



Conferences and Contested Historical Memory

At the beginning of September 2010 in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk there took place concerts, parades, and an international conference to commemorate the end of the Second World War. These events were part of a broad and well-funded campaign by the local political elite to imprint on the regional consciousness the significance of the victory over Japan in 1945. In July of this year, Russian President Dmitrii Medvedev signed into law a newly designated national day of remembrance on the 2nd of September: “the day of the ending of the Second World War” [*Den’ okonchaniya Vtoroi Mirovoi Voiny*]. While the new holiday passed virtually unnoticed in Moscow, on Sakhalin great efforts were made to mark the day, the victory and the ‘liberation’ of Sakhalin and the Kurils. On 1st September the Chairman of the Sakhalin Regional Duma, Vladimir Efremov, wrote on the front page of the region’s leading newspaper, *Sovietskii Sakhalin*, that: ‘For us, islanders, who every year proudly note the Day of the freeing of Sakhalin and the Kuril islands, this date has huge significance...Moreover, the most important military-political result of the Second World War was the return of our ancient (*iskonnyi*) land’¹. Governor of Sakhalin, Aleksandr Khoroshavin, actively participated in the campaign to designate the 2nd of September a holiday and declared in an interview with the magazine *Rodina* that: ‘One of the most important military, political results of the victory in August 1945 was the return of the country to its natural historical borders’². This idea of the country returning to its ‘natural’ borders was behind much of the September events on Sakhalin.

In Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk an international conference entitled “Lessons of the Second World War and the Present Day [*Yroki Vtoroi Mirovoi Voiny i Sovremennost*]” was held on the 2nd and 3rd September. The conference attracted not only the local political elite but also Sergei Mironov (Chair of the Federal Council and Leader of ‘Just Russia’) as well as senior

¹ EFREMOV, V. (2010) S Prazdnikom. *Sovietskii Sakhalin*, 114 (24165), 1st Sept, p.1.

² KHOROSHAVIN, A. (2010) Tam, gde nachinaetsya Rossiya. *Rodina*, No.9, September, 24-25.



representatives from the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Foreign Affairs³. More than one hundred papers were delivered many with overtly political themes emphasising the importance of historical memory and advancing Russia’s claims to the Southern Kuril Islands. Titles included: ‘Ways and means of neutralising the damage to the territorial integrity of Russia over Sakhalin and the Kurils’, ‘Sakhalin-Kuril region – the justified result of war’, ‘The Southern Sakhalin Offensive and the Kuril Landings operation of 1945: Irretrievable loss, historical memory’, ‘The war with Japan in August 1945 – falsification or authentic historical fact?’. Inevitably Sergei Ponomarev⁴ was active in organising this conference and he featured on the front page of *Sovietskii Sakhalin* on the 3rd September with an address to ‘Sakhaliners, Kuril Islanders, and guests of the islands’, congratulating them on ‘the day of the freeing of Southern Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands from Japanese militarism’⁵. Ponomarev noted that the recognition of this day by the President was the culmination of a long campaign by him and the Sakhalin Regional Duma, however, he also stated that the campaign was not over, explaining that while the name of the new holiday, ‘the day of the ending of the Second World War’ was optimal for the international arena, ‘we also hope that through our unified strength we will restore to the domestic legislation of Russia the full name of this holiday – the Day of Victory over Japanese Militarism’⁶. He also suggested that through Russian initiatives this day could be adopted by the United Nations⁷.

It is in these statements that Ponomarev reveals the real motives behind his campaign: a desire to promote the image of an aggressive Japan while at the same time consolidating

³ VYACHIN, V. & KARPUKA, I. (2010) Opalennaya Zemlya. *Sovietskii Sakhalin*, 115 (24166), 3rd Sept, p.1.

⁴ Deputy Head of the Management of External Relations and the proceedings of the apparatus of the Governor and Government of Sakhalin Region, a former Regional Deputy and one of the most vocal and active campaigners against any kind of territorial concession to Japan

⁵ PONOMAREV, S. (2010b) Uvazhaemye Sakhalintsy, Kuril'chane i gosti nashikh ostrovov. *Sovietskii Sakhalin* 115 (24166), 3rd Sept p.1.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.



international support for his discourses of maintaining Russian control over the Kurils. As Ponomarev clearly spelt out in an article published two days earlier, ‘establishing a Day of Victory – it is a real line of defence of the borders of our country, which shows to all the absurdity of the demand for territorial compromises...’⁸ Ponomarev goes to extreme lengths to place such an emphasis on the permanence of this victory, and with it the permanence of Russian control over the Kurils. He insists on the intense meaning of remembering this victory precisely because of its implications for national territory, identity and memory:

The interests of the security of the country, the formulation of its image in domestic and international public opinion, the bringing-up of future generations of its citizens, the struggles against the falsification of history, [and] the moral duty before the older generation insistently demands the adequate fixing of this holiday of the victory over (militaristic) Japan in the national calendar⁹

Alongside this desire to cement in the regional consciousness Japan’s militarism, there occurred at the beginning of September the symbolic installation of a Japanese tank in the grounds of the Regional Museum (formerly the Japanese military headquarters on the island) in the centre of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk. On the 7th June 2010 a Second World War Japanese light tank (Type 95 – *Ha-Go*) was delivered to Sakhalin from the island of Shumshu. The tank was brought to Sakhalin after a resolution by the organising committee “Victory” and its transportation organised in part by the Agency for Culture of Sakhalin Region¹⁰. The tank was a rusty shell and had laid abandoned on Shumshu since being put out of action by the Soviet landing forces in August 1945. Despite its dilapidated condition, within three months of its delivery to Sakhalin the tank had been carefully restored and placed in the grounds of the Regional Museum. The tank project was part of the preparations for the celebrations of the 65th anniversary of the Second World War and on the 1st September at 12.30 on the square of

⁸ PONOMAREV, S. (2010a) Prazdnik Pobedy i pamyatnaya data. *Sovietskii Sakhalin*, 114 (24165), 1st Sept, p.3.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ SAKH.COM (2010) Yaponskii tank s ostrova Shumshu dostavlen na Sakhalin. *sakhalin.info*, <http://www.sakhalin.info/news/63056/>, 8th July, Accessed 23rd Sept 2010.



the Regional Museum the new exhibit was unveiled¹¹. It seems the local political elite are going to significant lengths to remind local residents of Japan’s militarism and the battle that raged over the island of Shumshu.

(written by: Paul Richardson)

¹¹ VYACHIN, V. (2010) Zdes', na ostrovakh zakonshilas' voina. *Sovietskii Sakhalin*, 1st Sept, 114(24165), 1.



The restored Japanese tank in the grounds of the Sakhalin Regional Museum



Sakhalin Regional Museum



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