southern Kurils are the “ancestral territory of Japan,” that the USSR committed aggressive and unfair actions against Japan during World War II, and modern Russia did not correct them, and that the Japanese natives of the Southern Kurils experience enormous moral suffering, not having the opportunity to freely visit the graves of their ancestors. The article examines the organizational structure of state, public, and socio-political organizations designed to ensure public policy to popularize this narrative and shows the features of its reflection in school textbooks, museums, and memorial complexes. The author focuses on the Movement for the Return of the Northern Territories and the events held within its framework, including the annual “Northern Territories Day,” held on February 7.

It is concluded that, despite all the efforts of the government, Japanese public opinion in reality turns out to be relatively poorly informed about the problem of the Northern Territories. At the same time, as generations change, the interest in this problem is gradually decreasing, especially among young people. There is a process of realizing the futility of maintaining a hard line in the government’s approach to solving it. The humanitarian aspect of the

problem, related to visits to graves by former islanders and members of their families, causes the greatest public outcry, but even this aspect, as the results of public opinion polls show, has a limited effect.

Keywords: narrative of the Northern Territories, “ancestral territories”, visits to graves, victimization, “illegal occupation”, Movement for the Return of the Northern Territories, awareness of the problem of the Northern Territories.

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According to Japanese public opinion polls, Russia has consistently remained one of the most unpopular countries in Japan throughout the whole post-war period. For several decades, a friendly attitude towards Russia was expressed by the minority of Japanese people, not exceeding 10–15 percent [Chugrov 2016, p. 56], and by even fewer people after the beginning of the special military operation in Ukraine in 2022. There is no doubt that bad feelings of the Japanese towards Russia are to a large extent rooted in the official narrative of the Northern Territories issue, which is widespread in Japanese society.

The name *Northern Territories* appeared during the Japanese-Soviet negotiations on normalizing relations in 1956, when Japan, with the support of the United States, included the islands of Kunashir and Iturup in the list of its territorial claims to the USSR. This led to a situation where the claims started to include four islands, not just two, as had been before. The invention of this name is connected with geographical confusion regarding the definition of the object of these territorial claims, requiring a certain level of systematization. Unlike the islands of Shikotan and Habomai, Japan recognizes the islands of Kunashir and Iturup as part of the Kuril Islands (calling them *Minami Chishima*, or the Southern Kurils), basing its position on evidence by the international geographical science and the pre-war administrative status of the islands. Since 1951, according to Article 2 of the San Francisco Peace Treaty, Japan has

renounced the Kuril Islands, so it was necessary to explain why this renunciation does not apply to the Southern Kuril Islands. The Japanese government argues that the islands of Kunashir, Iturup, Shikotan, and Habomai were recognized by Russia as part of Japan proper in 1855, when the first Russo-Japanese border treaty, the Treaty of Commerce and Navigation between Japan and Russia (the Treaty of Shimoda), was signed. Therefore, although, geographically, they partly belong to the Kuril Island Chain (at least the islands of Kunashir and Iturup), in the political sense, they do not correspond to the territories that Japan renounced in the San Francisco Peace Treaty, as they had never been part of any state other than Japan before 1945.¹ To avoid confusion in understanding Japan's territorial claims which include the islands of Kunashir and Iturup, which are recognized as part of the Kuril Islands, the Shikotan Island, which Japan sees as separate from the rest of the Kurils, and the Habomai Islands, which it considers part of Hokkaido but not part of the Kurils, a special name "Northern Territories" was invented. The name was coined by Takezo Shimoda, head of the Department of Treaties at the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who first used it during parliamentary hearings on March 20, 1956 [Shimotomai 2011, p. 304]. However, in official documents and speeches by officials, this name started to be used only after January 1960, when government notes were exchanged between the USSR and Japan following the signing of the new version of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty [Fujiu 2020, p. 168]. In particular, it was mentioned in a speech given by Foreign Minister Fujiyama in February 1960.

According to Japan's official position, the Northern Territories still remain under Japan's sovereignty. On maps published in Japan, they are depicted as part of national territory of Japan. Other former possessions of Japan that were given to the USSR as a result of World War II, such as Southern Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands north of Iturup Island, are

¹ われらの北方領土 2022年版. 外務省 [Our Northern Territories. Yearbook 2022]. *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/pr/pub/pamph/hoppo6.html> P.11

marked on Japanese maps with an uncertain legal status. This means that there is currently no peace treaty between Japan and Russia with specific provisions regarding these territories, and that the border line between the two countries is not clearly defined. Therefore, the ownership of these territories is still undetermined and should be resolved through bilateral negotiations between Japan and Russia.

It should be noted that the name *Northern Territories* is pivotal for understanding the Japanese position on the territorial issue, so it is used in this article solely for describing this position. For each point of Japanese argumentation, Russia has its own counterarguments, which are adequately outlined in relevant bibliography [Cherevko 1992; Sarkisov 1997; Georgiev 1998; Kuzminkov 2013; Streltsov 2019]. The purpose of this article is not to refute the arguments of the Japanese side, but rather to analyze the essence of the Japanese narrative, its mass appeal, and the extent to which it resonates in modern Japanese society.

Features of the Official Japanese Narrative About the Northern Territories

The official Japanese narrative of the Northern Territories is reflected in various sources, including the websites of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs,² other ministries and government organizations, official documents, brochures, and information materials. It is also expressed through comments of government officials.

According to the website of the Japanese Foreign Ministry, Japan received information about the existence of the four “northern islands” (Iturup, Kunashir, Shikotan, and Habomai) earlier than Russia. The Treaty of Shimoda, signed in 1855 between Japan and Russia, peacefully and amicably established the border between Iturup and Urup, and, since

² 北方領土 [Northern Territories]. *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*. https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/hoppo/index_4to.html

that moment, these four islands have come under the administrative control of Japan and were rightfully part of its territory until the end of World War II. However, at the end of the war, on August 9, 1945, the Soviet Union violated the Japanese-Soviet Neutrality Pact and invaded Japan, occupying the four islands in the period from August 28 to September 5. This occurred after Japan had already accepted the Potsdam Declaration. Although only the Japanese citizens (about 17,000 people) resided on these islands at that time, the Soviet Union unilaterally annexed the four islands in 1946 and forced all Japanese residents to leave by 1948. The illegal occupation of these islands by the Soviet Union continues by today's Russia. Due to the Northern Territories issue and the absence of a mutually recognized border, no peace treaty has been signed between Japan and Russia, despite the fact that more than seven decades have passed since the end of the war.

It is noteworthy that there are certain moments in the Japanese narrative that are of particular importance in terms of their emotional effect on public consciousness. First, it is the thesis that the Southern Kuril Islands are the “ancestral territory of Japan” (固有の領土 *koyū-no ryōdo*).³ This thesis roams everywhere – from school textbooks and popular pamphlets published by government agencies to official documents. For example, the Japanese Diet resolution on the issue of the Habomai Island Chain adopted in March 1951 refers to territories geographically representing a continuation of Cape Hanasaki of the City of Nemuro as those “where the Japanese have lived since ancient times” (古来より日本人が居住していた) [Fujiu 2020, p. 159].

Russian authors put forward weighty counterarguments against the idea that the Southern Kuril Islands were discovered by Japan, including documentary evidence of the first appearance of Russians on the islands and the low level of reliability of maps and other historical documents submitted by the Japanese side. Among such documents that raise doubts among Russian historians, we can mention, for example,

³ Since July 2009, the Southern Kuril Islands have been referred to as *waga koyū no ryōdo* (“our ancestral territories”) in Japanese legislation.

the Shōhō Era Map of Japan (正保国絵図 *Shōhō kuni ezu*), dated 1644, which is often referred to as evidence of Japanese sovereignty over the islands [Georgiev 1998, pp. 13–70]. The idea that the Southern Kuril Islands are “ancestral territories” does not stand up to criticism, since Japan began active development of not only these islands, but also Hokkaido only in the second half of the 19th century, when a special colonization agency was created to settle the Japanese on the “new” territories such as Hokkaido, Sakhalin (Karafuto), and the Kuril Islands. For example, the settlement of Nemuro was founded only in 1869, and acquired the status of a city in 1900. Obviously, for Japanese culture and civilization, the value of the Southern Kuril Islands is insignificant and therefore they are not considered “sacred” territories in the context of Japanese cultural and historical identity. To support the thesis of the “ancestrality” of Southern Kurils, some Japanese historians suggest interpreting this term in an unusual way – not as territories belonging to a specific country since ancient times, but rather territories acquired by a state as a result of discovering “ownerless lands” and including them in the sphere of its effective control, and not necessarily uninhabited lands (as was the case with the Southern Kurils, which were inhabited mainly by Ainu people in the mid-19th century) [Tanaka 1991, p. 58]. In this context, the word “ancestral territories” in the Japanese interpretation means only that, at the time of Japan’s appearance in the Southern Kuril Islands, from the point of view of Japan, there were no Russian settlers there yet.

In other words, the phrase “ancestral territories” in its official Japanese interpretation acquired a distinctly politicized meaning, contrasting with its basic definition (which implies a sense of ownership from time immemorial, akin to the Japanese 固有 *koyū*). This shift in meaning can be traced through the historical context of its emergence in official documents. The idea of South Kuril Islands as “ancestral territories” was first introduced on December 7, 1955, during a speech delivered by a government official at a session of the budget committee in the Lower House. At this point, claims against the Soviet Union were extended to four islands, rather than the previously

stated two, thus becoming an official stance of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party [Fujiu 2020, p. 162]. Subsequently, in order to create the impression that these claims have an international recognition, and, in particular, the recognition from Japan's key ally, the phrase "ancestral territories" (*koyū-no ryōdo*) was used when translating into Japanese the politically neutral phrase "part of Japan proper" of the memorandum by the U.S. State Department dated September 7, 1956, which expressed the U.S. support for Japan's position on the South Kuril Islands.⁴ However, in some cases, when it was politically expedient, the Japanese government refrained from using this wording in official documents. This was the case, for example, after 2013, during the Japanese-Russian negotiations on signing a peace treaty held under the cabinet of Shinzo Abe. At that time, the phrase "territories under Japanese sovereignty" was used instead.⁵

In the classical sense, the Southern Kuril Islands have been "ancestral" since ancient times (according to some estimates, for about 15 thousand years) only for the Ainu people, who inhabited the Kuril Islands and Sakhalin, which, at various historical stages, were under the control of either Japan or Russia. It is worth noting in this regard that, in Japan, there is also a point of view that, since the Ainu people are an ethnic minority of Japan, all the lands on which they previously lived should belong to Japan [Turaev 2018, p. 223]. However, it cannot be denied that, since the Ainu people live on Southern Sakhalin, which was returned to the USSR after World War II, and even on Kamchatka, it

⁴ See the text of this document in the Japanese official translation on the website of the Cabinet Office. www8.cao.go.jp/hoppo/shiryoku/pdf/gaikou14.pdf

⁵ 北方領土は「固有の領土」「主権を有する領土」…首相「用語使い分けた記憶はない」 [The Northern Territories are "ancestral territories", "territories under Japanese sovereignty".. The prime minister: "I do not remember making a distinction in the use of these terms"]. *Yomiuri Shimbun*. 07.03.2022. <https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/20220307-OYT1T50283/>

seems unconvincing to assert that the Southern Kurils belong to Japan, based only on the fact that the Ainu inhabited these islands since time immemorial.⁶

Another emotionally charged part of the Japanese narrative is that the islands have been “captured” by the Soviet Union during World War II as a result of “aggressive” and “illegal” actions, which, in particular, included the unilateral violation by the USSR of the Neutrality Pact, leading to the subsequent military occupation of the islands. Little is known in Japan about the Russian legal argument that the obligations of the USSR under the UN Charter, according to which it was necessary to take all possible actions to end the war as soon as possible, took precedence over the Neutrality Pact.

In addition, an argument is used that the USSR occupied the islands in the very last period of the war, when Japan was no longer able to resist. In the most cynical form, this idea is promoted by the Soviet image of *kaji dorobō* (“thief at the scene of fire”, i.e., someone who takes advantage of a crisis).⁷ Japan believes that the occupation of the islands by the USSR was the result of a secret deal between the Allies (the Yalta Agreement of February 1945), which was concluded “behind its back.” Moreover, on September 24, 1941, the USSR joined the Atlantic Charter, which fixed the principle of not expanding territories for the Allied powers, and then violated it by annexing the Northern Territories. In Japan, Moscow’s actions are seen as a practical manifestation of the Stalinist approach to foreign policy, and therefore Tokyo places special emphasis on the fact that post-Soviet Russia proclaimed in its relations with Japan the rejection of “the legacy of totalitarianism” and “the

⁶ In December 2018, Russian President Vladimir Putin, at a meeting with members of the Human Rights Council, proposed including Ainu among small peoples inhabiting Russia. *RIA Novosti*. 17.12.2018. <https://ria.ru/20181217/1548135596.html>

⁷ See, for example, a lecture by the former Japanese Ambassador to Belgium, Hyodo Nagao, on the occasion of the Northern Territories Day. <https://www.pref.toyama.jp/documents/8576/01490581.pdf>

legacy of the difficult past”.⁸ Besides, Japan often appeals to the contrast between the USSR and the United States, which returned Okinawa to Japan after more than 25 years of occupation. This fact is often used by the Japanese side to argue that modern Russia has not repented yet and, in fact, remains for Japan the same hostile state that the Soviet Union was. This historical thinking creates a sense of psychological comfort for the Japanese, allowing them to see themselves not only as the culprit, but also the victim in understanding their own militaristic past.

Another important part of the Northern Territories narrative refers to its humanitarian aspect, specifically, to sufferings experienced by former Japanese islanders who had lived on the Southern Kuril Islands before 1945. Approximately 280,000 Japanese civilians and war prisoners were forcibly relocated from the Sakhalin region between 1946 and 1949 [Kim 2009, p. 29], including 16,000 people from the Southern Kurils. Since the Japanese had inhabited the Kuril Islands and Sakhalin since the middle of the 19th century, for many of them these territories became the homeland where the graves of their ancestors were located. After their return to Japan, they were denied the opportunity to freely visit these places, and this became a source of considerable emotional distress for them, since, in Japan, caring for the graves of ancestors is considered a sacred duty.

It should be noted that Japanese citizens whose close relatives are buried in the Southern Kuril Islands have been able to visit their graves since 1964, when this practice was organized after the visit of Soviet Vice-Prime Minister Anastas Mikoyan to Japan.⁹ According to the

⁸ われらの北方領土 2022年版. 外務省 [Our Northern Territories. Yearbook 2022. Our Northern Territories. Yearbook 2022]. *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/pr/pub/pamph/hoppo6.html> P.4

⁹ This practice continued unabated until 2022, with interruptions between 1976 and 1986, when the Soviet side required a passport with a Soviet entry visa for entry from the Japanese.

Japanese Foreign Ministry, over the entire period of its implementation, almost 5,000 Japanese citizens visited 52 cemeteries located on these islands.¹⁰ This practice has not been abolished, although it was suspended, even after the Russian side terminated visa-free exchanges in September 2022.

The Japanese side emphasizes that these are elderly people (whose average age is about 88), who find it difficult to make multi-day sea journeys. Charter flights launched in 2017 were suspended in 2020 due to the pandemic and have not been resumed as of 2024.

Government Support for the Narrative of the Northern Territories

The government of Japan created a strong and extensive network of government, public, and socio-political organizations to support the narrative of the Northern Territories. The purpose of this network is to disseminate information about the issue to the general public.

On August 31st, 1982, the Law on Special Measures to Help Solve the Problem of the Northern Territories was passed. This law is still in effect today with several amendments and additions. Article 4 of the law specifically outlines the government responsibilities for promoting campaigns to return the Northern Territories and for educating the public about this issue through school curricula and other means.¹¹

The Cabinet includes the post of the minister without portfolio overseeing, among other areas, the sphere of state policy towards the Northern Territories (since 2023, in the second cabinet of Kishida,

¹⁰ 北方領土 [Northern Territories]. *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*. https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/hoppo/index_4to.html

¹¹ CM. 北方領土問題等の解決の促進のための特別措置に関する法律施行令 [Law Relating to Special Measures for Promoting the Solution of the Northern Territories, 2020]. *E-gov*, <https://elaws.e-gov.go.jp/document?lawid=361CO0000000252>

it has been occupied by Jimi Hanako). The so-called Government Headquarters for the Problem of the Northern Territories (内閣府北方対策本部) has been established as a separate government body. It has been in existence since 1972 (and since 1958 as a special unit of the Prime Minister's Office), but, since 2001, after the reform of the government structure, it has been a part of the Cabinet Office.

With a fairly large budget (1.683 billion yen, or more than 11.2 million US dollars in 2024),¹² the Headquarters implements awareness-raising campaigns to “consolidate and strengthen public opinion supporting diplomatic negotiations”, supports the Movement for the Return of the Northern Territories, carries out activities to promote exchanges with the Northern Territories and conducts other measures aimed at solving the problem of the Northern Territories. As evidenced by a document prepared for parliamentary hearings on the financial support of this body, the government is concerned about the process of aging and natural decline of the community of former islanders reducing the potential base of activists for the Movement for the return of the islands. In this regard, as the primary task of this movement, the document proposes to focus efforts on developing new, more modern methods of educational work among young people, adapting the movement to the aging of former islanders, as well as conducting effective public education (especially among the younger generation).¹³

The Headquarters supervises the semi-governmental Association for the Problem of the Northern Territories, established in September 1969, which has the status of an independent legal entity, and several quasi-public (semi-governmental) organizations operating in Sapporo,

¹² 令和6年度沖縄・北方関係予算 [Budget for Policy in Relation to Okinawa and the “Northern Territories” for FY 2024]. 立法と調査 [Legislation and Surveys], 2024, 2 (463), 176. https://www.sangiin.go.jp/japanese/annai/chousa/rippou_chousa/backnumber/2024pdf/20240207166.pdf (In Japanese).

¹³ Ibid.

including the League for the Return of the Northern Territories, the Association of Immigrants from the Kuril Islands and the Habomai Islands, and the Coordinating Committee of the Movement for the Return of the Northern Territories. In addition, the Headquarters closely coordinates its activities with municipal authorities – the City of Nemuro in Hokkaido (due to its geographical proximity to the Southern Kuril Islands, as well as the historical tradition of active participation in social movements based on a large community of immigrants from the Southern Kuril Islands) and other municipal bodies throughout Japan that are associated with the Northern Territories issue.

In order to disseminate the narrative of the Northern Territories as widely as possible, the Japanese government conducts targeted information and propaganda campaigns, which are implemented through Internet sites and print media outlets of central government and local administration bodies, radio and television, newspapers and magazines of various levels, educational and popular science literature, cultural and educational events, etc.

Among these propaganda materials, the brochure “Our Northern Territories,” published by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, occupies a special place. This brochure sets out the Japanese perspective on this issue and provides an exhaustive list of documents related to the history of border demarcation between Japan and Russia. The brochure is available on the website of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs¹⁴ and is also being mass-published as a separate brochure.

Textbooks for elementary, middle, and high schools also play an important role in spreading information about the Northern Territories. The relevant sections of textbooks on morality, social studies, history,

¹⁴ われらの北方領土 2022年版. 外務省 [Our “Northern Territories.” Yearbook 2022. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan]. Tokyo: Gaimushō. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/pr/pub/pamph/hoppo6.html> (In Japanese).

geography, and public policy are devoted to this issue, setting out the official position and emphasizing that Japan seeks to solve the problem exclusively by peaceful means.

Since 2021, the Ministry of Education of Japan has decided that all schools should teach the official point of view on this issue (there was no such obligation initially, although the version outlined in textbooks earlier had almost never differed from the official one). Textbooks should now include the idea that the Northern Territories are the “ancestral territories” of Japan.¹⁵ In addition, the inclusion of the wording “illegal occupation” (不法占拠 *fuhō senkyo*) of the Northern Territories has become mandatory for all textbooks. Some books had previously stated that Russia has only “administrative control” (実効支配 *jikkō shihai*, 事実上統治 *jijitsujō tōchi*) in relation to these territories, but now the “error” was ordered to be corrected. The Ministry comments state that, if the phrase “illegal occupation” is left out, students may have a “false understanding” of the essence of the problem.¹⁶

Among other noteworthy instructions from the Ministry of Education, the textbooks should contain maps with the Japanese names of all four islands, and even the mention that a solution to the border problem based on the 1956 Joint Declaration has not yet been achieved should be removed from them. As a reason, the Ministry cites comments that schoolchildren should not get the impression

¹⁵ 北方領土、竹島、尖閣「固有の領土」明記定着 小学校教科書検定 [The requirement to include the phrase “ancestral territories” in relation to the Northern Territories, Takeshima and Senkaku Islands]. *Sankei*. 28.03.2023. <https://www.sankei.com/article/20230328-37YB6YUPR5NOLCGLTJXP2QTNHI/>

¹⁶ 高校教科書検定「自虐史観を拭えず」[Secondary school textbook certification. “The Masochistic view of history is not wiped”]. *Sankei*. 07.04.2021. <https://www.sankei.com/article/20210407-W5ORXM3W7RISTFY06HXV4URURQ/2/> (In Japanese). See also https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mKj_NV3YqFs

that Japan is currently negotiating on the basis of the “transfer of two islands” formula.¹⁷

Another way to spread information about the Northern Territories is through historical and cultural sites such as museums, mnemonic complexes, and memorials. There are several museums and historical sites in Japan dedicated to the problem of the Northern Territories, through which the Government actively promotes the official interpretation of the problem of the Northern Territories.

The largest of these is the museum and mnemonic complex in Nemuro, a small city in eastern Hokkaido. Not far from the city, on Cape Nosappu, adjacent to the Habomai Islands, there is Nemuro City Northern Territories Museum (根室市北方領土資料館), which tells about the nature of the Southern Kuril Islands, the history of settlement, and the way of life of the Japanese colonists. Special emphasis is placed on the events of 1946–1948, when the Japanese had to live on the islands with Soviet immigrants and then leave for Japan. The narrative of the “brutality” of the Soviet invaders is highlighted by specially selected visual and cartographic materials attesting to the Soviet “invasion” of the islands, including the looped screening of the 10-minute animated film “*Etopirika*”, where these events are presented through the eyes of a Japanese girl.

When leaving the museum, there is a large whiteboard on which visitors can write their impressions with a felt-tip pen. In addition to the standard wishes for the islands to “return” to their native harbor as soon as possible, there are also responses to the geopolitical situation in the world after 2022, for example, wishes for Japan to quickly put an end to the “obsession with pacifism.”

On cape Nosappu, there is also a Viewing Pavilion for the Northern Territories (*Hoppokan*), where visitors can see the Habomai Islands located just a few kilometers away through binoculars and receive

¹⁷ 「固有の領土」記述求める [Demand for the inclusion of the phrase “ancestral territories” in textbooks]. *Jiji.com*. 30.03.2021. <https://www.jiji.com/jc/article?k=2021033000815> (In Japanese).

a “Certificate of Visiting the Northern Territories” upon exit. In 1981, a 35-meter memorial was built on the same cape in the form of a symbolic bridge (arch) connecting Japan with its Northern Territories, at the foot of which an eternal flame burns, symbolizing, as stated in the guidebooks, “the plea of the Japanese people for reunification with their ancestral territories”.¹⁸ On the entire coast of the cape, various organizations, mainly of the right wing, have installed many commemorative steles and signs on the theme of the “plea for the Northern Territories.”

The narrative of the Northern Territories is also popularized with the help of souvenirs (T-shirts, key chains, stickers, badges, mugs, etc., depicting the contours of the islands, which are designated with Japanese names), as well as billboards on the streets of Nemuro and other cities in Japan.

Nemuro City is also home to the Hokkaido Prefectural Center for Relations with the Northern Islands (*Nihoro*), established in February 2000. The center has an exhibition space with video materials, “the Room of Russian culture,” “the Room of Japanese culture,” several classrooms and an observation deck from where on clear days one can observe the island of Kunashir. In turn, the Tokyo Museum of Territories and Sovereignty (領土主権展示館 *Ryōdo shuken tenjikan*) presents mainly political events and documents related to Japanese territorial disputes with neighbors. The section on the Northern Territories displays the main historical events related to the formation of the border between Japan and Russia in the official Japanese interpretation.

In addition to Nemuro, there are also museums and special “classrooms of historical education on the problem of the Northern Territories” in the villages of Shibetsu and Rausu in Hokkaido, as well as in the City of Kurobe, Toyama Prefecture, where especially many immigrants from the islands and their descendants live. Museum

¹⁸ 北方領土返還運動のシンボル像の建設 [Construction of a symbolic object of the Movement for the Return of the Northern Territories]. *Betsukai.jp*. https://betsukai.jp/gyosei/seisaku/4island/4island_mondai_toha/hopposhinboru (In Japanese).

facilities receive generous grants for their educational activities from the budgets of the central government, Hokkaido Prefecture, and local authorities. There is an endless stream of sightseeing buses with Japanese schoolchildren and tourists. The creativity of these objects should be noted – not only textual information is presented there, but also video and photographic materials, as well as other visual exhibits. For example, in 2024, a plan was unveiled to reorganize the exposition of the Museum of National Territories and Sovereignty. According to the new concept of the museum, which proposes to use projection mapping technologies (where images are projected onto walls, ceilings, and floors), visitors will feel as if they are flying over the sea and diving underwater, looking at the world from the point of view of animals associated with each type of territories that have become the object of disputes with neighbors. For example, for the Northern Territories, it will be *etopirika* (tufted puffin, a seabird that lives in the waters of the Nemuro Peninsula and the four northern islands).¹⁹

With the support of state authorities, the Movement for the Return of the Northern Territories has been launched in Japan, manifesting itself in mass rallies, demonstrations, propaganda caravans, lectures and exhibitions, which are organized throughout the country. Various essay and oral presentation contests, as well as lectures and quizzes on the topic of the Northern Territories, are held for children in schools and on the basis of municipal and state cultural facilities. A large number of events aimed at the younger generation are planned in the form of information and propaganda campaigns using media and social networks, including Facebook and Twitter (X). To make it more attractive to young people, the organizers use the images of cartoon characters and other “hyped” brands of popular culture.

¹⁹ 北方領土へ足を運んだ感覚、プロジェクションマッピングで味わう...政府が東京の展示館を改装へ[Experience the feeling of visiting the Northern Territories with the help of projection mapping. The government will renovate the exhibition hall in Tokyo]. *Yomiuri Shimbun*. 07.02.2024. <https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/20240207-OYT1T50073/>

Especially many events are being implemented within the framework of the Monthly Campaigns of Struggle for the Return of the Northern Territories, which are traditionally held in February and August each year. These monthly campaigns were established in 1986 in order to promote the movement more actively throughout the country. To give an additional impetus to the movement, in January 1981, the cabinet of Zenko Suzuki established a special commemorative date – the Northern Territories Day, which is celebrated annually on February 7. It was on this day in 1855 that the historical Treaty of Commerce and Navigation between Japan and Russia (the Treaty of Shimoda) was signed, according to which the islands were recognized as owned by Japan. Official documents emphasize a special political meaning of this memorable date: it was the first time that Japan gained new territories as a result of diplomatic negotiations rather than military action. When deciding on the establishment of the date, some organizations proposed September 3, when the Soviet military occupation of the islands was carried out. Yet the Japanese Prime Minister, assuming that the islands would “return” to Japan as a result of peace negotiations with the USSR, chose February 7, with the hope that it would become one of the memorable dates of the Soviet-Japanese friendship [Uda 1984, p. 64].

However, in reality, its celebration turned into a demonstration of openly anti-Soviet/anti-Russian sentiments. Every year, on the Northern Territories Day, a national rally is held demanding their return, attended by the Prime Minister, the Minister of State for Okinawa and Northern Territories Affairs, representatives of political parties, former islanders, and other activists. On this day, noisy demonstrations and rallies of right-wing organizations are taking place in front of the Russian Embassy in Tokyo and other Russian diplomatic missions in Japan. At a meeting with government officials held on February 7, 2024, a statement was adopted in which the Russian administration of the four islands was qualified as “illegal occupation” (until 2023, the milder

wording “occupation without legitimate grounds” was used at such events).²⁰

Another form of activity is the collection of signatures calling for the return of the Northern Territories, which has been carried out throughout Japan since the early 1980s. It is held during educational, cultural, and scientific events, various congresses and rallies. The collected signatures are submitted annually to the Diet in the form of a petition. Recently, in accordance with the new version of the Law on Petitions, it has become possible to submit an electronic signature. Since the Japanese generally support the main message of this campaign, it is not surprising that, by December 2008, more than 80 million signatures had been raised – that is, almost the entire adult population of Japan.²¹

The Northern Territories problem is also actively discussed in the Japanese media. A special emphasis is placed on the sufferings of former islanders who are not destined to return to their homeland during their lifetime. Gradually, the narrative of the sufferings began to occupy a special, if not central, place when covering the topic of the Northern Territories. For example, a national NHK news channel broadcast on December 16, 2016, gained great resonance. There, it was reported that the Japanese Prime Minister had extended letters to President Vladimir Putin from several former residents of the islands, which contained a “plea to resolve the issue with the islands as soon as possible.” One of the authors of the letter, Kodama Taiko, a former resident of the island of Habomai and a public activist, explained the initiative of its compilation in the following words: “We want to visit the islands more freely than

²⁰ PM Kishida says Japan-Russia ties are “difficult” amid Ukraine war. *Kyodo news*. 07.02.2024. <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2024/02/e02081d057a4-pm-kishida-says-japan-russia-ties-are-difficult-amid-ukraine-war.html>

²¹ Activities aimed at the return of the Northern Territories. *Hokkaido Governorate website*. <https://www.pref.hokkaido.lg.jp/sm/hrt/hopporyodo/rosia6.html>

we do now and to have the chance to wake up there in the morning” [Iwashita 2019, p. 117].

The emotional subtext of this message finds a significant response in Japanese society, where Russophobic sentiments are developing largely against the background of sympathy for the “indigenous inhabitants of the islands.” Japanese political leaders are clearly aware that the Japanese tend to view this problem primarily as a humanitarian issue rather than a political one. It is no coincidence that, on February 7, 2024, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, speaking at a rally on the occasion of the “Northern Territories Day,” stressed that the Japanese government “demands that the Russian side resume the practice of visiting graves,”²² which was suspended in September 2022 in response to Japan’s joining the anti-Russian sanctions.

The Attitude of the Japanese Public to the Northern Territories Issue

Government policy is bearing fruit: in the context of the official narrative of the Northern Territories, Russia appears to Japanese citizens as a state alien to Japan, the state which has committed unforgivable atrocities against the Japanese and does not want to admit its wrongdoing, as a continuing source of blatant injustices and suffering of the Japanese people. Japanese media coverage of the situation in Ukraine has significantly added negativity to the already gloomy image of Russia in Japan. The picture offered by the media fell on well-prepared ground: for most Japanese, who have been raised on the Northern Territories narrative, the news that come from

²² 前年踏襲、響かぬ首相の演説 元島民「政府の関心低い」 領土返還大会 [After last year’s speech by the Prime Minister, which did not cause a public outcry, former islanders note the low interest of the government to the problem of the Northern Territories]. *Hokkaido Shimbun*. 07.02.2024. <https://www.hokkaido-np.co.jp/article/972906/>

Ukraine in the form presented by the Japanese media do not cause much surprise: “What else can you expect from these Russians?” At the same time, many observers note the Japanese media fixation on the Ukrainian conflict. A study conducted by the Global News View Media Research Institute showed that, in the first half of 2022, 94.7 percent of Japanese media covering international conflicts focused on the war in Ukraine. Some experts criticized the media for deliberately spreading the Ukrainian versions of events in order to increase their profits, attracting the attention of the anti-Russian and pro-Ukrainian public, which in turn further strengthens public sentiment in favor of Ukraine [Kamata 2023].

In many reports, as well as in the reaction of the political authorities, there has been a desire to link Russian actions in Ukraine with Russia’s stance on the border issue with Japan. These, they say, are links in the same chain, parts of the policy of an “aggressive” and “lawless” state. For example, on February 28, 2022, Hideki Uyama, a representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, speaking to a Diet committee, compared Russia’s actions in Ukraine with the occupation of the islands: “In my understanding, Russia’s occupation of the Northern Territories and the Russian military invasion in Ukraine both contradict international law.”²³

The situation around the practice of visits by Russian officials to the Southern Kuril Islands, which continued after 2014, when Japan joined the anti-Russian sanctions after the Crimean events, added fuel to the fire. In March 2022, the Russian government announced that, in response to the sanctions, it was suspending negotiations on a peace treaty with Japan, and, in September of the same year, it suspended the agreement on visa-free travel to the islands. Another strong irritant for the Japanese public opinion was

²³ Reynolds, Isabel. How Ukraine War Fuels Japan’s Island Feud With Russia. *Bloomberg*, 03.03.2022. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-03/how-ukraine-war-fuels-japan-s-island-feud-with-russia-quicktake>

President Vladimir Putin's public promise to visit the South Kuril Islands, given by him in Khabarovsk during a meeting with the business community on January 11, 2024. Each time there was an increase of anti-Russian sentiment in Japan in response to Russia's actions. For example, an opinion poll ordered by the Cabinet Office in September–October 2023 revealed that the proportion of those in Japan who “sympathize” or “to some extent sympathize” with Russia fell to a record low of 4.1 percent, down 0.9 percent over the year, and the percentage of those who “dislike” it totaled 95.3 percent.²⁴ This shift is especially striking in comparison, for example, with the situation in October 2018, when the cumulative percentage of Japanese who sympathize with Russia to one degree or another was 20.8 percent.²⁵

At the same time, it should be admitted that, despite all the efforts of the government, the Japanese public opinion is actually not informed about the Northern Territories problem to the extent the organizers of propaganda campaigns expect. In general, there is a fairly high awareness of the problem in society, but most Japanese people do not know its details. Besides, the level of awareness has been falling over the years.

Public opinion polls confirm this conclusion. Since 2008, every five years the Cabinet Office has conducted a survey on the “awareness” of residents regarding the problem of the Northern Territories. It is interesting to look at the data of the latest one, which was conducted in November 2023.²⁶ A survey involving 1,624 respondents representing different age categories and regions of Japan showed that a significant

²⁴ 「外交に関する世論調査」の概要.令和6年1月 [Public opinion poll on Japan's relations with foreign countries. January 2024]. <https://survey.gov-online.go.jp/ro5/ro5-gaiko/gairyaku.pdf>. P.11

²⁵ Ibid. P. 13.

²⁶ 「北方領土問題に関する世論調査」の概要.令和6年1月 [Public opinion poll on the problem of the Northern Territories. January 2024]. <https://survey.gov-online.go.jp/hutai/ro5/ro5-hoppou/gairyaku.pdf>

part of the Japanese (almost 36 percent of respondents) either do not understand the meaning of this problem or have not heard anything about it at all. Only 10 percent of the respondents know about it well, while another 54.1 percent know about it “to some extent.” It is particularly noteworthy that the percentage of ignorance is much higher among young people. Speaking in detail, 47.0 percent of respondents aged 18–29 and 49.1 percent aged 30–39 chose the answer “I’ve heard about the problem, but I don’t understand its meaning”. Older people showed the greatest awareness of the problem: only 29.0 percent of respondents over the age of 70 reported their “ignorance”.

The change in Japanese interest in this issue over time is significant. For example, data from a similar survey conducted ten years ago, in October 2013, shows that the level of awareness at that time was significantly higher. 81.5 percent of respondents chose the first two answers (“Well informed” and “Somewhat informed”), while 17.9 percent chose the answers “I’ve heard the name Northern Territories, but I don’t know the present situation” and “I haven’t any idea.”²⁷ In other words, the level of awareness has dropped by more than 17 percent in ten years. In addition, the percentage of young people who know almost nothing about the Northern Territories is also significantly increasing – for example, in 2018, the percentage of respondents who chose the answer “I’ve heard the name Northern Territories, but I don’t know the present situation” was 42.0 percent for the age group of 18–29 and 43.2 percent for the age group of 30–39, whereas in 2023 this figure was 47.0 and 49.1 percent.²⁸

Surveys have shown that the majority of the Japanese are quite indifferent to participating in the campaigns “for the return of the islands.” 62.4 percent of respondents said in 2023 that they had

²⁷ Ibid, p.2.

²⁸ 「北方領土問題に関する世論調査」の概要. 平成30年12月 [Public opinion poll on the problem of the Northern Territories. December 2018]. <https://survey.gov-online.go.jp/hutai/h30/h30-hoppou.pdf>. P.1.

no desire to participate in them, while the most significant part of respondents, 45.7 percent, when asked why they did not participate in these campaigns, replied that the Northern Territories would not return to Japan with their personal participation.²⁹

In addition, conformism and the readiness for compromise in solving this problem are growing among the Japanese. For example, in November 2016, before Vladimir Putin's arrival in Japan, the majority of respondents in a public opinion poll conducted by the *Mainichi* newspaper said that Japan should respond to the territorial dispute with Russia "flexibly."³⁰ 57 percent of respondents said that Japan should not insist on the return of all four disputed islands, while only 25 percent of respondents chose an uncompromising answer.

Thus, with the change of generations, the acuteness of this problem in Japanese socio-political discourse is gradually decreasing. Along with a general decrease in public interest in the topic of the Northern Territories among young age groups, there is a process of realizing the futility of maintaining a hard line in the government's approach to its solution. The humanitarian aspect associated with visits to graves by former islanders and their family members is causing the greatest public outcry, but even this, as the results of surveys show, has a limited effect on public opinion. From this point of view, the declared goal of ensuring broad and active public support for the Japanese position in negotiations with Russia on the issue of a peace treaty is becoming increasingly elusive over time.

²⁹ 北方領土問題に関する世論調査」の概要.令和6年1月 [Public opinion poll on the problem of the Northern Territories. January 2024]. <https://survey.gov-online.go.jp/hutai/ro5/ro5-hoppou/gairyaku.pdf>. Pp. 6, 8.

³⁰ Majority say Japan shouldn't insist on return of all disputed Northern Territories islands: poll. *The Mainichi*, November 7, 2016. <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20161107/p2a/oom/ona/019000c>

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