

Japan MEETS Russia

By Viktor Shmagin



Japanese, Ainu and Russians, 1702–1792

Most people today think of the Russo–Japanese War (1904–1905) as the first time Russians and Japanese came into conflict in Asia. Yet in fact, by 1904 they had been viewing each other as imperial rivals for over a century. Edo Period (1600–1868) Japan was keenly interested in the world beyond its borders. Indeed, despite the persistence of the *sakoku* (closed country) narrative in the popular imagination, Japan was anything but secluded during this period. True, the samurai government led by the Tokugawa shōgun did keep Westerners at arm's length. East Asia, though, was extremely important to Japan. Japanese traded with Chinese, Koreans and Ryūkyūans. The Tokugawa also adapted the Sinocentric (China-centered) model of diplomacy for their own uses, receiving Korean and Ryūkyūan diplomatic embassies and portraying them as tribute missions. This allowed the Tokugawa to claim the Koreans and Ryūkyūans as subjects, though Japanese control over the Ryūkyūs was limited, and over Korea nonexistent.¹

Starting in the early 1600s, the Japanese also started colonizing the region where they would eventually encounter Russians. This was today's Hokkaidō, the southern Kuril/Chishima Islands, and southern Sakhalin/Karafuto. The indigenous inhabitants of these lands called themselves "Ainu," and the region "Ainu Moshir," which roughly translate into "the people" and "the land of the people." The Japanese, on the other hand, called both the "barbarians" and the "barbarian land" they lived in "Ezo." By the late eighteenth century, they dominated the Ainu economically, militarily, and politically. Trade with Japanese merchants had changed the Ainu economy, traditionally based on hunting, fishing and regional trade with different peoples, into one that was dependent on trade with one people: the Japanese. At Japanese trading outposts, Ainu increasingly exchanged prestige goods

such as eagle feathers and fur pelts for foodstuffs, especially rice, as well as manufactured items and luxury goods, such as sake.³ Inevitable Ainu resistance was ruthlessly suppressed. Yet the Japanese never annexed the region, and the Tokugawa government in Edo remained largely uninvolved in Ainu affairs. Instead, Ainu trade was overseen by the Matsumae Clan, whose feudal domain was restricted to the southernmost portion of today's Hokkaidō. By the late eighteenth century, the Matsumae had subcontracted Ainu



Two Ainu men, "Ainos of Yezo," by Isabella Bird. Source: *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* (first published in 1905). The Project Gutenberg eBook at <https://tinyurl.com/y4czjsu5>.



Matsumae Town palace near Hakodate in 1751. Ainu traders enter on the right with offerings of seal, fish, waterfowl, and furs. Painting, *Customs of Ezo*, by Kodama Teiryō, Hakodate City Central Library, Hokkaidō, Japan. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/bdfs76tf>.

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trade to merchants from outside the domain, who also set up lucrative commercial fisheries.⁴

The Russians, for their part, came to Ainu lands in search of valuable fur pelts. They had spread from the Urals to the Pacific in less than a century, founding the port town of Okhotsk in 1649. Starting in 1697, Russians began to encounter Japanese castaways there, in Kamchatka, and in the Aleutian Islands. In 1705 Tsar Peter I ordered one of these, a man named Denbei, to teach Japanese in a specially-created language academy. Rumors of “Red Barbarians” began to filter southwards to Japan in the early-mid 1700s, as they traded with and forcibly collected a fur tax (the *iasak*) from the Ainu, and occasionally encountered armed resistance.

In 1738–1739, a detachment from the Russian Second Bering Expedition, led by Martin Spanberg and William Walton, sailed as far south as northern Honshū, received curious Japanese visitors aboard their ships, and even briefly landed to obtain provisions. In 1771, a Hungarian nobleman, Count Mauritz Benyovsky, captured by the Russians while fighting for Poland and exiled to Siberia, commandeered a ship in the Kurils with some other exiles and escaped. Heading for Macao, he stopped at several locations in Japan and spread the news of a non-existent Russian plan to occupy Ezo to anyone who would listen. While the incident did not cause any major change in Japanese policy up north, it did plant seeds of suspicion in the Japanese public consciousness. Soon afterwards, Russian merchants, hearing about the wealth of Japan and hoping to establish trade in order to feed the agriculturally unproductive Russian Pacific colonies, would start arriving in Ainu lands in earnest.⁵

Chief among these early Russian efforts was a trade delegation led by Ivan Antipin and Dimitrii Shabalin. In 1778, these merchants and their crew, accompanied by a number of Ainu, sailed south from a trading post established by Antipin on Urup/Uruppu Island three years prior. In that year and in 1779, they negotiated with Matsumae Clan authorities via Ainu translators. These talks put the Matsumae in a delicate position. They desired trade with Russia, especially coveting the Chinese silks and other luxury goods the Russians brought, but did not want to overstep the authority granted them by the Tokugawa by establishing formal trade. Thus, they compromised. The Russians were told that trade with Japanese merchants was forbidden except through Nagasaki, but that they could trade with local Ainu. In this way, the Russians could still obtain Japanese foodstuffs.⁶ This indirect trade blossomed and enriched the Matsumae, as well as their associated merchants. However, as the Matsumae had not informed the Tokugawa of any of this, when rumors of this trade reached mainland Japan, they became a political problem.

In the late 1700s, a debate about the future of Ezo was taking place in Japan. Some supported direct Japanese colonization, in part to guard against potential Russian advances. Such men included prominent intellectuals, such as Kudō Heisuke and Hayashi Shihei, as well as officials like Great Elder Tanuma Ōkitsugu, who headed the Tokugawa government. Their opponents wanted to keep Ezo as an undeveloped, foreign buffer zone, and included the merchant intellectual Nakai Chikuzan, as well as Tanuma's political rival, Matsudaira Sadanobu. By 1786, rumors of illicit trade had become impossible



The Samurai and the Ainu, c. 1775. The painting is in the collection of the Hakodate City Museum, Hokkaidō, Japan. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/5x5abb9c>.



Tanuma Ōkitsugu rōjū (senior counselor) of the Tokugawa shōgunate. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/3nvjev8>.

By 1786, rumors of illicit trade had become impossible to ignore, and were starting to threaten the Tokugawa officials' public image as arbiters of Japan's foreign relations.



Matsudaira Sadanobu.

Source: Wikipedia at <https://tinyurl.com/wsj4pk32>.



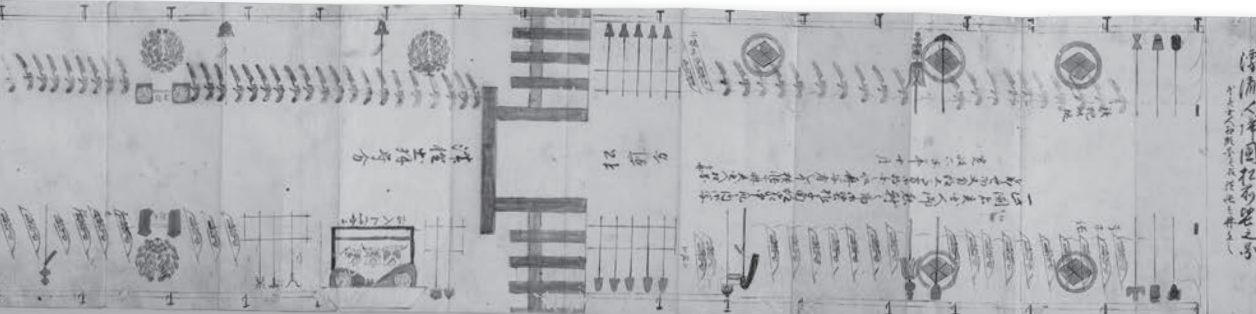
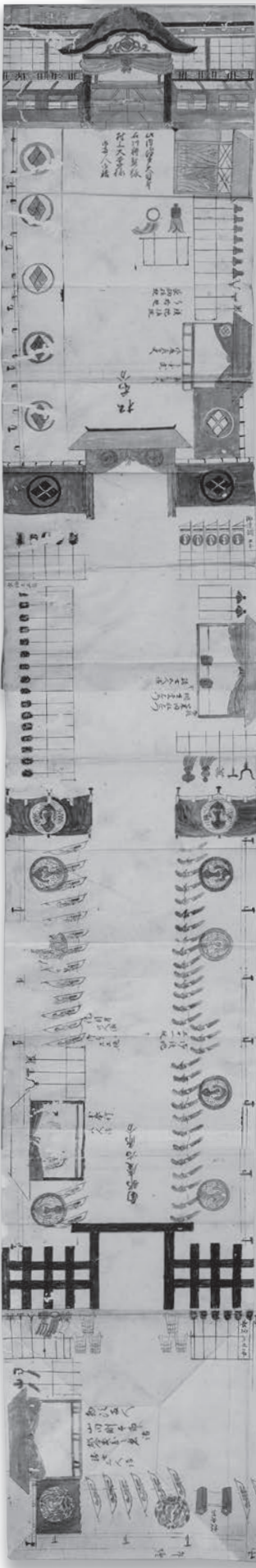
Kōdayū and Isokichi, the two Japanese castaways returned by Laxman in 1792. Source: Wikipedia at <https://tinyurl.com/vct73wph>.

to ignore, and were starting to threaten the Tokugawa officials' public image as arbiters of Japan's foreign relations. These men also feared that continued Japanese abuse of the Ainu would drive them into the arms of the Russians. Tanuma thus dispatched a series of fact-finding and exploration missions, which confirmed worrying evidence of cultural exchange; Christian, Russianized Ainu, as well as Russians themselves, were sailing, staying, and even being buried under forbidden Christian crosses as far south as Etorofu Island. In 1789 Ainu resentment against Japan boiled over into an ineffective but violent revolt in Kunashiri and Menashi. From the Japanese point of view, the situation in the North was becoming unstable.⁷

Diplomats and Warriors, 1792–1807

The Russians wanted to expand their trade even further, and in 1792 dispatched an official trade delegation commanded by Army Captain Adam Laxman to Japan. Accompanying them were two Japanese castaways who had spent almost a decade in Russia, Daikokuya Kōdayū and Isokichi. They were to be repatriated as a goodwill gesture. Laxman docked at Nemuro, in North-east Hokkaidō, where he met with Matsumae officials. Since they had been chastised for the earlier illicit trade, these officials reported to Edo and waited for instructions. Matsudaira Sadanobu had by then replaced his rival Tanuma as head of government. He wanted to maintain Ezo as a buffer zone against the Russians and was worried by Laxman's arrival there. He also wanted to avoid official trade because the Russians were not part of the East Asian cultural sphere and would be difficult to integrate into the Japan-centered model of foreign relations in the same way the Koreans and Ryūkyūans were. He was, however, willing to allow unofficial, private trade.

Matsudaira thus came up with a plan and had the Russians escorted from Nemuro to the castle town of Matsumae. This was the first time Russian diplomats had ever set foot on Japanese soil. Japanese representatives then put on an impressive ceremony designed to awe the Russians with a display of force, marching the delegates through a gauntlet of hundreds of Matsumae, Nanbu and Tsugaru Clan warriors. Laxman then came face to face with the Tokugawa officials Murakami Daigaku and Ishikawa Tadafusa, who presented him with two documents. The first, an "Explanation," claimed that Japan only traded with four countries (China, Korea, the Ryūkyūs and Holland), and that they had a strict "ancestral law" that did not allow for the establishment of trade or diplomacy with any other country. However, though a series



of maritime prohibitions that restricted contacts with the outside world had been in effect since the early 1630s, they were not a coherent policy; the “ancestral law” was a pronouncement invented especially for Laxman. It would have a lasting impact, though, as future Europeans, finding themselves outside the Japanese trade and diplomatic network, would accept it at face value as evidence of Japan’s “national isolation.”

The second document presented to Laxman was a special permit to enter Nagasaki harbor for the purpose of private trade, much as Chinese captains trading there were doing. Matsudaira thus wanted to appear strong yet flexible, and to deflect the Russians away from Ezo, which he declared off limits to them. Yet Laxman, due to a translation error, believed the pass was as good as a trade deal. Satisfied, he returned to Russia for further instructions. However, due to the French Revolution, no one sought to follow up on his success until 1804.⁸

In the meantime, the Tokugawa moved to shore up Japanese control over Ezo. In 1799 they stripped the Matsumae of their control over Ainu trade in eastern Ezo and extended central authority over this colony by establishing a magistracy in Hakodate, the principal port of the Japanese part of Hokkaidō. They later moved the magistracy to Matsumae town. They also replaced rapacious Matsumae-connected merchants with their own men and took steps to placate the Ainu by trying to curb Japanese excesses. They also ordered the Ainu to assimilate by adopting Japanese dress, dietary and other cultural practices. These steps were largely unsuccessful in the long run. What was more successful was brute force; the Tokugawa also increased the Japanese military presence throughout the region, opened a garrisoned trading post on Etorofu, the closest major island to Russian-controlled lands, and forbade Ainu from trading with the Russians on Urup.⁹

Thus, when the next Russian ambassador arrived in Nagasaki harbor bearing the entry pass, in 1804, asking not for private, but for official trade, he was kept waiting until the following year, then rudely rebuffed. The rudeness was calculated, with some Tokugawa officials believing a show of contempt would underscore the “ancestral law.”¹⁰ Instead, it backfired. The ambassador, Grand Chamberlain Nikolai Rezanov, was quarrelsome and loved to hold grudges. He bullied subordinates. He was at loggerheads with Ivan Kruzenshtern, the respected explorer-captain of the *Nadezhda*, the ship that took him halfway around the world from St. Petersburg to Japan. Rezanov’s close relationship with Tsar Alexander I regularly shielded him from many of his critics, however. He had also married the daughter of Georgii Shelikhov, one of the founders of the Russian-American Company (RAK), a semi-private commercial entity that acted as the governing body of Russian Alaska and the Kuril Islands. Indeed, the Russian trading post on Urup was under RAK control. After his rebuff, Rezanov came up with a characteristically aggressive plan; he ordered two of his subordinates, Navy Lieutenant Nikolai Khvostov and Midshipman Gavril Davydov, to raid Japanese installations across Ezo and foment Ainu rebellion against Japanese domination. His intention was to force the Japanese to open trade with Russia.



Adam Laxman, from a 1793 Japanese painting of members of his expedition. Hakodate City Central Library, Hakodate, Hokkaidō, Japan. Source: Wikipedia at <https://tinyurl.com/vct73wph>.

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Russian officer, Nikolay Rezanov (1764–1807) in the port of Nagasaki. He faces a soldier at the left, and his attendant, at the right, holds a Russian flag. A yellow cartouche, upper left, reads “Illustration of Russians who arrived at Nagasaki in the ninth month of the first year of the Bunka era [1804].”

Source: The Met website at <https://tinyurl.com/5n6js9bc>.



Japanese scroll depicting the Laxman embassy procession through Matsumae. The scroll is titled “A Picture of Returning Castaways to the Fort in Matsumae, and Also of the Appearance of the Foreigners.”

Source: Reproduced with the permission of the Daikokuya Kōdayū Memorial Hall.



Matsumae Takahiro (1829–1866), a Matsumae Domain Lord. He and Abe Masato were responsible for the opening of the Hyōgo port to foreign trade against the wishes of the imperial court. Both men lost their offices, court rank, and titles, and were forced to yield lordship of their domains. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/3zfwpz7v>.

The Tokugawa ordered northern Japanese clans to garrison all of Ezo with thousands of troops and put them on permanent alert. They also stripped the Matsumae Clan of their control over the rest of Ezo and banished them to a minor fief in Honshū.

Though Rezanov's actual orders to Khvostov and Davydov were somewhat confusing, and though he himself soon died and was unable to provide clarification, the two sailors carried them out. In 1806, and again the following year, the two men devastated Japanese trading posts and shipping in the region, even capturing the heavily fortified post on Etorofu with a mere handful of men. These raids were the first defeats of Japanese by foreigners in over 200 years. They shocked and embarrassed the shōgun, whose full title translated into "Great Barbarian-subduing Generalissimo." Despite Rezanov's expectations, however, the raids failed to produce a trade agreement. Efforts to incite Ainu rebellion also failed. And while Japanese troops briefly withdrew from the Chishima Archipelago, they returned in force after 1807. The Tokugawa ordered northern Japanese clans to garrison all of Ezo with thousands of troops and put them on permanent alert. They also stripped the Matsumae Clan of their control over the rest of Ezo and banished them to a minor fief in Honshū. Lastly, they issued the "Order to Shell and Repair Russian Ships" on sight, and to kill or capture any Russians who landed in Japan or Ezo.¹¹

The Golovnin Incident, 1811–1813

The crisis that became known as the "Golovnin Incident" finally led to the establishment of a stable coexistence between Japan and Russia. It began when the leader of a Russian survey mission to the Kuril/Chishima Islands, Captain Vasilii Golovnin of the sloop *Diana*, went ashore on Kunashiri Island in July 1811 to obtain fresh provisions. He also tried to convince the Japanese that the Russians did not want war. Golovnin even brought along a Russian-speaking Ainu named Aleksei to act as translator. Indeed, although there were plans to establish a Russian colony on Sakhalin, later aborted due to lack of resources and continued Japanese hostility, it is true that the Russians were not planning any future raids. However, Golovnin, Aleksei and six other Russians were captured and taken to Matsumae as prisoners. Golovnin's First Officer, Petr Rikord, decided he could not rescue Golovnin without reinforcements, but as Russia was about to face Napoleon's invasion, he soon discovered that the central government could not send any help. Rikord thus decided his best bet was to take counter-hostages and intercepted a ship off Kunashiri in the summer of 1812. He boarded it and took its owner, a wealthy merchant named Takadaya Kahei, along with five attendants, back to Kamchatka.

Below: A section of the Japanese scroll, "Capture of the Russians" depicting the capture of Captain Vasilii Golovnin and other crew members of the ship *Diana*.

Source: From the PDF article, "Bypassing the Dutch Monopoly of Relations with Japan: Vasily Golovnin's Captivity (1811–1813)" by Thomas Pierre Gidney, on the *Terrae Incognitae: The Journal of the Society for History of Discoveries* website at <https://tinyurl.com/nsrnsja2>.



Takadaya had established the Etorofu trading post on orders from the Tokugawa and was also the official provider of local shipping for the shōgunate. The tensions with Russia threatened his business interests and impeded his official duties. It is no surprise, therefore, that this wealthy and powerful man was interested in reducing those tensions, and he decided the best way to do this was to befriend Rikord over the long winter they spent together in Kamchatka. They admired each other for their cultivated manners, dedication to duty, as well as their patriotism. Rikord had met Takadaya's favorite mistress when he boarded his ship, as well as one of his sons and one of his nephews (who had both accompanied him into captivity). Takadaya met Rikord's wife in Kamchatka. Both men thus also had a peek into each other's private lives and related to each other as fellow patriarchs.

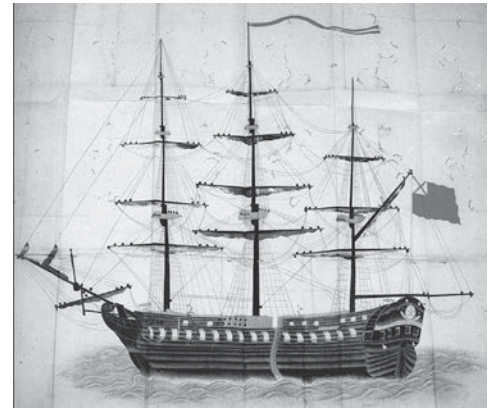
Golovnin had, in the meantime, also impressed his captors, and they him. The Matsumae Magistrate had ordered him to teach Russian to a small group of samurai, which included a young, talented student, Murakami Teisuke. This young man became Golovnin's star pupil and arguably his friend as well. Thus, Russians and Japanese at the point of contact came to regard their counterparts as cultural and intellectual equals and colonial elites who regarded each other's countries and peoples as important, and indigenous peoples, including the Ainu, as colonial subjects.

At this point, Japanese and Russian authorities all wanted to resolve the crisis peacefully, though the Japanese were prepared to fight if the Russians escalated the crisis by trying to rescue Golovnin. It was the Matsumae Magistrate, a career official named Hattori Sadakatsu who had interrogated Golovnin, came up with a workable plan to avoid hostilities; would it be sufficient, he asked his superiors in Edo, if the Russians officially apologized for Khvostov's actions and pretended these had been pirate raids instead of state-sanctioned attacks? After all, that is what Golovnin had been saying all along, even if everyone really knew otherwise. As Khvostov and Davydov, like Rezanov, had died shortly after the raids, they could be useful scapegoats. Hattori's superiors duly approved his plan. Takadaya, in the meantime, had persuaded Rikord to sail south in June of 1813 to see if there had been any new developments in Japan. Upon arriving off Kunashiri, Rikord was told to obtain an official letter of apology from Russian officials, which he did, and presented it to Matsumae Magistracy officials during an official ceremony in mid-October. In exchange, he received a written "Admonishment" that reiterated the "ancestral law," and was told to never return.

On the face of it, the Russians had been chastised; the Tokugawa treated their presentation of an apology much like the Korean and Ryūkyūan "tribute" missions. In exchange for their show of submission, however, the Russians received some important concessions. First was that, unlike Rezanov's embassy, this Russian delegation was received in a friendly and open manner. Indeed, Tokugawa officials even allowed the ordinary people of Hakodate, many of whom swarmed around the Diana in small boats, to board the Russian ship and mingle freely with the foreigners. The Russians were also treated with respect. Unlike other European ships in Japanese waters, the Diana was not disarmed, and Rikord was even allowed an armed honor guard to accompany him ashore. He was also permitted



Portrait of Russian Navigator, Captain Vasily M. Golovnin (1776–1831) by Orest Kiprensky (1782–1836).
Source: The State Hermitage Museum at <https://tinyurl.com/36ywc4jy>.



Japanese illustration of the Golovnin's sloop *Diana*.
Source: Wikipedia at <https://tinyurl.com/yckvftch>.



to meet with Golovnin before the exchange ceremony. This meeting was important because Golovnin convinced him that in exchange for a public apology, Rikord could achieve another key objective; the creation of a stable border between Russian- and Japanese-controlled lands that would help prevent future clashes. The Japanese considered it improper to conclude any kind of official agreement with the Russians, who were presented as admonished inferiors. Unofficially, however, they made it clear they would not advance any further north than Etorofu, effectively drawing a de-facto border just to the north of that island.

This unofficial agreement was the first border settlement the Japanese ever negotiated with a foreign power. For the next four decades, though the Russians continued to send periodic, unsuccessful probes to sound out the Japanese about official trade, they were content to let this part of the frontier remain quiet.¹²

The Imperial Peace, 1813–1852

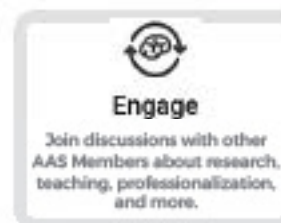
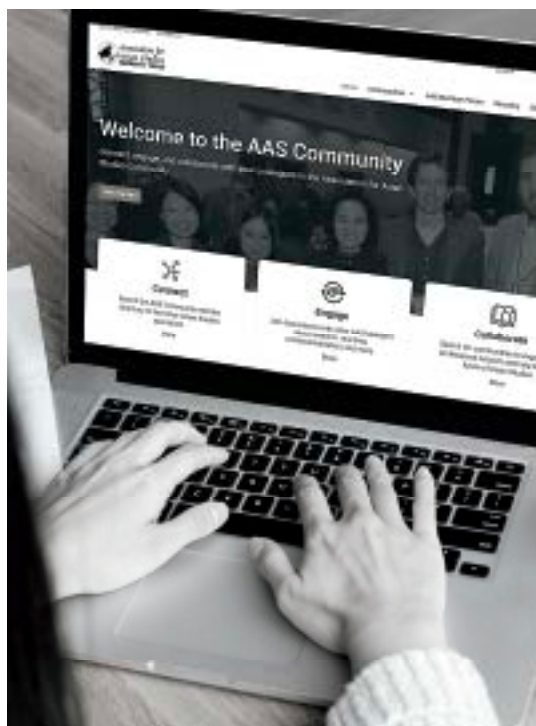
The effects of these early Japan–Russia relations on Northeast Asia were significant. Before the two countries' soldiers and officials came into significant contact, the Sea of Okhotsk had been a contact zone where Ainu had traded and mediated between Chinese, Jurchens, Japanese, Russians, Nivkh and other peoples. Afterwards, Ainu Moshir became a stage for imperial competition, which it remains to this day. When the land became divided, the Ainu were even forbidden from traveling from one zone to another. Instead, they became colonial subjects and an ethnic minority in their own homeland. Indeed, the Ainu had been completely frozen out of the negotiations between the colonial powers. They were not even called on to translate, despite the presence of multilingual Ainu, including Aleksei, who had been brought along for that very reason.¹³

As for Japan, imperial competition with Russia not only hardened its external borders, but stimulated the growth of Japanese national identity, which would quicken as the feudal, decentralized Tokugawa regime crumbled in the 1850s. When American and Russian envoys arrived in steam-driven gunboats in 1852–1853, demanding the establishment of official trade and diplomacy with Japan, they would get their way. They would also provoke a concerted response from a country already used to dealing with Europeans as imperial rivals, a response that would culminate in the Pacific War of 1941–1945. ♦

NOTES

1. Conrad Totman, "Japan and the World, 1450–1770: Was Japan a 'Closed Country'?" *Education about Asia* 12, no. 1 (2007): 36–39; Ronald Toby, *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan: Asia in the Development of the Tokugawa Bakufu* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 4–11.
2. "Ezo" clearly carries derogatory overtones, and for this reason, I will refer to the people as "Ainu" and only use the term "Ezo" when referring to the area of the Ainu homeland under Japanese control. When talking about the entire homeland, I will use "Ainu Moshir."
3. Brett Walker, *The Conquest of Ainu Lands: Ecology and Culture in Japanese Expansion 1590–1800* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) 1–15, 73–127.
4. David Howell, *Capitalism from Within: Economy, Society and the State in a Japanese Fishery* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 24–49.
5. Tessa Morriz–Suzuki, "Lines in the Snow, Imagining the Russo–Japanese Frontier," *Pacific Affairs* 72 no. 1 (1999): 65–66; George Lensen, *The Russian Push towards Japan: Russo–Japanese Relations, 1697–1875* (Octagon Books: New York, 1971), 14–83.
6. Ibid., 87–95; Susanne Koller, "Anei nenkan no Ezochi ni okeru Nichi–Ro kōshō to Chishima Ainu," (Russo–Japanese negotiations in Ezo in 1778–1779 and the role of the Kurile Ainu) *Hokudaishigaku* 42 (2002): 61–72.
7. Walker, *Conquest of Ainu Lands*, 163–176.
8. Mark Ravina, "Tokugawa, Romanov, and Khmer: The Politics of Trade and Diplomacy in Eighteenth–Century East Asia," *Journal of World History*, 26, no. 2 (2015): 282–292.
9. Walker, *Conquest of Ainu Lands*, 227–232.
10. Ravina, "Tokugawa, Romanov, and Khmer," 293–294.
11. Viktor Shmagin, "Diplomacy and Force, Borders and Borderlands: Japan–Russia Relations in the Transformation of Japanese Political Culture in the Edo and Early Meiji Periods" (PhD diss., University of California Santa Barbara, 2016), 90–134.
12. Viktor Shmagin, "The Imperial Peace of 1813: The Golovnin Incident and Tokugawa Authority in Ezo," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 48, no. 1 (2022): 75–91.
13. Ibid., 79–91.

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