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From imperial revenants to Cold War victims: ‘red repatriates’ from the Soviet Union and the making of the new Japan, 1949–1952

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ABSTRACT

When over half a million former Imperial Japanese Army soldiers returned home from long captivity in Soviet labour camps in the late 1940s, they brought back more than their memories of hardship and humiliation. In post-war society, the Siberian returnees were the uncomfortable remnants of the failed Japanese Empire; yet it was their brush with the communist enemy that caused suspicion and dragged them into the domestic political struggles. In this article, I use the experiences of Siberian internees as a lens to reconsider Japan's formative post-war decade, when the onset of the Cold War eclipsed the inconvenient legacies of empire.

KEYWORDS

Empire; Cold War – Origins; Soviet Union; Japan; forced labour camps

An unexpected scene unfolded when *Shinyō Maru*, a Japanese Navy merchantman sailing from the Soviet harbour of Nakhodka, reached Maizuru Port on the Sea of Japan coast on 25 July 1949.¹ On board were 2,000 returnees from a long captivity in the USSR's forced labour camps – some of the 600,000 former Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) servicemen taken away by the victorious USSR following the brief Soviet-Japanese War of August 1945. However, to the dismay of family members and repatriation officials waiting at the pier, when the gangway was lowered the *Shinyō Maru* passengers refused to disembark.² They sat defiantly on the deck, the more pugnacious among them chanting songs and dancing up and down the ship floor, displaying a militancy rather unbecoming for survivors of what one memoirist likened to the Babylonian Captivity in the frigid Siberian camps.³

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¹Different from the ‘hellship’ *Shinyō Maru*, sunk by the US Navy in September 1944 carrying over 700 Allied prisoners-of-war, only eighty-two of whom survived. Thomas Saylor, *Long Hard Road: American POWs during World War II* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2007), p. 187.

²Kyō kettei: kiso, fukiso / Shinyōmaru jiken / Shiberia hikiage, *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 2 August 1949, Morning edition, p. 2; Onda Shigetaka, *Shiberia yokuryū* (Kōdansha, 1986), p. 277. Unless noted otherwise, all Japanese titles are published in Tokyo. Japanese names are in the traditional order, with the surname preceding the given name.

³Takasugi Ichirō, *Kyōkō no kageni: shiberia furyōki* (Iwanami Shoten, 2011), p. 359.

Such recalcitrant behaviour of the returning ‘Siberian internees’ – what the United States Occupation officials called ‘nerve tactics’ – continued through the summer of 1949.⁴ Of the 44 ships that arrived from Nakhodka in June–December 1949, repatriates on 33 – or 75% – displayed ‘rebellious behaviour’.⁵ Even those who did not stage sit-ins on board ships often maintained a ‘surlly and uncooperative attitude toward repatriation officials’ and rejected ‘the sympathetic welcome of the throng which gathered’ at Maizuru.⁶ Some marched off the ships and past their anxious families, shouting provocatively: ‘We are landing on enemy territory, the emperor’s islands!’⁷ Many performed communist songs, like the returnees on the *Takasago Maru*, who ‘in drilled harmony sang the Internationale and the International Youth Song, the hymn to Communist youth of the world’.⁸ These acts of defiance often sparked off clashes that reached as far as Tokyo’s Ueno Station and beyond, and on 11 August 1949, Emperor Hirohito signed the ‘Cabinet Order No. 300 for the Maintenance of Order with the Repatriates,’ calling for ‘the speedy and orderly return home of ex-army and ex-navy personnel’.⁹ Reporting on the chaotic homecoming of the nation’s long-lost sons – for they were nearly all men – the Japanese media portrayed it almost as an invasion of the homeland by a Soviet-trained army eager to subvert the brittle post-war peace.¹⁰ Some newspapers described the repatriates’ conduct ‘as a “slap in the face” to the Japanese people,’ especially as ‘hundreds of thousands of Japanese had for months been clamoring for [their] repatriation’.¹¹

The ‘red repatriates’ may have made headlines in Japanese national newspapers in 1949, but they would soon be largely consigned to obscurity. Their riotous arrival held the public’s attention for months, but for decades thereafter they struggled to reintegrate into the changed community of post-war Japan, fighting an uphill battle for recognition and compensations against successive governments. This marginality was mirrored in scholarship, too, conditioned in part by the Cold War, during which Soviet archives were closely guarded and little evidence-based research could be conducted. In Japan, the internment had to be written based solely on survivor memoirs, over 2,000 of which were published.¹² Yet even after the opening of the Soviet archives in the early 1990s, while works on the topic mushroomed in Japanese and Russian, the ‘Siberian Internment’ (*Shiberia yokuryū*, 1945–1956) has received scarce attention in English-language scholarship.¹³ The internment has been analysed in

⁴General Headquarters (GHQ) of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, Far Eastern Command (FEC), Military Intelligence Section, Special Report ‘Japanese Prisoners of War: Life and Death in Soviet P.W. Camps’, 1949, Modern Japanese Political History Materials Room, National Diet Library of Japan, Microfiche resource, Box 2153, File 6, Section 7, p. 2.

⁵Kurihara Toshio, *Shiberia yokuryū: mikan no higeki* (Iwanami Shoten, 2009), p. 112.

⁶GHQ FEC, ‘Japanese Prisoners of War’, Section 7, p. 1.

⁷Kurihara, *Shiberia yokuryū*, p. 111.

⁸GHQ FEC, ‘Japanese Prisoners of War’, Section 6, p. 1.

⁹Ueno eki wa kōshiki kangeisha dake / Hikiage demukae gochūi / Soren hikiage’, *Asahi Shimbun*, 1 July 1949, Morning edition, p. 2; ‘Dantai ōhaba ni seigen / Hikiagesha demukae’, *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 13 August 1949, Morning edition, p. 2; ‘Cabinet Orders’, *Official Gazette* (English Edition), Extra No. 103, 11 August 1949, online at http://jalii.law.nagoya-u.ac.jp/official_gazette/nag_pdf/19490811e_eb.00103.010.000_0010.0010.0_a.190100.02114900.pdf, accessed 5 June 2016.

¹⁰Tomita Takeshi, ‘Shimbun hōdō ni miru shiberia yokuryū– beiso kyōchō kara reisen e, 1945–1950 nen’, *Yūrashia*, May 2013, pp. 7–13; Sherzod Muminov, ‘The ‘Siberian Internment’ and the Transnational History of the Early Cold War Japan, 1945–56’, in *Transnational Japan as History: Empire, Migration, and Social Movements*, ed. Pedro Iacobelli et al. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 71–95.

¹¹GHQ FEC, ‘Japanese Prisoners of War’, Section 7, p. 1.

¹²Takahashi Daizō, ‘Kaisetsu’: hangun/minshuka undō no keika’, in *Horyo taikenki*, Vol.8: Minshu undō hen, ed. Takahashi Daizō (Soren ni okeru nihonjin horyo no seikatsu taiken o kirokusuru kai, 1992), p. 3.

¹³Sherzod Muminov, ‘Eleven Winters of Discontent: The Siberian Internment and the Making of the New Japan, 1945–1956’, PhD Dissertation, University of Cambridge, September 2015.

the wider context of post-war repatriations of the Japanese from imperial frontiers¹⁴; the more recent works that view it as a discrete subject, while novel in several respects, view the issue largely from the vantage point of Japan.¹⁵ In short, a comprehensive examination of the Siberian Internment as a Cold War encounter, based on multilingual evidence, has been missing from Anglophone scholarship.

In this article, I view the internment as a transnational moment that demonstrates the impracticality of studying complex events – such as the collapse and dismantling of Japan's empire and the dawn of the Cold War in East Asia – exclusively through national frameworks and narratives. The cross-border experiences of the 600,000 Japanese caught in transit between eras – their peregrinations from imperial Japan to the puppet-state of Manchukuo, from there to the Soviet camp system and finally to a much transformed, 'new' Japan – illuminate most vividly the post-war metamorphoses in politics and society. I recount these experiences drawing on hitherto little used multilingual sources: Soviet, Japanese, and Occupation-era United States archival documents, internee memoirs, press reports, and records of Diet sessions.

While an important topic in its own right, the Siberian Internment is helpful in reconsidering the turbulent window of 1949–1952 in Japan, when the Japanese Empire was slowly expunged from collective memory, overshadowed by the impending Cold War. Studying the period through internee experiences in 'Siberia' and upon repatriation provides three insights into Japan's transition from wartime empire to Cold War nation-state, which I detail in the three sections of this article. First, the Siberian returnees' past roles as imperial soldiers reappearing in post-imperial Japan bring into spotlight the omission of Japan's empire from the post-war public space. Addressing this exclusion, in section "Siberian returnees as embodiments of Empire", I present the Siberian Internment as a direct imperial legacy, and the internees themselves as the empire's reincarnation in post-war Japan.

Second, returning home amidst the growing Cold War competition over Japan, the repatriates from Communist Russia witnessed a revealing transformation in domestic attitudes towards them: while previously seen as 'Japanese brethren' trapped in the brutal Soviet camps, they now caused alarm as a potential communist fifth column. Accordingly, the second section focuses on the internees' association with the Soviet Union, the propaganda education to which they were subjected there, and the coincidence of their return with the so-called 'Red Purge', in which thousands of Japan Communist Party (JCP) members and other leftists were banished from the public sphere. I analyse this entanglement through the fate of Kan Sueharu, a former internee embroiled in an anti-JCP campaign in 1950.

Finally, the returnees' post-war experiences bring into relief Japan's remodelling as a Cold War United States ally, and an anti-communist, democratic nation. The Siberian repatriates injected into the public sphere the freshest knowledge about the USSR, which was used selectively by the media and propaganda in casting the Soviet Union as the ideological arch-enemy. The returnees' struggles to recover their agency as Japanese subjects illuminate the shifting boundaries of what constituted a good citizen in the 'new' Japan. In the last section

¹⁴Lori Watt, *When Empire Comes Home: Repatriation and Reintegration in Postwar Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Centre, 2009); Yoshikuni Igarashi, *Homecomings: The Belated Return of Japan's Lost Soldiers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

¹⁵Andrew E. Barshay, *The Gods Left First: The Captivity and Repatriation of Japanese POWs in Northeast Asia, 1945–1956* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013).

of the article, I demonstrate how for a brief moment in the 1940s–1950s, the returnees from the USSR contributed to re-creating, on one hand, the image of the USSR as Japan's (and America's) existential enemy and, on the other, of Japan as the America's ally and bastion of anti-communism in East Asia. By contributing to the demonisation of the USSR, they attempted to re-create themselves as loyal Japanese subjects.

In short, by bringing back the empire into our understanding of post-imperial Japan and the discourses of Soviet cruelty into the increasingly anti-communist society that was forming, the returnees bridged Japan's pre-war with its post-war. In the figure of the former internee trying to reclaim his place in the new Japan, the fallen empire met the looming Cold War.

Siberian returnees as embodiments of Empire

The anxiety about the return of 'red repatriates' to Occupied Japan reflected profound weariness – and wariness – of the war in a society yearning to leave the past behind.¹⁶ This reaction, obvious though it may seem, was more complex than a momentary anxiety about the subversive behaviour of the Siberian returnees.¹⁷ The public's attitude towards the recalcitrant repatriates reflected not only fear for the future, but also uneasiness about the past. It laid bare the contradictions in Japan's post-war transition from empire to nation-state, the disjunctions born of the hasty recalibration of the imperial realm spanning over 7,000,000 square kilometres on land and sea to the very limited space of four Japanese home islands. Perhaps more challenging was the task of reducing the imperial mindset that had sought 'to unite the eight corners of the world under one roof' to a narrowly national discourse of post-war Japan. This task dictated jettisoning, along with the colonies won and lost in a mere five decades, of the responsibility for the excesses of imperial expansion. It required consigning to oblivion the imperial legacies, including an army of over 600,000 men driven away by the Soviets at empire's fall, only to be returned to their homeland on the cusp of the Cold War.¹⁸ The irony in the slogan about 'landing on the emperor's islands' was that a few years ago these very soldiers had been fighting – and dying – in the name of the emperor. Coming home in the middle of what Sebastian Conrad called 'a clinical separation of Japan from its empire', the Siberian returnees revived the uncomfortable memories of the imperial past.¹⁹

Throughout the post-war decades in Japan, the Siberian Internment has been cast, understandably, as a story of great injustice, a tragedy of historic proportions that shattered the existences of millions – the *yokuryūsha*, as the internees are known in Japanese, and their families.²⁰ Yet despite its enduring presence in the collective memory, few voices in

¹⁶Igarashi, *Homecomings*.

¹⁷According to Tony Judt, Europeans similarly 'turned their heads resolutely away' from the war after its end. Judt, 'The 'Problem of Evil' in Postwar Europe', *The New York Review of Books*, 14 February 2008, online at: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2008/02/14/the-problem-of-evil-in-postwar-europe/>, last accessed 20 June 2016.

¹⁸Sherzod Muminov, 'Prejudice, Punishment and Propaganda: Post-Imperial Japan and the Soviet Versions of History and Justice in East Asia, 1945–1956', in *The Dismantling of Japan's Empire in East Asia: Deimperialization, Postwar Legitimation and Imperial Afterlife*, ed. Barak Kushner and Sherzod Muminov (Abingdon: Routledge 2017), pp. 146–164.

¹⁹Sebastian Conrad, 'The Dialectics of Remembrance: Memories of Empire in Cold War Japan', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 2014, 56 (1), pp. 4–33, this quote p. 22.

²⁰I use the terms '*yokuryūsha*' and 'internee' interchangeably to refer to Japanese captives in Soviet camps. The term 'returnee' refers to the internees after repatriation.

Japan have viewed the internment as a legacy of empire. This is in agreement with the 'imperial erasure' in post-war Japan, the empire's seeming – and sudden – disappearance from collective memory.²¹ In this section, I demonstrate that this erasure was exaggerated, and that the imperial past repeatedly resurfaced in the Japan of the immediate post-war. The domestic Japanese reaction towards the Siberian returnees was illustrative in this regard.

Until the Soviet archives opened in the 1990s following decades of secrecy, survivor memoirs of Siberia served as the primary source of knowledge about the internment. These were tales of youth and health squandered in the frigid plains of an alien land, of an enemy that drove away the able-bodied Japanese against their will, turning them overnight from proud soldiers of a vaunted army into powerless victims of an exploitative labour-camp system.²² Few memoirists of the internment, however, connected their captivity in the USSR with their roles as imperial agents in northeast China. Even fewer of them asked uncomfortable questions such as the one asked by Hiraide Setsuo, an army doctor who spent four years in Siberia: 'Why was the Kwantung Army stationed [in Manchuria] in the first place?'²³ Without the imperial expansion there would be no Siberian Internment, but making the connection with the empire would result in drawing attention to Japan's aggressive penetration into China and other Asian countries.

Nowhere is this lacuna more apparent than in the opening of many an internment memoir.²⁴ Ignoring their prehistory as imperial soldiers protecting the community of Japanese colonisers, many writers start their accounts by remembering how in the small hours of 9 August 1945, Red Army troops crossed the Soviet-Manchukuo border. War-hardened in battles against Nazi Germany, the Soviet divisions swept through the puppet domain at an astonishing speed. The once vaunted Kwantung Army, stationed in northeast China to protect the empire's frontiers and subjects, had been seriously weakened in the previous years as its elite divisions were transferred to the Pacific Theatre of the war, one after another. It was therefore hardly surprising that the Japanese military leadership was astonished by 'the overpowering superiority' of the Soviet Army, and quickly retracted south, leaving tens of thousands of agricultural settlers defenceless before the attackers.²⁵ For many Japanese in Manchukuo, the humiliation of defeat was mixed with the anger at being abandoned to the enemy that killed, raped and looted its way through the Manchurian colony once hailed as the 'new heaven on earth'.²⁶

Japanese humiliation at the hands of the Soviets did not end with the brutal sacking of Manchukuo by the Red Army. On 23 August 1945, three days after the vanquished Kwantung Army agreed its surrender with the victorious Soviets, Joseph Stalin, in his capacity as the Chairman of the USSR's State Defence Committee, signed a top-secret decree 'On Receiving

²¹Conrad, 'Dialectics of Remembrance'; Ian Nish, 'Regaining Confidence: Japan after the Loss of Empire', *Journal of Contemporary History* 15 (1980): pp. 181–195.

²²Muminov, 'The 'Siberian Internment'', p. 74.

²³Hiraide Setsuo, *Shiberia ni uzumeta karute* (Bungeisha, 2000), p. 5, added emphasis.

²⁴For a poignant analysis of Japanese experiences on the Chinese mainland, see, for example, Yoshimi Yoshiaki, *Grassroots Fascism: The War Experience of the Japanese People*, trans. Ethan Mark (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

²⁵Sejima Ryūzō, *Sejima Ryūzō kaisōroku: Ikusanga* (Sankei Shimbun Shuppan, 1996), pp. 277–281.

²⁶As quoted in Louise Young, *Japan's Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), p. 5.

and Accommodating the Japanese Army Prisoners-of-War and Utilising Them for Labour.’²⁷ The decree ordered the People’s Commissariat (later Ministry) of Internal Affairs (NKVD/MVD) to ‘select up to 500,000 Japanese ... physically fit to work in the conditions of the Far East and Siberia,’ and to send them to the Soviet Union. The document spelled out the regions and projects to which this new workforce would be allocated: 150,000 Japanese were assigned to the construction of the Baikal-Amur Railway Mainline, while another 280,000 were dispatched to the vast expanses of Siberia and Far East. Thus, except the 70,000 sent to Soviet Central Asia and a few thousand more to the European regions, the majority were destined for the expansive wilds of the Soviet East. This vast, resource-rich and underpopulated region, denoted by a catch-all term ‘Siberia,’ was to give the captivity of the Japanese its name.²⁸

Following Stalin’s order, the Red Army put the able-bodied Japanese in freight trains – having first reassured them they were being sent home – and transported them north across the Soviet-Manchukuo border along with the inanimate war booty – industrial equipment dismantled from formerly Japanese-owned factories, food and clothing.²⁹ For several years, the Japanese worked alongside other foreign prisoners of war (POWs) and millions of Soviet inmates in the camps attached to various industries of the vast forced-labour economy. In the war-ravaged Soviet Union, badly in need of spare hands to rebuild the economy, the internees’ role was first of all as workforce. They were employed in coal-mining, lumbering, urban and railway construction, agriculture, fisheries, and other industries. They often found themselves in climes too frigid even for those familiar with the harsh Manchurian winters; at least in the first two years, they were constantly underfed, and had to perform physically demanding labour. In their memoirs, internees canonised these experiences as the ‘Siberian trinity of suffering’ – extreme cold, constant hunger, and backbreaking work. Of over 600,000 Japanese POWs and civilians who passed through Soviet camps, about 10% found eternal rest in Siberia. The majority of Japanese captives were allowed to return home by the end of the 1940s, barring a few thousand ‘war criminals’ convicted by Soviet tribunals; the last group arrived at Maizuru on 26 December 1956.

In the camps, the Soviet captors put to use not only the bodies, but also the minds of the Japanese captives. In total isolation from the outside world for several years, the internees were subjected to a comprehensive re-education (for United States Occupation officials – ‘communist indoctrination’) programme known as the ‘Democratic Movement’ (*demokraticheskoe dvizhenie* in Russian, *minshu undō* in Japanese). This was a skilfully organised and implemented set of policies and methods that achieved impressive results, as acknowledged even by the United States Occupation in a 1949 Special Report.³⁰ The soldiers who refused

²⁷Postanovlenie GKO SSSR o priiome, razmeshchenii i trudovom ispol’zovanii voennoplennyykh laponskoi armii, 23 August 1945, Central Archive of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation (TsAMO RF), fond (f.) 66, opis’ (op.) 178499, delo (d.) 1, listy (l.) 593–598.

²⁸While I use the phrase ‘Siberian Internment’ in this paper for reasons of convenience, it is not entirely accurate. The captivity was not confined to the geographical region of Siberia, and the camps with Japanese captives were scattered across the USSR. The word ‘internment’ in Russian (*internirovaniie*) has a narrower meaning than in English: it only denotes the captivity of civilians as opposed to that of the ‘prisoners-of-war’ (*voennoplennyye*).

²⁹O sozdanii komissii po vyvozu trofeinogo oborudovaniia iz Man’chzhurii, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), f. 644, op. 1, edinitsa khraneniia (ed. khr.) 459.

³⁰GHQ Civil Intelligence Section (CIS), Special Report ‘Japanese Repatriates from Soviet Territory: Communist Indoctrination’, 8 March 1949, MacArthur Memorial Archives, MMA-18, Reel No. 13, Modern Japanese Political History Materials Room, National Diet Library, Tokyo.

to disembark on the ‘emperor’s islands,’ or those who upon repatriation joined the JCP’s struggle against American imperialism, became critical of Japan’s imperialist past thanks primarily to their participation in the Democratic Movement. Their instructors supplied them with ideas and vocabulary that made the internees conscious of their own role as past agents of empire. Using the methods of carrot-and-stick and ingeniously exploiting the grievances inherent within the military hierarchies of the former IJA, the Soviet political officers inculcated in their Japanese charges a critical awareness of the transgressions of their army and leaders. At the heart of the Democratic Movement was *Nihon Shimbun* (Japan Newspaper), edited and published in Japanese from the early days of the internment by the political department of the NKVD Chief Directorate for POWs and Internees (GUPVI) using the editorial skills of Japanese captives specially selected for the purpose.³¹ Along with the main tenets of Soviet propaganda: the cult of Stalin or the USSR’s sacrifices in freeing the world of Nazism and Japanese militarism, the newspaper carried critical articles on Japan’s past – the atrocities committed by the IJA against the Asian peoples – as well as its present – the ‘imperialist’ United States Occupation. Besides the newspaper, which many internees claimed to have used mainly for rolling cigarettes but which remained the only source of information in the camps, the propaganda chiefs organised rallies, reading and debate clubs, concerts and theatrical performances where ‘antifascist activists’ delivered speeches on the need to overturn the emperor system in Japan and to turn it into a ‘workers’ country’.

As early as May 1946 – only a few months into the internment – the Soviet minister of internal affairs Sergei Kruglov addressed a secret report to the supreme leaders of the state – Stalin, Molotov, Beria and Zhdanov – titled ‘On the Mood among the Japanese POWs Kept in the MVD Camps,’ where he presented pro-Soviet statements from Japanese officers and ordinary soldiers. The report quoted a rally speech by one sergeant Nishimado [*sic*], who urged his fellow internees ‘To demand our freedom and achieve it now!’³² Nishimado had in mind the freedom from the tyranny of the officer class in the IJA. The Soviet camp chiefs had initially preserved this despotic army hierarchy for their own interest: it facilitated the task of managing over half a million Japanese captives by delegating control to the officers among them. Yet the Soviet leaders soon realised the benefits of exploiting the divide between the officer class and the rank-and-file. Pitching these two groups against each other and using various incentives, most effectively the promise of early repatriation, the captors succeeded in inducing many non-commissioned officers and ordinary soldiers to join the Democratic Movement. According to the Russian archives, over 21,000 Japanese internees – roughly one in 30 of the total – had participated in propaganda activities.³³ In classes, discussions and rallies, the activists came to view their military and political leaders as imperialist stooges, and themselves as ‘human bullets’ of the war fought in the emperor’s name. Mainly as a result of these propaganda sessions, it was not so unusual for some of the receptive internees to interpret Japan’s empire and war in purely Leninist terms in their memoirs.³⁴ Although they had been soldiers of an ‘imperial’ army, many of the Japanese

³¹RGASPI, f. 17, op. 3, d. 1053, punkt (p.) 231.

³²‘Doklad ministra vnutrennikh del SSSR rukovodstvu strany o nastroeniakh sredi iaponskikh voennoplennykh...’ 17 May 1946, GARF, f. 9401, op. 2, d. 136, l. 188–191, reprinted in V.A. Gavrilov, E.L. Katasonova, *Iaponskie voennoplennyye v SSSR, 1945–1956: Dokumenty* (Moscow: Demokratiia, 2013), hereafter *Iaponskie voennoplennyye*, pp. 276–278.

³³*Iaponskie voennoplennyye*, p. 274.

³⁴Itô Masao, *Mahoruka: shiberia yokuryûki* (Bungeisha, 2002), p. 89.

servicemen truly grasped the meaning of empire and their own place as imperial subjects only through Soviet propaganda education.

In hindsight, however, the Siberian internees' dedication to the communist cause would prove largely short-lived; faced with the post-war Japanese realities, many ardent converts soon lost their enchantment with communism. Nevertheless, during camp years and on those turbulent days of landing at Maizuru, thousands still held fast to their newfound beliefs that had blossomed in the unlikely circumstances of forced detainment. The Soviets could have achieved this only through awakening a class consciousness in the soldiers who had for years lived under officer tyranny, and by stressing the much greater injustices committed in emperor's name – often by these soldiers themselves. Below, I demonstrate the persuasive power of Soviet re-education through the example of Itagaki Tadashi, perhaps the unlikeliest of communist converts.

Itagaki Tadashi was the son of General Itagaki Seishirō, one of the architects of Manchukuo and a prominent Japanese military leader executed as Class A war criminal by the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (IMTFE, or Tokyo Trial) in 1948. As a young officer, Itagaki Tadashi had been a staunch nationalist ready to sacrifice himself for the emperor – the Soviets captured him in northern Korea where he was being trained in a kamikaze unit. Initially, in the relatively comfortable conditions of an officers' camp in Elabuga west of the Ural Mountains, Itagaki continued to harbour ultra-nationalist views, bullying Democratic Movement members and tearing off camp wall-newspapers put up by the activists. Following his transfer to a mixed (containing both officers and soldiers) camp in Khabarovsk, however, Itagaki underwent a 'rebirth', as the title of his memoir-article suggests.³⁵ Interestingly, the seeds of his reawakening were sown not by the Soviet political officers but by his Japanese companions; Itagaki first became disillusioned with the decadence of his fellow officers, and then was touched by the humanity of the ordinary soldiers. In the Khabarovsk camp, Itagaki was awakened to the injustices inherent in the officer-soldier relationship and, embarrassed by this discovery, started to work alongside soldiers. At worksites, he also came into contact – for the first time – with ordinary Soviet citizens, who surprised him as warm-hearted, friendly people.

Through this quotidian experience of socialism, Itagaki's old world view slowly crumbled away, giving way to a new consciousness. In early 1949, when a Soviet officer informed him of his father's execution by the Tokyo Trial, Itagaki had a nervous breakdown and was hospitalised. It was in the camp infirmary that he got to grips with his imperial guilt; after days of reading and thinking, Itagaki mustered enough courage to reconsider his own war responsibility and to denounce his father's role in leading Japan down the road of imperialism and destruction. In April 1950, giving a testimony before the Diet Lower House soon after repatriation, Itagaki boldly reiterated, to the astonishment of the deputies present, his belief that his father had played 'a huge role in Japan's war of aggression'.³⁶ Yet, despite his initially steadfast loyalty to the communist struggle, Itagaki's enchantment with leftism proved transitory. Having joined the JCP in 1950, Itagaki left the party in 1954 and soon swung back to the right of the political spectrum. His oscillations came full circle in 1980, when he was elected to the Diet from the conservative Liberal Democratic Party, which ruled Japan uninterruptedly between 1955 and 1993.

³⁵Itagaki Tadashi, 'Watashi wa shiberia ni umarekawatta', *Shinsō shōsetsu*, No. 18 (April 1950), pp. 22–35.

³⁶National Diet, House of Representatives, 7th Congress, Special Investigative Committee Session 24, 12 April 1950.

It is true that not every internee bought into Soviet propaganda so readily; many played along in order to earn larger rations, easier work assignments and early repatriation. It was perhaps true that, as in an apt metaphor by the writer Sawachi Hisae, the Siberian internees had become like the Japanese red-crowned cranes: only the top of their heads had actually turned red.³⁷ Despite the arrogance with which the ‘red repatriates’ nailed their colours to the mast at Maizuru, many of those who had shown enough enthusiasm towards the Democratic Movement to be selected for further education in regional political schools – a comfortable life compared to the daily toil of their fellow internees in the camps – hardly ever discussed this experience after returning to Japan.

The fact that many internees were not conscious of their role as imperial agents did not diminish their association with Japanese Empire in the eyes of both the Soviet camp wardens, and more importantly the Japanese public at home. Itagaki wrote in his memoir that he and his fellow officers were wearing their IJA uniforms and insignia well into the third year of the internment, yet even without those marks of distinction they clearly were the embodiments of imperialism in their captors’ eyes. While spatially confined within Soviet borders, chronologically they were still rooted in the imperial era, unaware of the latest transformations in the Occupied Japan. Hence, when they returned to the Japan of the late 1940s, the Siberian repatriates traversed not only the national and geographical boundaries, but also the border between two epochs in Japanese history. They re-entered the new Japan as remnants of the old era, of the war that had brought misery to millions, and of the army that had failed in its duty to protect. Moreover, on top of the disgrace of being a POW – the 1941 Japanese Field Army Service Code dictated: ‘You shall not undergo the shame of being taken alive’³⁸ – these revenants faced the accusation of being Soviet stooges, and were pushed towards the society’s fringes for the best part of the post-war period. Returning to the Japan of the Red Purge, as I now demonstrate, the ‘red repatriates’ found themselves in the eye of the ideological storm.

When Empire met the Cold War

The year when the ‘red repatriates’ swept the Japanese shore, 1949, was arguably also the year in which the Cold War started in earnest in East Asia. The paper masks of Allied charity between the United States and the Soviet Union were finally thrown off, and the confrontation between two ideologies became prominent in people’s minds. To provide some context, it is worth remembering that in this watershed year a triple blow was dealt to United States influence in East Asia: in January, the JCP achieved its highest ever result in the Diet elections, winning 35 seats and almost 3,000,000 votes, in August the Soviet Union successfully tested its first atomic bomb, and in October the triumphant Mao Zedong proclaimed the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. Re-entering Japan in this stormy period, the Siberian returnees were sucked into the vortex of domestic confrontation on the Soviet influence in Japan. They occupied a central place in the debates about Japan’s uncomfortable past and uncertain future. In the process, the repatriates from Siberia

³⁷Sawachi Hisae and Sataka Makoto, ‘Sedai o koete kataritsugitai sensō bungaku’, *Sekai*, No 6, 2007, pp. 206–214, this quote p. 207.

³⁸Clifford Kinvig, ‘Allied POWs and the Burma-Thailand Railway’, in *Japanese Prisoners of War*, ed. Philip Towle, Margaret Kosuge and Yoichi Kibata (London: Hambledon and London, 2000), pp. 37–57, this quote p. 48.

became the Cold War's first victims in Japan, as I show through the story of the death of Kan Sueharu, a former camp interpreter.

The initial signs of the coming ideological clashes were already evident in the Soviet camps, where the Japanese were divided according to not only class, but also ideology. On the opposite side of the spectrum from the 'red repatriates' were the Japanese captives who had managed to hold on to their nationalism and loyalty to the emperor even in the Soviet camps. These nationalist internees had been a nuisance for the Soviets, organising sabotage campaigns and refusing to work for their captors. They had also been patiently waiting for the day when the Democratic Movement activists would lose the protection of their Soviet masters; as soon as the repatriation ships departed Nakhodka, the 'red repatriates' were often violently beaten and even thrown overboard.³⁹

The confrontations were hardly limited to the sea passage; the most prominent nationalist group among repatriates, 'The Rising Sun Brigade' (*Hinomaru Teidan*), instigated one of the early ideological entanglements in post-war Japan. The affair originated from an accusation that Tokuda Kyūchi, the JCP secretary-general, had 'demanded' in a letter to his Soviet partners that they repatriate from Siberia only the 'true democrats', and to postpone the return of the 'reactionaries'.⁴⁰ In a call reported by the *Asahi*, Kubota Zenzō, the leader of the Rising Sun Brigade (*Hinomaru Teidan*), urged the authorities to investigate Tokuda.⁴¹ Ten days later, Kubota testified in a Diet Upper House session, where he read out a petition signed by 373 fellow members of the Rising Sun Brigade accusing Tokuda of obstructing the repatriation of the fellow Japanese considered 'reactionaries' by the JCP.⁴² This was a grave accusation against the Japanese communists, as at the time the issue of repatriation was an explosive topic. 'Special Committees on Repatriation' were set up in both Diet houses, where extensive hearings were held in February–April 1950. With hindsight, it is possible to see that the issue became the culmination of the Red Purge of leftists and communists from the public sphere, and thus had significant implications for Japan's entanglement in the Cold War confrontation.

Besides Tokuda, who denied all allegations before the deputies in his trademark militant manner, I analyse the tragic personage of Kan Sueharu, who took his own life after his second Diet testimony. A philosopher and humanist who had learned Russian in the camps, Kan had translated to his fellow Japanese at Karaganda Camp the speech by the political officer Senior Captain Yermolaev, who had alluded to Tokuda's alleged 'demand' when answering the internees' question about repatriation. When witnesses mentioned his name during a Diet Upper House session in March 1950, Kan was in the audience; he stood up and identified himself. He was summoned as a witness two days later. This was the first of his two hearings; after his brief self-introduction, one committee member after another grilled him about that day in Karaganda Camp in September 1949. Answering questions, Kan recited from memory, in Russian, Yermolaev's original answer, and translated it for the benefit of the audience. The discussion then turned into a lesson in polemics about shades

³⁹Fujimori Takayuki, 'Aishū no tōdo', in *Heiwa no ishizue: shiberia kyōsei yokuryūsha ga kataritsugu rōku* (Heiwa kinen jig'yō tokubetsu kikin, 1991–2012), Vol. 9, pp. 190–204, this quote p. 202.

⁴⁰Tomita Takeshi, *Shiberia yokuryūshatachi no sengo: reisenka no yoron to undō, 1945–56 nen* (Jinbun shoin, 2013), pp. 101–112; Barshay, *The Gods Left First*, Chapter 3, 'Knowledge Painfully Acquired: Takasugi Ichirō and the 'Democratic Movement' in Siberia', pp. 81–120.

⁴¹'Tokuda shi o tsuikyū' – soren hikiage no Kubota shi kataru', *Asahi Shimbun*, 13 February 1950, p. 2.

⁴²National Diet House of Councillors, Special Committee on the Issue of Repatriation of Japanese Nationals Overseas, 7th congress, 13th session, 23 February 1950.

of meaning and nuances of interpretation. Yermolaev had used the word *nadeetsia* ('hopes') in reference to Tokuda's wish; Kan used the verb 'expects' (*kitai suru*) in his translation. The Russian word *nadeetsia* has shades of meaning, but it expresses more a passive hope than an active wish; translating it as 'demands' would be stretching the word's meaning. Still, the interrogators wanted to know whether Tokuda had really made this demand. Kan answered that he did not know: 'I was there and then only in the capacity of an interpreter,' he said. Committee members pressed Kan to express his 'impression' of whether Yermolaev had meant 'demands' or 'expects'; Kan held on to the word 'expects,' and remained confident in the accuracy of his memory, which was repeatedly called into question.⁴³

Kan's interrogators kept bringing up evidence that would, in their view, implicate him in being a communist and a JCP-sympathiser. Besides questioning the linguistic acrobatics of the Soviet camp officer's speech, they talked pointedly and repeatedly about Kan's role as a Democratic Movement activist, and his opposition to the emperor system in Japan.⁴⁴ Kan countered by saying that all translators and other administrative staff were automatically classified as 'activists,' for camp authorities had to meet minimum targets in activist numbers. Even when interrogators quoted other testimonies that went against Kan's, the witness was apparently confident of his innocence and in the belief that truth would prevail no matter what, and willingly cooperated with the deputies. Committee members did not fail to take advantage of this cooperation, probably seeing it as a sign of a guilty conscience. During his second testimony, this time in the Lower House, the grilling Kan had to endure turned into an attack from several fronts.⁴⁵ The day following the hearing, the 32-year old Kan left a note lamenting his 'weakness to take on the evil and falsehood' of the world and threw himself under a Chūō Line train near the western Tokyo suburb of Kichijōji.⁴⁶

Newspapers portrayed Kan's suicide as an outcome of depression and mental fatigue, and in the eyes of the newspaper-reading general public Kan acquired the aura of a strange, mentally unstable person.⁴⁷ In hindsight, it must have seemed plausible to newspaper readers that he had taken his own life in order to escape justice.⁴⁸ To the proponents of anti-communist crackdowns, Kan's death provided the missing link in the conspiracy theory connecting the Siberian internees with the JCP, as enemies within ready to destabilise the country on Soviet orders. Through the issue around Tokuda's 'demand,' the Siberian returnees became scapegoats used to whip up indignation towards the USSR and its Japanese 'stooges,' and to excise the objectionable groups from the body politic. In this sense, Kan's was the first of many 'sacrifices' that had to be made to restore the 'social fabric' of post-war Japan in opposition to the communist Soviet Union⁴⁹. This was evident in the attempts to label this

⁴³National Diet House of Councillors, Special Committee on the Issue of Repatriation of Japanese Nationals Overseas, 7th cong., 16th session, 18 March 1950.

⁴⁴On Kan's opposition to the emperor system, see Tada Shigeharu, *Uchinaru shiberia yokuryū taiken: Ishihara Yoshirō, Kano Buichi, Kan Sueharu no sengoshi* (Shakaishisōsha, 1994), pp. 26–27.

⁴⁵Ibid. See also Odagiri Tadashi, 'Kan Sueharu: 'Bungeiteki shinrigaku e no kokoromi' josetsu (sono 7)', *Hokkaido University of Education - Jōsho shōgai kyōiku kenkyū kiyō* 20 (2001).

⁴⁶Jibun no yowasa ni zetsubō shite shinu/isho rokutsū hakken / Tokuda yōsei shōnin jisatsu, *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 8 April 1950, Evening edition, p. 2; 'Kan shōnin naze jisatsu shita ka/Tokuda yōsei shōnin jisatsu', *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 8 April 1950, Morning edition, p. 3.

⁴⁷'Karō ga gen'in/Hōjin hikiage bōgai mondai/Tokuda yōsei shōnin jisatsu', *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 8 April 1950, Morning edition, p. 3.

⁴⁸Nakano Shigeharu was a rare exception; he was present at Kan's testimony and felt guilty he had not warned Kan of what awaited him at the hearing. Nakano, 'Kōsei no yūwaku', quoted in Tada, *Uchinaru shiberia*, p. 24.

⁴⁹Jenny Edkins' *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 99–110) provides an interesting analysis of political sacrifice.

sensitive man a 'red', despite the fact that Kan did not consider himself a communist, only someone who had tried to do a good job as an interpreter. These nuances would be lost in the frenzy of the Red Purge Japan, where even momentary association with communism could attract suspicion. This wariness was manifest in the fact that some members of the Diet special committee interpreted Kan's mental strain as arising not from his cornering in the Diet, but from the insecurity of a Soviet spy afraid of being found out. Four days after Kan's suicide, committee member Kimura Kōhei requested a separate investigation into this version, asking to summon to testify in the Diet those who accused Kan of being a spy.⁵⁰

On 30 April 1950, the Diet Lower House ruled that the JCP, and Tokuda personally, had obstructed the repatriation of Japanese from the USSR. A few days later, on the third anniversary of the Japanese Constitution on 3 May 1950, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, General Douglas MacArthur publicised a statement titled 'The Other Minority'. The minority he had in mind was the JCP and its followers, who he accused of abusing the rights granted to them by the post-war Constitution. MacArthur stated this in no uncertain terms: 'Under foreign dictation to establish a domestic basis favorable to the ultimate subjugation of Japan to the political control of others,' this minority sought 'to encompass freedom's destruction ... through the perversive use of liberty and privilege' and by 'the spread of false, malicious and inflammatory propaganda intended to mislead and coerce the public mind'.⁵¹

MacArthur's statement, reflecting the spirit of the times when leftists came under increasing pressure, was a portent of the impending clash on the Korean Peninsula. On 30 May, days after MacArthur's statement and four weeks before the outbreak of the Korean War, some leftist demonstrators in Tokyo resorted to violence against United States citizens at American Memorial Day celebrations, following which JCP leaders were all purged 'from public service'.⁵² This became the hardest blow to the party's activities in Japan and it led to the exile of top party officials, including Tokuda, and the arrests of others.⁵³

Witnesses of the enemy: the Soviet Union in returnee testimonies

In her book on Cold War captives, defectors, refugees, and the propaganda wars that raged around them, historian Susan Carruthers shows how during the late 1940s the Soviet Union became associated with slavery in the eyes of the American public. In the anti-communist frenzy that engulfed the United States public opinion, the Soviet labour camps, while 'evok[ing] some of the most repugnant features of the Third Reich,' were seen as worse than even the Nazi extermination camps. According to this view, even ancient slave-owners were better than Gulag chiefs, who kept 'an entire population in a condition of terror, mute in the face of state tyranny'.⁵⁴

⁵⁰National Diet House of Councillors, Special Committee on the Issue of Repatriation of Japanese Nationals Overseas, 7th cong., 23rd session, 10 April 1950.

⁵¹Douglas MacArthur, 'The Other Minority', in *A Soldier Speaks: Public Papers and Speeches of General of the Army Douglas MacArthur*, ed. Major Vorin E. Whan, Jr. (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965), pp. 204–209.

⁵²John Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Aftermath of World War II* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 272.

⁵³Robert A. Scalapino, *The Japanese Communist Movement, 1920–1966* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967), Chapters 2 and 3, pp. 48–96.

⁵⁴Susan L. Carruthers, *Cold War Captives: Imprisonment, Escape, and Brainwashing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), pp. 123–124.

While the United States propagandists made good use of stories told by the German returnees from the Soviet camps and defectors who had slipped through the Iron Curtain, Japan had its own characters to play in the ideological standoff. Perhaps unsurprisingly, slavery narratives took hold in Japan too, mirroring the discourses in the United States. Regardless of their original motives, once the memoirists made their stories public, their testaments started a life of their own. Through them, words such as ‘forced labour’ (*kyōsei rōdō*), ‘slave’ (*dorei*) and ‘violent revolution’ (*bōryoku kakumei*) became buzzwords in writing about the Soviet Union in Japan.

Despite their travails as labourers in the Soviet camps and suspected communists upon return home, in spite of the niche of victimhood they carved out for themselves in post-war Japan, the Siberian returnees’ role in the political struggles for Japan’s future should not be defined solely through their victimhood. They were not mere instruments of manipulation in the hands of different political actors – they were also political actors in their own right. The returnees engaged in the political battles by forming associations and, indirectly, by trying to influence the debate through their testimonies about Siberia. While the former efforts proved largely unsuccessful, the latter method had three important outcomes.

First, the recollections published by the returnees from the Soviet Union were an act of making peace with the past and their responsibility in it, an attempt to explain and confront the suspicion and discrimination they faced in the society by telling their own versions of the truth. And while memoirists had diverse reasons to put pen to paper, the urge towards reinstating themselves as ‘normal’ and loyal Japanese citizens was perhaps the greatest motivation. In the society where they struggled to find jobs and marriage partners, many felt the need to retell their experiences to avoid being misunderstood, and to seek compassion that would lift them to the moral high ground of victimhood. Partly through memoirs, the *yokuryūsha* could externalise the shame and responsibility for the cruelty of and failure in war, and the shameful captivity in enemy hands.

Second, many of the memories returnees brought back became a tributary to the stream of victim narratives that took hold in post-war Japan.⁵⁵ Prioritising Japanese victimhood in circumstances where suffering was widespread, they created a lopsided ‘literature of hardship’. Analysing these accounts against the background of the Soviet archival documents demonstrates that while the internment was an illegal and inhumane confinement that made a mockery of international agreements, the experiences of Japanese captives were hardly unique within the larger context of the Soviet forced labour camps. Focusing mainly on Japanese suffering, camp memoirs rarely put these hardships into perspective. There were, of course, memoirs that touched on the broader context of the Soviet forced labour camps and the suffering of other detainees, but the majority was oblivious to such nuances.

Finally, and more importantly, internment narratives became the perfect raw material in writing about the Soviet enemy. They helped popularise the image of the cold, hungry and backward USSR in Cold War Japan; the fact that this benighted nation had helped defeat Japan’s militarist empire was hardly mentioned. The experience of living in the USSR, often working shoulder-to-shoulder with the Soviet people, made the Siberian captives valuable ‘witnesses of the enemy’ who had the freshest, most direct knowledge of the conditions in the

⁵⁵For example, James Joseph Orr, *The Victim as Hero: Ideologies of Peace and National Identity in Postwar Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001).

communist superpower. Besides writing memoirs, some of them testified in the Diet, gave lectures, painted Siberia from memory, thus producing ample material for representations of the USSR in Japan. These accounts came in handy for a variety of people and groups, but their most important contribution was to the Cold War discourses in Japan.

National newspapers, at the time second only to radio as sources of information, played a leading role in popularising mainstream narratives and in rallying support for Occupation policies.⁵⁶ They kept the public informed on debates between Soviet and American delegates on the internees and their repatriation at various venues. With the hardening of the United States stance towards the USSR in 1948–1949, negative reports about the USSR and its camps became more frequent in Japanese newspapers, especially on the Soviets' reluctance to repatriate the internees. Reporting on the debate in Washington between the Soviet and American officials in the Far Eastern Commission, the *Yomiuri* newspaper quoted the American side: 'Although two years have passed since the end of the war, the Soviet Union continues to use [Japanese captives as] "slave labour"'.⁵⁷ In a report on 27 April 1949, the *Asahi* newspaper outlined the questions asked by the United States representative, William J. Sebald, to his Soviet counterpart, Kuz'ma Derevianko, at a meeting of the Allied Council for Japan. In what had become usual practice, Sebald urged the Soviets to provide information on the numbers and names of Japanese internees, reminding Derevianko of obligations set in Japan's surrender documents and the Potsdam Declaration, and the gravity of the issue for the Japanese. Proving the last point, the newspaper quoted a statement by Diet Lower House members, who described the internment as 'an issue we [the Japanese] cannot forget for even a single day'.⁵⁸

The Soviet Union's uncooperative attitude worked to its detriment, giving rise to speculations and more accusations. On 24 July 1949, the *Yomiuri* published a front page article with a catchy headline: 'Ten Million Forced Labourers in the USSR: the British Representative at the UN Demands an Inquiry into the Camps'.⁵⁹ In a March 1951 article that reflected the fear of communism in the West, the London *Daily Telegraph* reported that 'a Communist-indoctrinated Japanese corps [was] with the Russians on Sakhalin Island ... [possibly] formed from among the 300,000 Japanese prisoners for whom Russia has not accounted.' Archives show that the British diplomats dismissed the story as 'rather far-fetched', but it nevertheless conveyed the spirit of the times.⁶⁰ The shroud of secrecy surrounding Soviet intentions gave birth to speculations of this kind, and helped foster and maintain a sinister image of a slavery kingdom firmly attached to discourses on the USSR.

Slavery narratives were promoted not only by the United States congressmen and conservative journalists. Former internees called themselves slaves as long as their suffering remained unacknowledged and unpaid for. They directed their anger towards not only the USSR, but also the successive Japanese cabinets who disregarded their demands for

⁵⁶On the role of newspapers in society, see, The Asahi Shimbun Company, *Media, Propaganda and Politics in 20th-Century Japan*, trans. Barak Kushner (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

⁵⁷Soren horyo mondai de ronsō, *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 16 February 1948, Morning edition, p. 1.

⁵⁸'Kazoku ga matte iru yokuryūsha no jōhō – Seborudo kōshi soren daihyō ni yōkyū', *Asahi Shimbun*, 27 April 1949, p. 2.

⁵⁹'Senman nin o kyōsei rōdō: Ei kokuren daihyō shūyōjo chōsa o yōkyū', *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 24 July 1949, p. 1.

⁶⁰The National Archives of the UK, FO 371/92602, pp. 4–10. Tomita Takeshi explained the discrepancy in internee numbers through a difference in interpretation: the Soviets counted only the captives in the USSR, whereas US officials included prisoners in all 'Soviet-controlled territories'. The difference of about 300,000 people was then exploited in news and propaganda reports. Tomita, 'Shimbun hōdō'.

compensation. Hiratsuka Mitsuo, a *yokuryūsha* and a prominent activist, thus explained the internees' struggle for compensations and recognition in post-war Japan: 'We are doing it to claim back our dignity as human beings. Only slaves are put to work without being paid. We cannot die as slaves.'⁶¹ In other words, slavery narratives became the linchpin for stories of not only Soviet brutality, but also the Japanese government's neglect. Importantly, uttered by the witnesses who had seen and experienced it all, these testaments to the brutish nature of the Soviet regime became grist to the propaganda mill in early Cold War Japan.

In perhaps the most extensive Japanese collection of internment memoirs – the 19 volumes on Siberia in the *Heiwa no ishizue* (Cornerstone for Peace) series – recollections that casually use the word 'slave' in describing the everyday lifestyle of the Japanese internees are fairly common. Remembering decades later his time in the Soviet camps, memoirist Tōjō Heihachirō talked about 'the slave-like existence in the Siberian camps.'⁶² Amaya Konokichi, who penned a book-long memoir of his Siberian years, poignantly wrote in *Heiwa no ishizue* about being left by the Kwantung Army in Manchuria only to be led to 'endless months of slavery in Siberia.'⁶³ Takeyasu Kumaichi's account was the most vitriolic, recounting one of the harshest examples of Soviet mistreatment of the Japanese. The little finger on Takeyasu's left hand was frostbitten after working outside in the temperatures of -50°C .⁶⁴ The finger turned white and Takeyasu lost all sensation in it. Although this was not unseen in the frigid Siberian climes, what happened in the camp infirmary infuriated Takeyasu so much he remembered it for decades. The female camp doctor first cut off his finger with scissors and a saw, then added, 'Your left hand is useless but you have your right hand. You can get back to work.' Takeyasu wrote, There was no mercy in her voice, no sign that she felt sorry for me. So was this our fate, of those who lost the war? We were nothing but slaves. Was this how a slave was supposed to be like?⁶⁵

These narratives of the Soviet Union as a brutal camp empire were drawn from bitter experiences of the survivors, but they had a powerful double-effect of demonising the USSR and portraying the Siberian Internees exclusively as victims. In the war of two ideologies any means were justified, but few accusations undermined Soviet prestige as effectively as the reputation of a slave-labour state. Soviet archives demonstrate the sensitivity of the country's leadership to international opinion about the USSR.⁶⁶ As a state born of a proletarian revolution, the Soviet Union's historical mission was 'to prepare the ground for other revolutions to come.'⁶⁷ As a self-proclaimed worker's state founded to end capitalist exploitation, the Soviet Union was vulnerable to accusations that it forcefully exploited the labour of millions. Accusations of slavery were perhaps the most effective form of demonising the USSR.

⁶¹Kurihara, *Shiberia yokuryū*, p. 171.

⁶²Tōjō Heihachirō, 'Ikizume no kei', in *Heiwa no ishizue: shiberia*, Vol. 2, p. 163.

⁶³Amaya Konokichi, 'Watashi no seishun: shiberia ga nikui', in *Heiwa no ishizue: shiberia*, Vol. 5, p. 148.

⁶⁴It is hard to tell whether this is a deliberate exaggeration. In an NKVD directive dated 24 November 1945, then deputy minister (later minister) Sergei Kruglov demanded that each camp 'establish temperature limits under which outside works must be cancelled', GARF, f. 9401, op. 12, d. 205, tom (t.) 13, l. 95–96). However, cases when POWs were forced to work in the cold were common.

⁶⁵Takeyasu Kumaichi, 'Furyoki', in *Heiwa no ishizue: shiberia*, Vol. 2, pp. 90–91.

⁶⁶For example, the TASS archives in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) contain ample evidence of the Soviet Party and state's constant paranoia about its representations in foreign press. GARF, f. 4459, op. 27.

⁶⁷Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 49.

Soviet archival documents demonstrate that Japanese victim narratives about life in the camps paint a one-sided picture of the Siberian Internment. Without denying the cruel and illegal nature of the internment, it is possible to glimpse in these documents the USSR's plans and intentions in relation to the Japanese and other Axis POWs, as well as the more practical issues of day-to-day running of the labour camps. This knowledge helps question the so far unquestioned truths about Japanese analyses of the internment, and complement the existing scholarship in English. To provide but one example, Soviet archives raise doubts about the argument that the Japanese – or other foreign POWs and internees for that matter – were the 'men Stalin didn't care about'.⁶⁸ Russian sources reveal that, for all his well-documented disregard for human life and dignity, Joseph Stalin *did* care for the foreigners more than the Soviet prisoners in the Gulag, as we learn from the orders he issued at the time, albeit not out of humanist considerations. To the contrary, as a pragmatic politician, Stalin cared for the foreign captives for very practical reasons. Not only were the foreign POWs valuable manpower in rebuilding the Soviet economy; the death of every captive damaged the Soviet Union's image on the international scene that Stalin carefully cultivated during the post-war.

Viewed in the larger context of the Soviet camp system for foreign POWs, the blatant imprisonment of over half a million Japanese citizens was not simply a Japanese tragedy, but a nexus in the chain of forced migrations, population exchanges, deportations of whole ethnic groups or former soldiers initiated by Joseph Stalin across the vast spaces of the Eurasian continent following the end of WWII. In fact, it will not be an exaggeration to say that for all the Japanese-centred nature of internee memoirs, the Japanese captives were something of an afterthought for the Soviet camp authorities, the last – and least expected – batch of inhabitants to enter the POW camps.

Moreover, not all Japanese internees returned damning verdicts on their captivity. Camp experiences were diverse and depended on the internee's rank, the camp officials at whose mercy he lived and worked, and the geographical region where he was interned. Even amidst all the suffering, some of the memoirists remembered lenience and, at times, kindness shown by the Soviets. Yawatagaki Masao, who spent four years and eight months in Siberia, remembered that even when the Soviet officers were furious, they would never beat the Japanese, only shout. He was moved by the words of an elderly Russian man who thus opined on the treatment of the Japanese: 'We cannot treat you as slaves. You might be POWs, but first of all you are human beings'.⁶⁹ Despite the overwhelming majority of negative recollections, there were memoirists – for example Takasugi Ichirō with his bestselling *In the Shadow of the Northern Lights* – who found humanity in the unlikely circumstances of the Soviet camps by casting away the shackles of ideology and building bonds with the ordinary Soviet people.

Conclusion

In the Cold War project of rebuilding Japan in America's image, the Japanese returnees from the Soviet camps played an important, if overlooked role. Caught by the Red Army in the Manchurian plains – where their government had sent them years earlier to ease the burden on the domestic economy and to build a new, model colony – they endured one

⁶⁸Barshay, *The Gods Left First*, pp. 165–188.

⁶⁹Yawatagaki Masao, 'Watashi no seishun ki', in *Heiwa no ishizue: shiberia*, Vol. 2, p. 28.

circle of hell after another, and those who survived in the end came back to a nation averse to what they represented: imperial past, ignominious defeat, and the communist enemy.

Indeed, the returnees from ‘Siberia’ stood for many things at once. To begin with, they were victimisers – many among them were conscious of the unfair treatment they had extended to the Chinese and Manchu peasants upon arrival from Japan in the 1930s. They were also victims – arguably more so than many other Japanese – of two empires, Japanese and Soviet (and possibly the third, American). They were war veterans who had suffered their way through war and internment; hence the message of *Gokurōsama!* (‘Thank you for enduring the hardships!’) with which the crowds greeted them at the Maizuru Port upon return home. Yet they were also POWs – a shameful label in the IJA, where being caught alive was a sign of cowardice and insufficient loyalty to the emperor. Finally, their belonging to Japan was far from indubitable because of the widespread belief that many of them were now communists, brainwashed and converted by their Soviet captors in camp indoctrination sessions.

Inhabiting the grey areas of post-war society, the returnees from the USSR rarely came into the limelight because of their Siberian past. Their association with the Soviet Union haunted even those among them who became household names in Japan – for example, the business strategist Sejima Ryūzō, or the author and translator Takasugi Ichirō. For decades during the Cold War, their efforts to leave the past behind, to achieve recognition and peace of mind bore little result. Their lives remained framed by Cold War discourses until the Cold War itself ended; in other words, they were not only the Cold War’s first victims, but also among its last ones.

In June 2010, 65 years after the start of the internment, the internees’ decade-long struggle for compensation finally bore fruit when the Diet adopted the ‘Postwar Forced Internees Special Law’ promising ‘consolation payments’ in acknowledgement of the ‘hardships endured by the postwar internees during the forced internment’.⁷⁰ Yet the irony is that only after the Soviet Union’s demise, thousands of returnees who faced discrimination and suspicion because of their association with the USSR since the 1950s suddenly acquired in the Japanese collective mind the cloak of victimhood. As the need to demonise the USSR disappeared with the Soviet juggernaut’s collapse and Cold War’s end, the victimhood of its one-time captives was raised onto a nation-wide pedestal in Japan. The ‘Special Law’ was undoubtedly a victory, albeit a very conditional and truncated one. It is a pity that many of the former Siberian Internees did not live to witness it.

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⁷⁰E-Government Electronic Portal of the Japanese Government, ‘Sengo kyōsei yokuryūsha ni kakaru mondai ni kansuru tokubetsu sochi hō’ [Special Law on Postwar Forced Internees], <http://law.e-gov.go.jp/htmldata/H22/H22H0045.html>, last accessed 21 July 2015.

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