

Voices from the Shifting Russo-Japanese Border: Karafuto/Sakhalin. Svetlana Paichadze and Philip, Seaton. (eds.) Abingdon: Routledge, 2015. ISBN: 9781138804784

Sakhalin—or Karafuto to some in Japan—is an island that sits between the mouth of the Amur River and Hokkaido, the northernmost of Japan’s main islands. Remote and under the influence of a harsh climate, yet rich in natural resources, sovereignty over Sakhalin remained to be defined as late as the mid-nineteenth century, with both Japan and Russia forwarding their claims based on loose historical associations with the territory and its native peoples (China also had such an association yet made no active claim). In the century that followed, Sakhalin’s status became “settled” in various bilateral treaties, but the island’s border continued to shift along with the balance of power in Northeast Asia. In the closing weeks of World War II the Soviet Union occupied the Japanese-held southern part of Sakhalin and the Kuril islands, which together make up Sakhalin oblast today. The border established *de facto* in 1945 has been maintained to the present; yet Japan still actively claims part of the territory. This territorial dispute remains unresolved, complicating Russo-Japanese relations to this day. Reflecting Sakhalin’s history as a contested space, the writing of its history has from the very beginning been heavily influenced by imperial/national agendas. Furthermore, after 1945 cold war tensions severely restricted travel to Sakhalin, and as a result John J. Stephan’s 1971 account titled ‘*Sakhalin: a history*’—still the standard work in English—was written without the author having ever set foot on the island. With the end of the cold war, objective historical enquiry into the fraught history of this ‘middle ground’ is no longer constrained as before. Nationalist sensitivities remain to some degree, but Sakhalin is no longer off limits to international researchers, and a new generation of multi-lingual scholars, based in both Japan and Russia, has built a strong collaborative relationship across these contested borders. The

volume under review here is evidence that this relationship is beginning to bear fruit, and it provides a long overdue update in English on the region's history and contemporary situation. Surpassing existing scholarship on the region in both its breadth and detail, I should also add that the audience of this volume should not be limited to those specifically interested in Northeast Asia or Russo-Japanese history. Indeed, anyone interested in border studies, colonial and postcolonial studies, migration and diaspora studies, memory and identity, international relations, and history broadly speaking, will find plenty of material in the pages of this volume to satisfy their attention.

The volume is organized into four thematic sections, each with two or three contributors offering a chapter that addresses a specific aspect of Karafuto/Sakhalin history or borderland society. The quality of each chapter is invariably very high, both from a stylistic and originality perspective, and they have been written so that they complement one another in an integrated whole, but remain accessible for readers who are in a hurry and have their eye on a very specific chapter.

Part I contains two contributions on society on Karafuto/Sakhalin before 1945. The first of these is by Nakayama Taisho who skillfully narrates the emergence of a "Karafutoan" identity and the major socio-economic and demographic trends of Japanese society on the southern half of the island in the period it was a Japanese colony. Whilst the main focus of Nakayama's chapter is the Japanese settler population—which almost reached 400,000 at its height—he is careful to highlight that though small in numbers, the colony also had a surprising mixture of nationalities amongst its residents, including Ainu and other natives, Russians, Poles, Chinese, and Koreans (many of the latter as labourers, mobilized/coerced during the late 1930s). In the other chapter of this section Igor Saveliev performs a similar task, albeit widening his scope to incorporate the wider Priamur region. He stresses that this space was

populated by a multicultural mix of native peoples who were soon outnumbered by migrants from Russia, China, Korea, and Japan. Non-Russian migrants were essential for the development of the region, but at various times their success invited the suspicion of the authorities. As such Asian settlers (particularly Koreans) suffered greatly under an official policy which resembled a pendulum, oscillating between encouragement and naturalization on the one hand, and repression and removal on the other. Both chapters stress the fluidity of identities and mobility of people either side of the border. In both chapters one is struck by the multi-ethnic composition of empire building.

Part II contains three chapters which examine postwar population movements. The first of these is an excellent chapter by Jonathan Bull which treats the repatriation of Japanese from Karafuto to neighboring Hokkaido, where two thirds of Karafuto repatriates resettled following the Soviet invasion. Bull adds detailed information on the practical issues facing repatriates, such as employment and housing, but also casts his net further elucidating how influential individuals from prewar and wartime Karafuto society were able to establish themselves as repatriate leaders, a role that allowed them to secure places in official circles in Hokkaido and eventually dominate history writing on the former colony. This at times vivid portrayal hints at a more complex story to repatriation and reintegration than has often been assumed, and reveals a number of tensions within repatriate society. In the chapter that follows Tonai offers a detailed and balanced account of Japanese society on Sakhalin following the Soviet invasion and preceding repatriation. The inclusion of a number of Russian primary source materials adds to the depth of this account. David Wolff closes the chapter examining Russian return migration to Harbin which presents a fascinating narrative and serves to contextualize the discussion of Sakhalin.

Part III is concerned with how narratives have been constructed. Here, Seaton convincingly shows how Karafuto repatriates, now separated from their former home, have made Hokkaido a “proxy site of memory”, which largely tend to promote a victim consciousness as do many sites of memory associated with World War II in Japan. This chapter is then complimented by Miyashita who explores the feelings towards “home” of a group of Karafuto repatriates who he accompanied on a trip to Sakhalin to attend to family graves—a trip made easier only in recent decades. The section closes with a particularly revealing account by Paul Richardson which examines how a heavily “territorialized” sense of identity has emerged in the Southern Kuril Islands as local elites have reacted to any hints of compromise with Japan on the part of Moscow.

Of all the different sections Part IV comes nearest to giving the “voices” from the region as promised in the book’s title. Yulia Din contributes an account of the tragic story of the Sakhalin Koreans for whom repatriation was delayed until after Japanese repatriation due to the labour shortage on the island, and then prevented altogether with the Korean War and division of the Korean peninsula. Rather than focus solely on the tragic elements of the story, the author brings out the active efforts by Sakhalin’s Koreans to secure their return home. Following this Mooam Hyun and Sevtlana Paichadze examine the multi-layered, transnational identities of returnees from Sakhalin now resident in Korea or Japan, further stressing the fluidity of identity and giving plenty of individual nuances to the discussion in previous chapters.

As a multi-contributor edited volume it is inevitable that the book will not achieve the same level of synthesis that a monograph will offer—despite the admirable efforts of the editors. Yet this does not detract from the quality of the work on offer, and in many ways it's the volume’s strength: offering the reader substance on specific topics rather than sweeping

generalization. In combination then, these chapters help disentangle the complex history of the region by shifting the focus away from Russo-Japanese rivalry and incorporating the ordinary people who inhabited this borderland. Based on a cross-border interdisciplinary dialogue, but still somehow managing to remain accessible for the non-specialist, contributes greatly to our understanding of Northeast Asia.

Steven Ivings, Heidelberg Centre of Transcultural Studies, Universität Heidelberg