

8 Post-Soviet Memory Politics of the Forgotten Victory over Japan in 1945

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Abstract Since the early 1990s, the local authorities of the Sakhalin region have used the victory in the Soviet–Japanese War in 1945 as a key tool for redefining their local identities and, furthermore, a regional identity. The local authorities have requested that the central government in Moscow commemorate the day of victory in the Far East at the national level, both by renaming it the Day of Victory over Militarist Japan and by rehabilitating the Soviet practice of celebrating it on September 3. The central government only partially accepted this request because, on the global level, it sought economic cooperation with Japan and, on the domestic level, it was pursuing the symbolic status of the “national” memory of the Great Patriotic War by keeping a balance between local war memories.

In the war memory of both the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia, Victory Day (May 9) celebrates the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany in the Great Patriotic War, which Russians call the Soviet–German War (June 22, 1941–May 9, 1945). While this has been considered an important day, the memory of the Soviet victory over Japan in the Soviet–Japanese War (August 9–September 2, 1945) was largely forgotten, except in some regions of the Russian Far East, even during the Soviet years. At the Yalta Conference in February 1945, Stalin, Churchill, and Roosevelt agreed that the Soviet Union would enter the fight against Japan two or three months after Germany surrendered. In compliance with the agreement, the Soviet Union declared war against Japan on August 8, 1945. The following day, the Soviet Army, allied with the Mongolian People’s Army, launched an attack on Japanese-occupied Manchuria, while other Soviet troops attacked the southern region of Sakhalin Island, the Kuril Islands, and the northern area of the Korean peninsula, which Japan had also occupied.

By early September, the Soviet troops had liberated those regions, having defeated the Japanese armies stationed there. Accordingly, on September 2, 1945, the Japanese delegation signed a document declaring unconditional surrender

on the deck of an American battleship in Tokyo Bay, while the Stalin government issued a decree that designated September 3 as a “Holiday of Victory over Japan.”¹ The following year, September 3 was celebrated as a national holiday in the Soviet Union, and the Stalin government organised mass celebrations and gunfire ceremonies in Moscow, the Soviet Republic capitals, and some regional administrative centres in the Far East, such as Khabarovsk and Vladivostok.²

However, the decree regarding the Holiday of Victory over Japan was never consistently observed, and as time passed, it was ignored by the Soviet government. There are several reasons for this. First, the Great Patriotic War was a total war that lasted nearly four years, compared to approximately three weeks for the Soviet–Japanese War. The former involved nearly the entire population, either as frontline soldiers or labourers on the home front. Most of the casualties of World War II (September 1, 1939–September 2, 1945) occurred during the Great Patriotic War, and the most heroic episodes took place against Nazi German forces. Although there were Soviet casualties from the military operation against Japan to recapture Japanese-occupied territories, the number was exceptionally small compared to those lost in the war against Nazi Germany.³ As Dmitry Streltskov, a Russian expert in Japan studies, points out, “[u]nlike Nazi Germany, Japan neither attacked the Soviet Union nor caused great suffering to the Soviet people or extensive damage to the Soviet economy.”⁴

Second, unlike the wartime propaganda against Nazi Germany, the Stalin government did not organise any propaganda that would cause “any hatred or even negative emotions toward Japan.”⁵ After the Soviet Union signed a neutrality pact with Japan in April 1941, Stalin did not want to provoke Japan to join Germany during the war, as this would have plunged the Soviet Union into a two-front war on the Western border and in the Far Eastern region. Thus, there was no strong anti-Japanese sentiment in Soviet public discourse.⁶ Consequently, unlike the Soviet Union’s victory over Nazi Germany, the memory of its victory over Japan was not deeply rooted in its collective memory, mass culture, or public discourse among most Soviet citizens.

1 Pravda, “Ukaz. Prezidiuma.”

2 Pravda, “V chest’ dnia.”

3 While the number of deaths from the Soviet and Mongolian armies totalled approximately 12,000, the death toll of the Soviet Army during the Great Patriotic War was 8,668,400, which is more than 722 times higher. Shishov, *Rossia*, 571; Filimoshina, “Liudskie,” 95–96.

4 Streltsov, “Russian Views.”

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

However, unlike most regions of Russia, which lost the memory of the victory over Japan, the Russian Far East and especially the Sakhalin region commemorated the victory throughout the Soviet period. This tradition of commemoration continued during the post-Soviet years because the memory was an inextinguishable part of the Sakhalin history that defined local identity.⁷ The postwar experiences of the Sakhalin region were distinguished from other regions, since southern Sakhalin first became Sovietised only after the war. During the postwar years, the region experienced intensive Sovietisation through Soviet identity-building politics.⁸ Thus, the commemoration of the Soviet victory over Japan was a key part of Sakhalin cultural tradition.

Until the mid-1990s, the local authorities of Sakhalin *oblast'* commemorated the Soviet victory over Japan at the local level. Then, the trend started to change: local authorities, politicians, and scholars of the Sakhalin region sought to promote the historical significance of the victory on the national level by emphasising the fact that it led both to the end of World War II and to the reincorporation of the lost territories, including Southern Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands. They wanted to obtain recognition from both the central government and the rest of the nation for their region's contribution to the war efforts by rediscovering the historical significance of the forgotten victory.

A key Yeltsin government decision, which neglected crucial local memory, changed the attitudes of local authorities, elites, and veterans toward the commemoration. In early 1992, the new post-Soviet government announced its plan to attract Japanese economic support for and investment in the Far Eastern region by returning the two southernmost Kuril Islands to Japan. This announcement caused enormous grievance among the local communities in the Sakhalin *oblast'*. Local Soviet–Japanese War veterans deplored the idea that their sacrifices in liberating the Kuril Islands and Sakhalin were in vain, while the governor of the Sakhalin *oblast'* expressed his deep concern about undermining Russia's geopolitical interest in the Far Eastern region.⁹ Local actors (e.g. local authorities, political elites, and veterans) further took the initiative to promote the victory over Japan from a local to a national one based on the decree, the Days of Military Glory, which the Yeltsin government issued in March 1995.¹⁰ The government, which was struggling to find new,

7 For example, see Gubernskie Vedomosti, "Frontoviki" for a commemoration ceremony on September 3, 1992, hosted by the governor of the Sakhalin *oblast'* for local veterans.

8 Urbansky and Barop, "Red Star," 283–316.

9 Gubernskie Vedomosti, "Frontoviki."

10 Rossiiskaia Federatsiia, "Federal'nyi zakon ot 13 marta."

post-Soviet symbols and ideologies that could effectively unify the nation, created the Days of Military Glory, which designated fifteen key historic dates of Russian military victories in order to use war memory as a unifying tool. September 3 was not included among those dates, while five other dates related to the Great Patriotic War were.¹¹ Local authorities and veterans of the Sakhalin region did not accept the exclusion of the victory day over Japan from the list of the honourable days. Thus, since immediately after the announcement of the decree, the local politicians, elites, and veterans of the region have persistently requested the central government to promote the victory in the Far East to the national level by designating September 3 as a Day of Military Glory—the Day of Victory over Militarist Japan.

To date, the Russian government has not fully accepted the requests from local communities. In 2010, the Medvedev administration announced a new decree that designated September 2, rather than September 3, as the Day of the End of World War II, an official day of remembrance commemorating Japan's unconditional surrender. It was only in 2020 that the Putin government accepted—but still only partially—the requests of the Sakhalin region. The government changed the date from September 2 to September 3 and designated it a Day of Military Glory,¹² but not with the naming terms requested by the *oblast'*. Thus, it remains the Day of the End of World War II, rather than the Day of Victory over Militarist Japan.

These actions lead to the following research questions: why did the Russian government reclaim the forgotten memory of the war against Japan by creating an official day of remembrance more than half a century later while only partially accepting the request from the local communities? How do local authorities in the Far Eastern region strive to rebuild their local identities and, furthermore, a regional identity by using the memory of the victory? What are the dilemmas and limits of the commemoration of the victory over Japan for the central government? To answer these questions, I examine post-Soviet politics of memory and the way that the Russian government and local authorities have used the memories of the Soviet victory over Japan to pique national and local interests.

11 These five dates include January 27 (the day the siege of Leningrad was lifted), February 2 (the day of victory in the 1943 Battle of Stalingrad), May 9 (the day of the Soviet people's victory in the Great Patriotic War that ended in 1945), August 23 (the day the Soviet Army defeated the Nazi fascist army during the battle of Kursk in 1943), and December 5 (the day the Soviet Army launched a counter-offensive against the German Army in the 1941 Battle of Moscow).

12 Rossiiskaia Federatsiia, "Federal'nyi zakon o vnesenii."

8.1 Politics of Memory, Regional Identity, and War Memory

The key question regarding post-Soviet politics of memory of the Soviet–Japanese War is by whom and under what circumstances the Soviet victory over Japan is remembered or ignored. Ultimately, the post-Soviet Russian government’s commemoration of the Soviet victory over Japan depends on the geopolitical situation, including the territorial dispute between Russia and Japan over the southern Kuril Islands. Thus, in this chapter, I analyse the disparity between the central government, local political elites, and communities in the way that they remember and commemorate the victory in the Far East in the context of “geopolitics of memory.”¹³

Regional identity is another key concept used to examine the characteristics of memory politics regarding the Soviet victory over Japan. Identity is defined as “a person’s or group’s functional sense of who ‘we’ are,”¹⁴ whereas “regional identity” is the feeling of belonging to an area, and it is grounded in local history or in other specific, regionally bound conditions. It is also a collective feeling that is geared towards a specific region or one that is formed by a region.¹⁵ During the Soviet period, the central government and the Communist Party instilled Soviet ideologies and values throughout the country in a unifying manner. As a result, many prerevolutionary regional traditions and other unique features that distinguished specific areas were suppressed, and eventually, they faded away.¹⁶

However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, regional authorities and the elite have persistently redefined and reconstructed regional identities.¹⁷ They began to rediscover the local memories of historical events in their areas, and in that process, they emphasised the significance of their regional contributions to the nation’s cultural and economic development as well as their patriotic exploits in certain historical events, such as wars against foreign invaders.¹⁸

For the regional authorities and elite of the Russian Far East, the Soviet victory over militarist Japan during World War II has a special meaning.

13 For an example of research applying the approach of the geopolitics of memory, see Zhurzhenko, “Geopolitics”; Antoshchenko, Shtykova, and Volokhova, “War,” 465–493.

14 Clowes, Erbslöh, and Kokobobo, *Russia’s Regional Identities*, 5.

15 Pohl, “Regional Identity,” 12917.

16 Song, “Branding,” 74.

17 Clowes, Erbslöh, and Kokobobo, *Russia’s Regional Identities*; Song, “Branding.”

18 For a case study on various Russian towns, see Petro, *Crafting Democracy*, 164–176; Song, “Olga gongwhuui,” 299–323; Song, “Symbolic Politics.”

During the first half of the twentieth century, the region experienced multiple conflicts with Japan, such as the Russo-Japanese war (1904–1905), the Japanese occupation of South Sakhalin (1905–1945), the Japanese intervention in Siberia during the Civil War (1918–1922), and Soviet–Japanese border conflicts (the second half of the 1930s). Due to turbulent relations with Japan, the reincorporation of South Sakhalin into Soviet territory after their 1945 victory is one of the most important historical events for the communities of the Sakhalin region. For this reason, during the 1990s and early 2000s, as regional authorities and scholars rediscovered regional history for rebuilding post-Soviet regional identities, local scholars of the Sakhalin area developed a keen interest in Sakhalin’s interconnected history with Japan. The *Kraevedcheskii Biulleten’*, one of the major regional-studies journals published in the Sakhalin region, provided a major platform for scholars to publish articles about the history of the Japanese occupation in Sakhalin, the Soviet–Japanese border dispute over the Kuril Islands, and the Russo-Japanese war.¹⁹

Thus, when the Russian government began to promote patriotism and unity throughout the nation by using memories of historic military victories against foreign invaders from the mid-1990s on, local actors started to invent “agents of memory” presenting memories of the 1945 victory in the Far East. The agents they used to promote this collective memory included the commemoration of victory day, flash mobs, and battle reenactments. Some local actors of the Sakhalin *oblast’* even made an effort to build a new regional identity based on the victory by spreading one of the agents (i.e. ribbons) throughout the Russian Far East.

8.2 Local Entitlement to the Far Eastern Victory

In response to the governmental decree of March 1995, which did not include September 3 in the Days of Military Glory, Valiulla Maksutov, a representative of the Sakhalin Oblast Duma (the executive body, *duma*, of this federal subject, *oblast’*, of Russia that includes the island of Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands), and Igor Farkhutdinov, head of the Sakhalin Oblast Administration, wrote letters in April and May 1995, respectively, appealing to President Yeltsin and a representative of the Russian government to include the day

19 For examples of these articles, see Kriukov, “Grazhdanskoe upravlenie,” 7–44; Aiushin, Kalinin, and Ancha, “Pamiatniki,” 3–65; Akidzuki, “Iapono-rossiiskie otnosheniia,” 41–128; Shcheglov, “Uchastie SSSR,” 51–70.

of victory over Japan in the Days of Military Glory.²⁰ They indicated that residents and veterans of the Sakhalin region were also sending letters to the local government administration, local *duma*, and local media to demand inclusion of this date. Maksutov claims:

In the history of our country, this date entered as a memorable historical date associated with the end of World War II and the defeat of militarist Japan. [...] One of the most important results of this victory is the return to the USSR of Southern Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands. [...] On behalf of the residents of the Sakhalin Oblast, we ask you to consider inserting the following addendum to the federal law “On Days of Military Glory (victorious dates) of Russia” September 3, 1945—the Day of the End of the Second World War and the defeat of militarist Japan.²¹

Viktor Ustinov, chairman of the committee on geopolitics of the State Duma of the Federal Assembly, reacted to the letter from the Sakhalin *oblast'* by pointing out that no one on the committee believed that “the victory [over Japan] was decisive, especially because it was not in the framework of the Great Patriotic War.”²² This implies that, at the time, few political leaders considered the war and resulting victory over Japan as historically significant in contemporary Russia. However, appeals from the local community in the Sakhalin region eventually changed the attitude of Moscow’s officials and politicians. After the Days of Military Glory decree was announced, Ustinov implied that he had received letters from *frontoviki* (former frontline soldiers) and *dal'nevostochnikov* (people of the Far Eastern region). He urged Maksutov and Farkhutdinov to take further action by persuading Moscow’s administrators to include September 3 in the Days of Military Glory list by amending the decree. Furthermore, in June 1995, the head of administration for the Ministry of Defence announced that the letter from the representative of the Sakhalin Oblast Duma, Maksutov, had received enough support for the ministry to send the request to the cabinet.²³

20 Ponomarev, “Den' pobedy.”

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

Meanwhile, on September 18, 1997, the Sakhalin Oblast Duma accepted a decree that urged the government to add “September 3, Day of the victory over militarist Japan” in a declaratory note:

[The local] community and war veterans especially, who participated in the battles in the Far East and liberated the Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands and remained in the islands, are counted at about 900 people. [...] [T]hey expressed their confusion about the reason that the day of victory over Japan is not included in the federal decree. [...] The day is no less significant in the history of Russia than any other day indicated in the decree. [...] In the battle for the liberation of South Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands, 2,153 people died. For bravery and courage in defeating the Kwantung Army, 308,000 soldiers received orders and medals, and 93 people were bestowed with the title of “Heroes of the Soviet Union” [...]²⁴

This decree indicates that the local community of the Sakhalin region strongly desires to have their role in the war recognised, especially as their war efforts with Japan in 1945 had been ignored and largely forgotten for a long time by the central government and the nation as a whole.

While most cities in Russia did not regularly organise ceremonies to commemorate September 2 before 2010, when the Medvedev government designated the date as a day of remembrance at the end of World War II, some cities in the Far Eastern region (especially those that were directly involved in the campaign against the Japanese army in August 1945) acted differently. Blagoveshchensk, one of the launching points for the Soviet attack against the Japanese Kwantung Army during the first days of the Soviet–Japanese War, has commemorated the victory since the 1990s.²⁵ According to Soviet tradition, the city administration of Blagoveshchensk, the capital of the Amur *oblast'*, organised commemoration ceremonies on September 3, rather than September 2. For example, *Amurskaia Pravda*, a local news outlet, reported that on September 3, 2004, the local authorities of Blagoveshchensk laid a wreath on the monument of the Armoured Boat to commemorate the “victory over militarist Japan.” On the same day, they also organised an event

24 Ibid.

25 Amur.info, “Blagoveshchentsy opustili.”

of tossing wreaths into the Amur River, which the Soviet Army had crossed to attack Heihe, a fortified town where the Japanese army was stationed.²⁶

Similarly, some Far Eastern cities that were liberated from the Japanese occupation during the war, such as Iuzhno-Sakhalinsk, had already preserved the memory of the victory after the Soviet years by organising an annual commemoration for this specific event. The local administration of the Sakhalin *oblast'*, comprising Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands, observed September 3 as a memorable date long before 2010. In a ceremony commemorating the day of victory over Japan in 2002, Governor Farkhutdinov emphasised that the value of a “Great Victory” in the war of the Far East was not compromised by the short length of the war.²⁷ He also emphasised that “we should do everything in order not to have this territory transformed by any others.”²⁸ The following year, more than a thousand people participated in the commemoration ceremony of September 3, held in Iuzhno-Sakhalinsk, including Ivan Makhhalov (the new Governor of the Sakhalin *oblast'*), local politicians, local city officials, *oblast'* administrators, schoolchildren, students, and veterans.²⁹

As the Sakhalin region's local media indicated, September 3 is another Victory Day, along with May 9, for the residents of Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands.³⁰ Consequently, in June 2008, the Sakhalin *oblast'* decreed September 3 to be the “Day of the Independence of South Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands from Japanese militarists,” according to *oblast'* law.³¹ Contrary to other regions of Russia, this designation implies that, for the local authorities and communities of the Far Eastern region that either experienced Japanese occupation or were directly involved in the battle against Japan, the memory of their victory is a crucial component of their identities.

8.3 Moscow's Geopolitics of Memory

How did the Moscow leadership respond to this local call for recognition and attention during the 1990s? President Yeltsin did not fully agree with the request from the Sakhalin Oblast Duma. Instead, in a letter to the Federal Assembly on November 22, 1997, Yeltsin suggested an alternative date and

26 Amurskaia Pravda, “Venki poplyvut”; Larina, “Blagoveshchensk.”

27 Sakhalin.info, “Tret'e sentiabria.”

28 Ibid.

29 Gruzdeva, “Zhiteli.”

30 Sakhalin.info, “K piatidesiatipiatiletiiu.”

31 Stoliarova, “Poiasnitel'naia zapiska.”

name. Rather than suggesting September 3, which the Stalin government designated the Holiday of Victory Over Japan, Yeltsin called for September 2 to be named the Day of the End of World War II (as opposed to the Day of Victory over Militarist Japan).³² Thus, the Russian government suggested a slightly different option, which entailed omitting the term “militarist” from the name of the day of remembrance while still accepting the requested date. However, opposition arose from the State Duma to decline the government’s version. In a letter to the committee on the Defence of the State Duma dated November 17, 1997, Aleksey Mitrofanov, the chairperson of the committee on geopolitics, opposed declaring it a day of remembrance: “Japan did not surrender in front of the Soviet Union [but did so in front of the Allied powers].”³³

Eventually, after discarding his initial suggestion to make September 2 a national day of remembrance celebrating the end of World War II, Yeltsin refused the proposal of the Sakhalin Oblast Duma in October 1998:

It is necessary to consider the fact that the establishment of the day of victory over militarist Japan by the Federal Law will enter in contrast to the positive sentiments that have emerged in Russo-Japanese relations in recent years.³⁴

In other words, rather than promoting patriotism among Russians through war memories, economic benefit was more important for the Yeltsin government during this time. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the rehabilitation of the crumpled regional economy in the Far East was an urgent issue. In October 1993, Yeltsin announced a plan to solve the regional issue by selling the Kuril Islands to Japan after the Russo-Japanese summit that was held during his official visit to Japan, thereby attracting Japanese investment and financial reward. However, his plan was not realised due to fierce opposition from Sakhalin *oblast*, including local anglers, the State Duma, the military, and Russian intellectuals.³⁵

In November 1996, after Yeltsin began his second term as the Russian president, the government urged Japan to develop economic relations with Russia during a meeting between the two countries’ ministers of foreign

32 Ponomarev, “Den’ pobedy.”

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Park, “Russia,” 197.

affairs.³⁶ Given the continued efforts of Moscow leadership to promote friendly relations with Japan, the Yeltsin administration decided to bury the memory of the Soviet victory over Japan in World War II by refusing the local authorities' request.

The priority of the Russian government and Moscow politicians did not change until 2010, even though the Sakhalin Oblast Duma continually requested that the State Duma adopt the bill.³⁷ Each time, the State Duma dismissed the bill, indicating that the Sakhalin Duma needed to have the central government agree first.³⁸ However, in July 2010, the Russian government announced the inclusion of September 2 in a list of "memorable dates," which the federal law defines as being "related to important historical events for the existence of the government and society."³⁹ Although the Russian government did not designate September 2 as part of the Days of Military Glory that "commemorate[s] the honorable victory of Russian troops that played a decisive role in Russian history," it was still a huge political change regarding war memories, which had previously aimed at not provoking Japan for the benefit of Russia's economic interest.

So, why did the Kremlin hastily make September 2 a significant date in 2010? Territorial tensions with the Japanese government over the Kuril Islands in the Far Eastern border region pushed Moscow's leadership to pay closer attention to the region. During the Cold War era, Japan had consistently requested that the Soviet Union immediately return four of the southernmost Kuril Islands that are close to Hokkaido. As an alternative, the Soviet Union suggested that it could return two of the four islands, but Japan repeatedly refused to accept this offer. They deemed the Soviet occupation of the islands unacceptable, since they only took control after August 15, 1945 (which is the date that Japan recognises as the end of the war, rather than September 2, when Japan signed the document of unconditional surrender).

After the Cold War ended, the territorial dispute between Russia and Japan was exacerbated. In July 2008, the Japanese government had announced a new guideline for teachers that specified Japan's sovereignty over the southern Kuril Islands in their textbook.⁴⁰ Furthermore, in May 2009, Japanese Prime Minister Taro Aso claimed that Russia had "illegally occupied" the territory.⁴¹

36 Nam, "Nam-kurilyeoldo," 128.

37 Birzhevoi, "Rossiia v pervye."

38 Ibid.

39 Rossiiskaia Federatsiia, "Federal'nyi zakon ot 23 iuliia."

40 RT, "Japanese Schoolbooks."

41 Ministerstvo inostrannykh del Rossiiskoi Federatsii, "V sviazi."

In the following month, the Japanese parliament approved amendments to the law with a provision regarding Japan's sovereignty over the four islands of South Kuril in June.⁴² In response, the Russian government initiated a procedure to make September 2 a national day of remembrance.

In early 2010, Sergei Naryshkin, head of the Presidential Executive Office, called on the State Duma to proceed quickly with the lawmaking procedure. Following the Kremlin's request, Boris Gryzlov, a State Duma speaker and chief lobbyist, addressed the issue in the Duma.⁴³ On July 7, 2010, the State Duma accepted the change to the decree regarding days of remembrance, and it was signed by President Medvedev. On July 23, 2010, the Russian government issued a new decree under federal law that designated September 2 the Day of the End of World War II.⁴⁴ Consequently, on September 2 that year, the government organised a massive ceremony to celebrate the sixty-fifth anniversary of World War II's end at Victory Park in Moscow.⁴⁵

This example demonstrates that the Russian government used the memory of war not only to commemorate it but also for geopolitical purposes (i.e. to integrate and secure the remote borderland in the Far East). Furthermore, this implies that the Moscow leadership changed its policy that prioritised economic interests over border security. Since 2010, the central government has continued to be vigilant concerning its Far Eastern borderland, and on November 1 of that year, President Medvedev visited Kunashir Island, the southernmost Russian territory of the Kuril Islands facing the Japanese border; this was the first time the Islands were visited by a state leader, including during the Soviet and post-Soviet years. His visit was a gesture that confirmed the disputed island as Russian territory.⁴⁶

8.4 Local Politics of Memory and Building Far Eastern Identities

How did the local governments and communities of the Far Eastern cities respond to the central government's decree that designated September 2 as a national day of remembrance in 2010? They responded by rediscovering

42 Lenta.Ru, "Iaponskii parlament."

43 Birzhevoi, "Rossiia vpervye."

44 Rossiiskaia Federatsiia, "Federal'nyi zakon ot 23 iulia."

45 Itar-Tass, "V den' okonchaniia."

46 RIA Novosti, "Medvedev vpervye"; "Iaponiia vremenno."

memories of their victory by inventing new ways to commemorate the war and highlight the victory's significance in the nation's history. First, local authorities began to redefine the historical significance of September 2 by emphasising the region's contribution to the war's victory. For example, in September 2014, Viacheslav Shport, the Governor of the Khabarovsk region, commemorated the day in his address:

September 2—This is the date when the last period was set up for the long bloody war against the fascist invaders. [...] And *that happened here in the Far East region* [emphasis added]. The one and a half million Kwantung Army was defeated thanks to the extraordinary dedication of *our fellow countrymen* [emphasis added]. Their achievements are worthily appreciated by the President and the Government of the Russian Federation. Khabarovsk was awarded the honorary title “City of Military Glory.”⁴⁷

In his address, the Governor redefined the Khabarovsk region's role, which has long been considered a home front of World War II in the official discourse. According to his explanation, the Khabarovsk region was the front region where local soldiers played a crucial role in ending the long, violent war.

Local politicians, scholars, and veterans of the Sakhalin *oblast'* also presented their strong desire for a more vivid presentation of the Far Eastern victory. In 2017, Sergei Ponomarev, a representative of the Sakhalin *oblast'* branch of the Russian Geographical Society, asked, “[i]s there Russia in it?” in reference to the current title of the “Day of the End of World War II.” He complained that the title lacks information, such as “who fought with whom, who obtained victory over whom.”⁴⁸ From Ponomarev's perspective, the Soviet victory over Japan in the Far East should have been more clearly indicated in its title so that it could be included in the list of Days of Military Glory, which are officially specified as days of “heroism and bravery of Russian armies, as well as might and glory of Russian arms,”⁴⁹ rather than merely remaining a memorable date. In this sense, he criticised the Yeltsin government's refusal to designate September 2 as part of the Days of Military Glory by claiming that it was “certainly an opportunistic exclusion” in favour of “an instant trend of

47 DVHAB.ru, “Den' okonchaniia.”

48 Ponomarev, “Den' pobedy.”

49 Rossiiskaia Federatsiia, “Federal'yi zakon ot 13 marta.”

relations with Japan.”⁵⁰ They had also defined the Soviet victory over Japan as Russia’s “second Victory Day” after May 9, the first Victory Day.

In an open letter to President Putin in October 2017, ninety-seven regional *duma* members, veterans, academics, and museum directors requested that the President restore the “Holiday of Victory over Japan” as it was originally established on September 3 in 1945 by the Stalin government.⁵¹ In the letter, they complained that the government had unlawfully deprived the Far East community of a day to commemorate their soldiers that were sacrificed to achieve victory. The government did this by designating September 2 as the Day of the End of World War II, while September 3 was labelled the Day of Solidarity in the Fight against Terrorism.⁵² The letter also stressed that the Soviet victory in World War II would not have been achieved if the Soviet Army had not defeated Japan in the Far East. The petitioners maintained that the celebration of the Soviet victory over Japan contains a “pan-national meaning.”⁵³ They claimed that the Japanese occupation of both the southern Sakhalin Island (after the Russo-Japanese War) and the northern part of the island (during the Civil War) remained “painful memories in people’s minds.”⁵⁴ Accordingly, those petitioners, including regional veterans and elites of the Sakhalin *oblast’*, urged Putin to designate September 3 as a national “holiday for the victory over Japan that the whole nation can celebrate.”⁵⁵

In addition to portraying the victory over Japan as a historical event that deserves to be commemorated at the national level, the regional communities of the Sakhalin region initiated an event in 2010 on September 2 and 3. They wore moiré ribbons (white-yellow-red ribbons) as a part of the “action for Far Eastern victory” (*aktsiia Dal’nevostochnaia pobeda*).⁵⁶ The three colours of the ribbons were identical to the ones used for the medal “For Victory over Japan,” which the Stalin government awarded to 1,83 million soldiers on September 3, 1945 for participating in the war against Japan.⁵⁷ Following the popularity of wearing ribbons of St. George on Victory Day (May 9), the Sakhalin residents invented a symbol of the Far Eastern victory.

50 Ponomarev, “Den’ pobedy.”

51 Regnum, “Prazdnik pobedy.”

52 The Day of Solidarity in the Fight against Terrorism was established in 2005, a year after the Beslan school siege.

53 Regnum, “Prazdnik pobedy.”

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Vesti-Khabarovsk, “Muarovyie lenty”; Sukhorebrik, “Dal’nevostochnaia pobeda.”

57 Novosti Khabarovska, “Muarovaia lenta”; Regnum, “Prazdnik pobedy.”

In 2011, the Sakhalin authorities began to spread the campaign of wearing moiré ribbons to neighbouring regions by allocating them to local veteran associations and authorities of Khabarovsk, Vladivostok, and Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsk for distribution to locals. In a meeting with veterans in Khabarovsk in August of the year, Aleksandr Bolotnikov, a deputy of the Sakhalin Oblast Duma, emphasised that the ultimate goal of the “action for Far Eastern victory” was to “remind all citizens of the Russian Federation, especially those living in the western part of the country, of the fact that World War II, the most dreadful war on earth, ended right here in our far eastern borderlands.”⁵⁸ This indicates that, after the central government partly recognised the Far Eastern victory by designating September 2 as a memorable date, local actors of Sakhalin region—the most active in the Far East regarding the commemoration of the Soviet victory over Japan—strove to build a new post-Soviet *regional* identity by rediscovering and spreading memory of the so-called forgotten victory.

Khabarovsk authorities, like the Sakhalin ones, invented their own local symbol of the victory. On September 2, 2017, Khabarovsk’s regional government, along with Khabarovsk’s Committee on Youth Policy, organised a new event—a flash mob event called the Wall of Memory and Friendship (*Stena Pamiati i Druzhbby*)—with the goal of raising interest in commemorating the Far Eastern victory.⁵⁹ They made a line that was 1,945 metres long, symbolising 1945, which consisted of more than 2,500 city residents, including many students wearing moiré ribbons. As part of the ceremony, participants passed down the line a copy of Stalin’s announcement on September 2, 1945, declaring the capitulation of Japan. The line went all the way from the local park to the statue of Marshal Vasilevskii, where a veteran of the Soviet–Japanese War awaited the copy of Stalin’s announcement.⁶⁰ Since 2017, the Wall of Memory and Friendship has been organised every year.⁶¹

Like the Sakhalin and Khabarovsk regions, the city authorities of Blagoveshchensk developed their version of the September 2 commemoration in addition to their preexisting traditions, such as *Svecha Pamiati* (Candle of Memory), which entails a nighttime candle vigil at the World War II monument. Another tradition includes *Tsvety na Vode* (Flower on Water), which involves tossing flowers into the Amur River for the fallen soldiers of the war.

58 Sakhalin.info, “Aktsiuu sakhalintsev.”

59 Habinfo, “Zhivuiu stenu.”

60 Viazankin, “Stena.”

61 Panova, “Pamiat’ zhertv.”

On September 2, 2015, the authorities organised a new event: a battle reenactment between the Soviet Army and the Kwantung Army that occurred in August 1945 on the banks of the Amur River.⁶² Blagoveshchensk's city authorities mobilised more than 160 people to act as Soviet and Japanese soldiers, including the use of various weapons and fighter planes for the reenactment. This is one of the few battle reenactments between the Soviet and Japanese armies performed in Russia, as most of the World War II battles conducted along Russia's western border were between the Soviet and German armies.⁶³

8.5 The Limits and Dilemma of Memory Politics

The commemoration of the Far Eastern victory has not been shared very often at the national level. According to research comparing the frequency and usage of the phrases "Great Patriotic War" and "World War II," in the Russian media during the first two decades of the post-Soviet 1990s and 2000s, the memory of the Great Patriotic War and its victory remained dominant in the memories of Russian citizens in relation to World War II. The Soviet–Japanese War victory, however, which was not "directly related to the defence of the Motherland against fascist invaders and occupiers," is regarded as a minor achievement.⁶⁴

Although the authorities of regional centres outside of the Far East have organised annual days of remembrance on September 2 since 2010, the events focused more on remembering the Great Patriotic War rather than the Soviet victory over Japan. For example, to commemorate September 2 in Smolensk *oblast'*, located along Russia's western border, the local authorities arranged activities called the "Day of the Do-gooder," where volunteers participate in the cleaning and maintenance of war monuments and the graveyards of soldiers that fell during the Great Patriotic War.⁶⁵

Commemorating the Great Patriotic War on September 2, rather than the Far Eastern victory of World War II, sometimes makes more sense even for some residents of the Far Eastern region, especially outside the Sakhalin *oblast'*. Indeed, there is a strong popular tendency in the public's perception

62 Port Amur, "Blagoveshchenskaia."

63 For an example of a Soviet-German battle reenactment, see Song, "Symbolic Politics," 223.

64 Kangaspuro and Lassila, "Naming the War," 396.

65 BezFormata, "V Smolenskoi"; Partiia Edinaia Rossiia, "2 sentiabria"; O chem govorit Smolensk, "V Viazemskom."

to consider the Great Patriotic War an overarching term that covers not only the patriotism and sacrifice shown in the war between the Soviets and Nazis but also that of the Soviet–Japanese War.⁶⁶ For example, Vasilii Orlov, the acting Governor of the Amur region, perceived the Soviet–Japanese War as an extension of the Great Patriotic War, as many locals participated in this fight. In Orlov’s public address on September 2, 2018, he said, “100,000 soldiers from the Amur region participated in the *Great Patriotic War in the Far East* [emphasis added].”⁶⁷ In this case, therefore, the commemoration of the Great Patriotic War can be considered an inclusive action that includes the memory of the Far Eastern victory, as it belongs to the category of World War II. Consequently, the dominant perception of the Great Patriotic War inhibited the commemoration of the Far Eastern victory being turned into a *national* event and shared war memory of significant value.

In addition, the central government has been reserved in promoting and honouring the Soviet victory over Japan, and simultaneously, it has taken a pragmatic approach while implementing memory politics. While the Medvedev administration made September 2 a memorable date to commemorate the end of World War II, and the President independently visited the southernmost Kuril Island to reconfirm Russia’s sovereignty, Medvedev also expressed his hope to develop economic ties with Japan. In December 2010, immediately after his visit to Kuril Island, he stated:

This [Medvedev’s and other government officials’ recent visits to the Kuril Islands] does not mean that we are not willing to work with our Japanese colleagues. We are ready to implement a joint economic project. We are ready to work with them.⁶⁸

This indicates that the Russian government wants to maintain open relations with Japan in order to take advantage of opportunities for increased investments and economic cooperation while also securing the disputed Far Eastern borderland.

Furthermore, since 2015, the Russian government has annually organised the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok and invited leaders of Asia-Pacific countries, including Japan, to promote economic cooperation.⁶⁹ At the

66 Kangaspuro and Lassila, “Naming the War,” 397.

67 AmurNews, “Den’ gordosti.”

68 President of Russia, “Review.”

69 Eastern Economic Forum, “About the Forum.”

2017 forum, President Putin proposed a plan to build a bridge connecting southern Sakhalin to Hokkaido to build a global logistics network that links the Eurasian continent.⁷⁰ The Russian government's efforts to enhance economic cooperation with Japan are a possible reason that it has not accepted the request from political elites and veterans of the Sakhalin region to change the current title of September 2 (Day of the End of World War II) into one that includes terms such as "victory over (militarist) Japan."

It should be noted that, on April 19, 2020, the Putin government finally announced a decree that changed the Day of the End of World War II to September 3 while simultaneously designating the date a Day of Military Glory.⁷¹ However, this does not mean that the central government eventually fully accepted what local actors have been requesting for nearly twenty-five years, since the central government did not change the title of the memorable day (Day of the End of World War II). Despite the necessity of further research about the reason for issuing the decree, one can, at this point, assume that the Putin government wanted to make the Far Eastern victory stand out to serve as a reminder for the rest of the world, as well as the nation itself, that the Soviet Union brought an end to World War II while emphasising its role as an Allied power in the war. The Russian government certainly had to take action against the European Parliament's resolution, adopted in September 2019, which criticises the Soviet Union for signing the Non-Aggression Pact with Nazi Germany, which was a significant factor that led to World War II.⁷²

But, again, one can still see the dilemma in the central government's politics of war memory in that it decided to maintain a neutral title that includes neither terms like "victory," "militarist," nor "Japan," for the memorable day—presumably to avoid tensions with Japan. Following the government announcement, the Sakhalin politicians and veterans felt frustrated rather than welcoming of the central authorities' decision due to a missing word "victory," a source of the local communities' pride.⁷³ Thus, in early July 2020, the local *duma* of the Sakhalin *oblast'* reached a decision to send a petition both to the central administration and the State Duma, requesting a revision of the title of Day of Military Glory to Victory Day in World War II, a title that at least includes the term "victory," if not "militarist" or "Japan."⁷⁴ In response

70 President of Russia, "Plenary Session."

71 Rossiiskaia Federatsiia, "Federal'nyi zakon o vnesenii."

72 European commission, "Importance."

73 Sakhalin.info, "V oblastnoi."

74 BezFormata, "Sakhalinskie."

to the petition, the Russian government issued a statement of a negative review pointing out that the petition ignored the fact that the Soviet–Japanese war has a double character, i.e. one for the Soviet Union and another for the Allied powers, while treating the role of Soviet people in the termination of World War II in an unequal manner by emphasising the role of people who participated only in the war in the Far East.⁷⁵ The governmental statement indicates that “[the capitulation of Japan] is not an achievement of a single country, but that of many other countries.” It also stresses that the establishment of a World War II commemorative day by legislation “should not single out the Soviet victory over an individual enemy country not to reduce the role of [entire] Soviet people in the termination of World War II.”⁷⁶ The response of Senator Grigorii Karasin, who met delegates from Sakhalin in October 2020, clearly represents the government’s position. Karasin stressed as follows:

For the state of Russia, we have only one victory day, that is, the Victory Day on May 9, 1945. We cannot celebrate the victory day in the Battle of Kursk, the victory day in the Battle of Stalingrad, [and] the victory day in the Far East in a separate manner. The Victory Day in Russia is one.⁷⁷

In conclusion, the tug of war between the central government and local authorities is continuing. After the Soviet Union collapsed, the local authorities of the Sakhalin *oblast’* sought to build a new postwar local identity by using a lost memory of a war victory and symbols of the victory while, at the same time, making efforts to promote local memory to a regional level in order to create a common and unifying regional identity. Furthermore, the local authorities of the Sakhalin region strove to promote the war memory to the national level. Certainly, the local and regional politics of war memory has sometimes not only conflicted with but also partially coincided with that of the central government, as the Moscow leadership has practiced the politics of war memory according to both changing geopolitical situations related to Japan and the memory war over World War II with European nations. Despite its partial success, the local government has not succeeded yet in attaining its final goal. For the Moscow leadership, which pursued both economic cooperation with Japan on a global level and symbolic status of the “national”

75 TASS, “Duma otkazalas’.”


76 Ibid.

77 Iuliia Fraer, “Senator Karasin,” October 15, 2020.

memory of the Great Patriotic War by keeping a balance among local war memories on a domestic level, the request from the local authorities of the Sakhalin region was too radical to accept.

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