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Summary

Regional Dimensions of Postwar Soviet-Japanese Trade: Sakhalin from 1947 to the early 1950s

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This study reexamines Soviet–Japanese trade in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. It does so through a regional lens centered on Sakhalin, and including Karafuto (South Sakhalin) – the former Japanese territory incorporated into the Soviet Union after the war. Although the aggregate volume of postwar Soviet–Japanese trade was small and often treated as negligible in national-level narratives, Russian central and regional archival materials reveal a striking concentration of bilateral exchanges in Sakhalin. Consequently, this article analyzes the place of the region within bilateral trade, clarifying how the incorporation of Karafuto reshaped local economic development and illuminating the regional operation of Soviet foreign trade.

The analysis proceeds in several steps. First, it outlines Soviet and Japanese postwar trade practices. On the Soviet side, the nonconvertibility of the ruble, reliance on bilateral settlements and barter, and the generally low quality of export goods under the state monopoly of foreign trade complicated participation in international markets. On the Japanese side, GHQ oversight and subsequent alignments with U.S. export controls – through the 1949 Foreign Exchange and Foreign Trade Control Law and participation in COCOM after 1952 – sharply constrained Japan's trade with the socialist bloc. However, while these institutional hurdles, along with fragile diplomatic relations, hindered the development of bilateral trade, they did not eliminate opportunities for narrowly targeted exchanges based on proximate demand and regional endowments.

Second, the study shows that Sakhalin's sectoral composition — much of it established in the Karafuto era (1905–1945) — shaped the commodity structure of postwar Soviet–Japanese trade. Paper, pulp, and semi-coke were exported initially, as their industrial bases predated 1945. However, efforts by the central authorities to uphold export quality repeatedly failed in practice. Chemical, coal and power shortages, transport bottlenecks at ports, warehousing constraints, the withdrawal of skilled Japanese labor, and weak managerial incentives under the foreign trade monopoly combined to reduce output capacity and degrade product quality. By the early 1950s, Japanese buyers had shifted away from Sakhalin pulp and paper, while local semi-coke production was halted.

By contrast, coal exports proved relatively successful. Pull factors in Japan —especially the search for coking and semi-coking coal for steel and gas-coke production — aligned with supply-side advantages in Sakhalin's northern and southern coalfields. Coal logistics were simpler than those for processed manufactures: no packaging, tolerance for basic storage, and bulk shipment. When deliveries failed to meet contractual specifications, local organizations on the Soviet side responded comparatively quickly, sustaining buyer confidence despite broader geopolitical tensions. Although the Korean War briefly interrupted shipments, coal emerged as the most reliable Soviet export to Japan from Sakhalin during the first postwar decade.

The study also examines Sakhalin's role as a focal point for Soviet purchases from Japan, particularly in shipping and railway equipment. The narrow-gauge legacy (1,067 mm) of the Karafuto railway — incompatible with the Soviet standard (1,524 mm) — created immediate maintenance and parts shortages that could not be met domestically. The Council of Ministers therefore authorized equipment purchases from Japan, with the first deliveries arriving in early 1949.

Overall, this study finds that the Soviet–Japanese trade in Sakhalin was concentrated, path-dependent, and shaped by sector-specific frictions and capacities. A border-region perspective clarifies the causal links between territorial incorporation, inherited industrial structures, and the practical operation of socialist foreign-trade institutions. Rather than attributing limited trade solely to geopolitics or ideology, the analysis shows that institutional incentive failures and logistical constraints systematically favored bulk commodities (coal) over quality-sensitive manufactures (paper, pulp, and semi-coke). Combined with the region's partial dependence on Japanese imports — rooted in the technological and material legacies of the Karafuto era — these factors played a crucial role in shaping the composition of exchanges with Japan.