

## **Japanese Prisoners of War in the USSR: Facts, Versions, Questions**

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**Abstract.** The capture of servicemen of the Kwantung army by the Soviet troops in Manchuria in August 1945, their further detention in labor camps in the USSR, as well as their repatriation to Japan, which dragged on for nearly ten years, are among the most difficult and sensitive issues in relations between the USSR and Japan. They were not written about or discussed in the Soviet Union for many years until the early 1990s, when access to previously classified documents was opened. It was at that time that the issue became a matter for scholarly research by historians of the two countries and then put on the agenda of political negotiations at the head-of-state level. This first happened during the official visit to Japan of the first Soviet President, Mikhail Gorbachev, in April 1991, and then this mission was taken over by the Government of the Russian Federation. However, there are still questions that absorb the attention of researchers and the public and that still need to be fully answered.

**Key words:** Japan, the Soviet-Japanese War, the Kwantung Army, prisoners of war, internees, the Soviet-Japanese Joint Declaration of 1956, the Potsdam Declaration, the State Defense Committee, Joseph Stalin, Harry Truman.

The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw frequent military conflicts between Russia and Japan, including the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, the intervention of Japanese troops in Siberia and the Far East in

1918-1922, the armed conflict on Lake Khasan in 1938, the 1939 local war on the river of Khalkhin Gol, and also dozens of armed cross-border incidents in the late 1930s and the early 1940s. The entry of the Soviet army into the war against Japan in August 1945 was the lightning-fast end of World War II and, at the same time, the last military clash between the two countries. The consequences of this war, however, are still keenly felt today. Actually, the two main problems that resulted from the events of 1945 are the notorious territorial dispute and the non-compliance by the Soviet Union with a number of important legal norms regarding former soldiers of the Kwantung army captured by the Soviet troops in Manchuria and taken for forced labor to the USSR. But whereas the first issue is an object of constant public interest in both countries, the second one has been publicly discussed mainly in Japan. Despite a large number of studies on this theme, the Russian public knows it rather superficially. Hereafter we will try to highlight the most complicated questions faced by researchers and put forward a few assumptions on them.

### **Decision to Send Japanese Prisoners of War to the USSR**

One of the main questions in the history of what the Japanese call the “Siberian captivity” comes down to the following: what made Stalin violate the Potsdam Declaration and decide to immediately send several hundred thousand Japanese prisoners of war to the USSR for forced labor?

As known, Article 9 of the Potsdam Declaration, to which the USSR acceded on the day when war was declared on Japan, stated that “The Japanese military forces, after being completely disarmed, shall be permitted to return to their homes with the opportunity to lead peaceful and productive lives” [Potsdam Declaration 1945]. Following their allied commitments, on 16 August 1945, the Soviet leadership, represented by Lavrentiy Beria, Nikolai Bulganin and Alexei Antonov, sent Marshal Vasilevsky an encrypted telegram which clearly defined that “prisoners

of war of the Japanese-Manchu army will not be taken to the territory of the USSR”. It also indicated that POW camps should be organized, whenever possible, in places of the Japanese’s disarmament according to the orders from the front commanders, allocating the necessary number of troops for guarding and convoying POWs. Food for the POWs was to be given in accordance with the norms that existed in the Japanese army located in Manchuria. To organize and manage the containment of POWs in the camps, NKVD (People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs) sent there the head of the NKVD Main Directorate for Prisoners of War, Lieutenant-General Mikhail Krivenko, with a group of officers [TSAMO 1945a].

No sooner had this order entered into force than on August 23, the State Defense Committee, headed by Stalin, adopted Decree No. 9898-ss classified as “top secret” and entitled “On Reception, Placement and Labor Use of the Prisoners of War of the Japanese Army”, which described in detail the sending of 500,000 Japanese prisoners of war to forced labor in the Soviet Union, determined their distribution among the country’s economic facilities and established measures to organize their work and life. The document was signed by the Chairman of the State Defense Committee Joseph Stalin [TSAMO 1945b].

Thus, within a week, the Soviet leadership radically changed its approach to this issue, deliberately violating its allied commitments stated in Article 9 of the Potsdam Declaration. What were the reasons for such an unexpected turn of events?

To give an answer to this question it is necessary to find in the Russian archives documents that would make it possible at least to understand the whole range of opinions and arguments that the Soviet leaders had in this respect. For the time being, we have only the text of the Decree of the State Defense Committee. Direct acquaintance with the document allows us to advance, if only a little, in our knowledge of the events of that time.

First of all, an important thing is the signature of Stalin which, as it has now turned out, was made in green pencil. The color of the resolution is believed to have been significant to the Soviet leader. He signed the most important political documents in red ink, less

important papers – in blue, while green pencil was used rarely enough and mostly in documents related to orders in the economic sphere. This observation is so far just a stroke in our thinking on the theme, since it is quite obvious that the decision was caused not only by the economic factor but by a whole set of other factors, including military, political, ideological, and simply personal ones.

Long before the Yalta Conference, Franklin Roosevelt thought it possible to satisfy the territorial demands of the USSR after the war in return for the Soviet leadership's consent to enter the war with Japan. According to the US plans of occupation, the Soviet troops were to occupy vast territories of the Japanese Empire including the Kuril Islands, Hokkaido, and the entire northeast of the main island of Honshu.

However, by the time these plans were to be implemented, the relations between the USSR and the USA had already begun to change. The American side started to change its position after Roosevelt's death. It is known that, during the summer of 1945, Stalin and Truman carried on extensive correspondence on the details of the surrender and capture of the Kwantung Army. On August 15, the Soviet Union was offered "General Order No. 1" prepared by the Americans, according to which all the ground, naval, air, and auxiliary forces located in Manchuria, Korea north of 38 degrees north latitude, and also the Karafuto Governorate (Sakhalin) were to surrender to the Commander-in-Chief of the Soviet armed forces in the Far East.

Stalin approved this order, but proposed two substantial amendments to the text of the document: "1. To include in the area of the surrender of the Japanese armed forces to the Soviet troops all the Kuril Islands which, according to the decision of the three Powers made in the Crimea, are to pass into the possession of the Soviet Union. 2. To include in the area of the surrender of the Japanese armed forces to the Soviet troops the northern half of the island of Hokkaido that is adjacent in the north to the La Perouse Strait located between Karafuto (Sakhalin) and Hokkaido. The demarcation line between the northern and southern halves of the island of Hokkaido is to be drawn along the line running from the city of Kushiro on the eastern coast of the island to the city of Rumoi on the

western coast of the island, including the mentioned cities in the northern half of the island” [Perepiska Predsedatelya Soveta Ministrov SSSR 1958, pp. 263-264]. Raising the issue of the occupation of the northern part of Hokkaido, Stalin provided arguments from history: “As is known, in 1919-1921, the Japanese occupied the entire Soviet Far East. Russian public opinion would be seriously offended if the Russian troops did not have an area of occupation in any part of the actual Japanese territory” [Perepiska Predsedatelya Soveta Ministrov SSSR 1958, pp. 263-264].

On August 16, 1945, Moscow sent the command of the Soviet troops in the Far East a cipher telegram saying that the servicemen of the Kwantung Army who had surrendered would not be taken to the territory of the USSR. On the same day, however, Truman signed the SWNCC 70/5 directive on the new conditions of Japan’s occupation. The document cancelled all previous agreements with the allies and primarily the USSR on the division of Japan according to the “German formula” into several occupation zones, according to which Hokkaido and the northeastern regions of Honshu were to come under the control of the USSR, as well as part of Tokyo, which had previously been supposed to be divided into four sectors – American, Soviet, Chinese, and British [Katasonova 2005, p. 46]. According to the latest directive, the entire territory of Japan was to come under the sole control of the USA.

Eventually, the American side arrived at the idea of not giving the USSR an occupation zone on Hokkaido. In his memoirs, Douglas MacArthur commented on these events as follows: “The Russians commenced to make trouble from the very beginning. They demanded that their troops should occupy Hokkaido, the northern island of Japan, and thus divide the country in two. Their forces were not to be under the control of the supreme commander, but entirely independent of his authority. I refused point blank.” [MacArthur 2001, p. 306].

As a result, the operation to land Soviet troops on the island of Hokkaido, scheduled for August 23, 1945, was suspended the day before, on August 22. The Soviet ships that had practically sailed to the island had to turn back. And immediately after that, on August 23, Stalin decided to take revenge for the USA’s refusal to give the Soviet

Union an occupation zone in Japan, which he perceived as a political defeat. He signed the Decree of the State Defense Committee on the use of Japanese POWs at economic facilities in the USSR.

### **Analysis of Data on the Number of Japanese Prisoners of War**

One of the first figures published in the open Soviet press appeared in the final report by the Commander-in-Chief of the Soviet Forces in the Far East, Marshal A. M. Vasilevsky, as of September 1, 1945, according to which the Soviet Army took prisoner 573,984 Japanese soldiers and officers, including 110 generals [Efremov, Mukhin, Andronnikov, Grebenyuk (ed.) 1997, p. 371]. The report of the Pravda newspaper of September 12, 1945 stated that Soviet troops captured 594,000 Japanese soldiers and officers and 148 generals, including up to 20,000 wounded servicemen. Out of this number, 70,880 people were released right in the combat zone.

Another official source is *World History* in ten volumes, and Volume 10 mentions 594,000 servicemen of the Kwantung Army captured by the Soviet troops [Vsemirnaya istoriya 1965, p. 545]. The same number of prisoners is indicated in the articles by Army General M. A. Gareev, a participant of the 1945 events and a well-known military historian [Gareev 1991, p. 48]. The same average number is upheld in Japan. For instance, this opinion appears in the books by Saitō Rokurō, the late president of the All-Japan Association of Former POW (*Zenkoku yokuryūsha hoshō kyōgikai* 国抑留者補償協議会) [Saitō 1995, pp. 208-209].

However, this point requires some clarification. The most reliable information on this issue is contained in a document found in the State Archives of the Russian Federation. This is the “Statement of the number of prisoners of war of the former Japanese army captured by the Soviet troops in 1945” prepared by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and sent to N. S. Khrushchev, N. A. Bulganin and A. I. Mikoyan on October 18, 1956, i.e.,

the day before the Soviet-Japanese Joint Declaration was signed. This statement determined the number of the Japanese military personnel captured during the war in 1945 at 639,776 people, including 609,448 Japanese servicemen and also 30,328 Chinese, Koreans, Mongols, etc. The Japanese repatriated from the USSR between 1945 and 1956 numbered 546,752, including 112 generals and 25,728 officers. The number of deaths in captivity was 61,855, including 31 generals and 607 officers. At that time, 1,030 people convicted by the Soviet judicial authorities remained on the territory of the USSR, and 713 Japanese people lived in the USSR without national passports but on residence permits due to their refusal to return home [GA RF 1956].

These data coincide with the conclusions of one of the first researchers of this problem, Doctor of Law V. P. Galitsky. With reference to the archives of the General Directorate for Prisoners of War and Internees (GUPVI), he gives virtually the same figure, maintaining that, during the war with Japan from August 9 to September 2, 1945, 639,635 Japanese soldiers, officers, generals, and civilians were registered as prisoners of war. Out of this number, 65,245 people were released directly at the fronts and 12,318 people were transferred to Mongolia before December 1945, while 15,986 people died in front-line camps and at army reception centers (mainly from wounds, concussions, and diseases). In summary, based on these figures, he states that “there were 546,086 prisoners of war in the territory of the USSR, including 170 generals, headed by Army Commander Yamada Otozo, and 26,345 officers. As early as by March 1949, 418,152 people had returned to their homeland, whereas 62,068 Japanese servicemen did not return from captivity to their homes. But this number includes 15,986 people who died in front-line camps and reception centers. In the territory of our country, 46,082 people lost their lives” [Galitskiy 1991, p. 69].

## **Issue of the Legal Status of the Japanese Military in Soviet Captivity**

The Soviet leadership's political decision to send captured Japanese soldiers and officers to forced labor in the USSR was based on the argumentation developed in determining the future of German prisoners of war. This argumentation is clearly seen in the text of one of the directives of the Soviet leadership sent to the representative of the USSR in the European Advisory Commission (EAC), which commenced work on January 14, 1944. The directive prescribed: "Unlike the British and Americans, who intend to demobilize the armed forces immediately after the signing of an armistice and disarmament, the Soviet project requires that these forces be declared entirely prisoners of war. If this demand meets with the opposition from the Anglo-Americans, who can refer to the absence of such precedents in history, you should insist on this demand as arising from the principle of unconditional surrender, for which there are no precedents either" [Semiryaga 1995, p. 203].

Naturally, the issue of the future of German prisoners of war caused debate in the European Advisory Commission. The US and British representatives emphasized that the Germans who would receive the POW status would have to be treated in accordance with the norms of international law, and this would require substantial material costs, since each POW would have to be provided with normal housing, good food, decent clothes, etc. [Semiryaga, 1995, p. 203]. The Soviet side insisted that capturing enemy soldiers was a right and not an obligation of the victor and therefore the Allies were free to treat the surrendered Wehrmacht servicemen as they deemed necessary.

As for the soldiers and officers of the Kwantung Army, during a confidential conversation in early September 1945, V. M. Molotov directly asked US Secretary of State James Byrnes why the Americans were sending Japanese POWs to their homeland instead of using them as labor force as the USSR did. Thus he announced the recent decision of the Soviet top leaders, thereby showing their future plans. One of the decisive factors in this issue was the war-ravaged national economy of the USSR,

which suffered enormous material damage and many millions of human casualties, and therefore was desperately in need of labor. However, the Japanese POWs did not completely resolve the problem of insufficient workforce, although it played a certain role in the compensation for the losses inflicted by the war. Japanese POWs were used in various sectors of the Soviet national economy – from Vladivostok to Tbilisi, but mostly in Siberia and the Far East.

The legal status of these soldiers and officers, however, has been perceived by the Japanese side differently than it was in the USSR. In Japan, there is a wide-spread concept – “Siberian internment” (*Shiberia no yokuryū* シベリアの抑留). In relation to the category of people who were kept in Soviet camps, the public and political quarters most often use not the term “prisoner of war” (*horyo* 捕虜), but “internee” (*yokuryūsha* 抑留者). The Japanese judicial authorities also question the lawfulness of using the definition “prisoner of war” in this particular case. Instead, they use the terms “persons surrounded by the enemy” (*teki ni hōi sareta hitobito* 敵に包囲された人々) or “disarmed armed forces” (*busō kaijo sareta gunjin* 武装解除された軍人).

In justifying the term “internee” in regard of Japanese prisoners of Soviet camps, emphasis is placed on the fact that most of the Kwantung Army servicemen were captured not during hostilities, but as a result of Japan’s complete and unconditional surrender, which was announced in the emperor’s rescript. Surrender was in most cases voluntary: when laying down arms, the Japanese not only obeyed the emperor’s order, but also counted on the USSR’s compliance with Clause 9 of the Potsdam Declaration providing for immediate return to their homeland. Moreover, it is emphasized that the former servicemen of the Kwantung Army were taken prisoner in the territory of a third country, Manchuria, and “interned” in the USSR after the bilateral agreement on cessation of hostilities was signed on August 19, 1945.

However, according to the logic of the Soviet side, in international documents, the concept of “internee” is used mainly in relation to civilians. And the internment regime is governed by the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, as well as the 4<sup>th</sup> Geneva Convention of 1949 relative

to the protection of civilians in time of war. The rights of “prisoners of war” are established by the same Hague Conventions and by the 1929 Convention on the treatment of prisoners of war, which determine the rules for their treatment, the procedures for payment of compensation for work in captivity, etc. However, the Soviet side preferred to be guided not by the norms of the international documents, but by the course of bilateral agreements between the USSR and Japan.

Later on, there arose the objective issue of the low economic efficiency of the POW labor and the stranded costs of their maintenance, but even despite this, the Soviet leadership was in no hurry to return them to their homeland. In the note sent to Foreign Minister V. M. Molotov on September 15, 1946, Deputy Foreign Minister Ya. A. Malik wrote the following: “From the point of view of the national economic interests of the USSR it is desirable that the period of using the labor of the Japanese prisoners of war be extended as long as possible. On the other hand, proceeding from international political considerations, especially in the light of the upcoming negotiations with the allies on a peace treaty with Japan, it would be beneficial for us to begin partial repatriation of Japanese prisoners of war and civilians from the USSR right now. For the time being, the repatriation of Japanese prisoners of war should be carried out in such proportions that cannot significantly interfere with the implementation of our national economic plans...” [AVP RF 1946].

Unprofitability and inefficiency of forced labor always was a significant flaw in the Soviet economy, and the Japanese prisoners of war also became hostages of this system, which fact was also complicated by the uncertainty of their legal status.

### **Problem of the Japanese Military’s Repatriation**

The fates of these people often became a subject of numerous political clashes between the former Allies in the anti-Hitler coalition – the USSR and the USA. It would be sufficient to recall the numerous

wars of words in the Allied Council for Japan and tense discussions at the UN and its Special Committee on Prisoners of War.

Practical solutions to issues related to the detention of the Japanese in Soviet camps and their repatriation were the subject of negotiations between the USSR and Japan, first, at the level of the two countries' Red Cross organizations, and later at the level of state bodies and heads-of-government. In this case, we are talking about the Soviet-Japanese negotiations of 1955-1956, the purpose of which was to conclude a peace treaty between the two countries, but which ended, as is known, in signing the Soviet-Japanese Joint Declaration providing for the end of the state of war and for restoration of diplomatic relations.

According to Article 5 of this document, the Soviet Union pledged to release and repatriate to Japan all convicted Japanese citizens and also to continue search at the request of the Japanese side [USSR-Japan Joint Declaration 1956]. All other issues arising from the international conventions and related to the protection of the rights of POWs were omitted. The Soviet side was simply not interested in addressing these issues, since this would have required a number of measures to correct the legal mistakes made with regard to the Japanese POWs, which was not done in the Soviet system, and, besides, would further drag on the long-drawn negotiation process. The issues included compensation for work in captivity, rehabilitation of people erroneously convicted in the camps, etc. It is possible that the Japanese side intended to raise them again later, because, according to the experience of the Russo-Japanese War, all issues related to the treatment of prisoners of war were included as a separate clause in the Portsmouth Peace Treaty.

However, after the signing of the Joint Declaration on October 19, 1956 and the subsequent repatriation on December 23, 1956 of the last group of Japanese prisoners of war who were serving their sentences in the USSR, these issues were removed from the agenda of Soviet-Japanese relations for a long time. More precisely, the Soviet leaders, considering their obligations to the Japanese prisoners of war carried out from a formal point of view, hurried to issue an order to transfer

all the materials to the central and regional archives, classifying them as “top secret”.

From that moment, all requests from Japanese citizens about their relatives who had not returned from Soviet captivity were answered with formal replies to the effect that Soviet authorities did not have this kind of information. Shortly after, according to the established practice, they completely stopped answering letters from Japan.

### **Political and Academic Aspects of the Problems of Japanese Prisoners of War**

The two countries returned to discussing the problems of prisoners of Soviet camps only in April 1991, during the visit of the USSR President Mikhail Gorbachev to Japan. Then, for the first time in many years, the Japanese side was given lists of 27,800 Japanese prisoners who had died and been buried in the USSR and their relatives were offered condolences and given permission to visit the graves. But probably the main result of this visit was the signing of an interstate agreement on detainees in POW camps [Soglasheniye mezhdru pravitel'stvami 1991]. In the same year, as part of the general process of rehabilitation of victims of political repressions, the USSR started to review the court rulings in respect of Japanese citizens illegally convicted while in Soviet captivity. All these humanitarian actions were further continued and developed by the Russian Federation, which is the legal successor of the USSR. Finally, in October 1993, Russia admitted the antihuman treatment of Japanese POWs on the part of the Stalin regime, which was announced by President Boris Yeltsin during his official visit to Japan.

At the same time, the theme of Japanese prisoners of war began to be given broad coverage in the Russian media. The journalists should be given credit for being the first to identify the range of problems related to military captivity and help to attract the attention of both the general public and professional historians to these problems. Since then, these

issues have been actively studied by Russian scholars, whose efforts introduced a large array of declassified archival documents into scientific circulation. There appeared serious scientific works, including the book by an Irkutsk historian S. I. Kuznetsov *The Japanese in Siberian Captivity* [Kuznetsov 1997], the documentary study by V. V. Karpov *Prisoners of Stalin. Siberian Internment of the Japanese Army in 1945-1956* [Karpov 1997], works by E. L. Katasonova *Japanese Prisoners of War in the USSR: A Great Game of the Great Powers* [Katasonova 2003], *The Last Prisoners of World War II: Little-Known Pages of Russian-Japanese Relations* [Katasonova 2005], etc. Also, recent years saw the publication of several large collections of archive documents with academic commentary, including a large work *The Japanese Prisoners of War in the USSR: 1945-1956* [Gavrilov, Katasonova (ed.) 2013]. The process of clarifying the fate of former Japanese POWs is also continued by young Japanese researchers, as evidenced by A. Kobayashi's monograph *Siberian Captivity (Shiberia yokuryū)*, published by the Iwanami Shoten publishing house [Kobayashi 2018].

## Conclusion

“Siberian Captivity” is a landmark notion in Japan. It has become an everlasting part of the historical memory of the people, becoming associated with a tragic chapter of the Soviet-Japanese war. At the same time, there is every ground to believe that the parties will overcome the remaining stereotypes with regard to each other and bring the resolution of the existing problems to the practical level. Resolving the humanitarian issues regarding the Japanese POWs in this context will be an additional factor in strengthening trust between Russia and Japan, which is one of the main preconditions for signing a peace treaty between our countries based on the results of World War II.

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