

Russia's Japanese Islands Invasion

After Japan Surrendered — With U.S. Ships

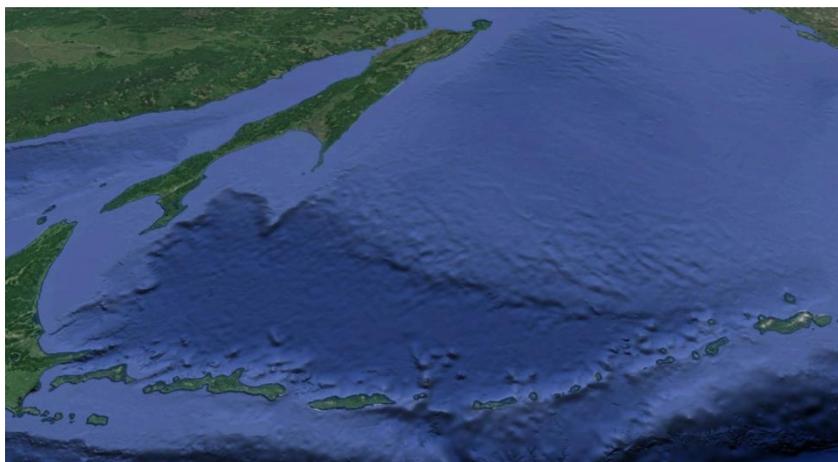


USS 'LCI(L)-551 in May 1945, before her transfer to the Soviet navy.

Seventy years after World War II ended, Japan and Russia are *still* trying to sign a peace treaty. The persistent bone of contention? The Kuril Islands, seized by Soviet troops in a bloody amphibious landing *after* Japan announced it was ready to surrender. But how and why did the Soviets seize the Kurils in the first place?

The Kuril Islands — also known as Chishima or the Northern Territories in Japan — are a chain of 56 volcanic islands stretching 810 miles from the northeastern Japanese island of Hokkaido to Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula. Originally populated by the indigenous Ainu people, the archipelago began receiving Japanese administration during the 17th century under the Tokugawa Shogunate.

The Japanese began encountering Russian explorers traveling southward after the settlement of the Kamchatka Peninsula in the 18th century. In 1855, Edo Japan and Imperial Russia signed a treaty in which the former claimed the southernmost islands — Kunashir, Iturup, Shikotan and the Habomai Islands — while Urup Island and everything north of it went to Russia. Then an 1875 treaty gave Japan *all* the Kurils, in exchange for Russia gaining all of Sakhalin, a large island to the west. You can see a map of the island treaties [here](#).



The Kurils, at bottom, extending from Hokkaido to the southwest (left) and across from Sakhalin Island opposite the Sea of Okhotsk. Photo via Google Earth

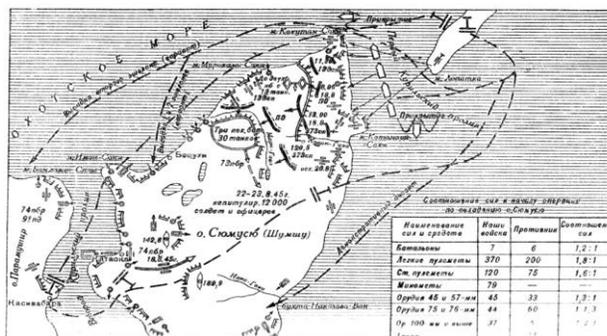
However, after Japan dealt a shocking defeat to the czar’s forces in 1905, Tokyo got full control of the Kurils as well as the southern half of Sakhalin. In subsequent decades, the Japanese government built up towns, administrative services and infrastructure across the remote islands. Thousands of ethnic Japanese began settling there to fish and mine valuable minerals.

The Japanese carrier task force that bombed Pearl Harbor actually assembled off Iturup Island, profiting from the persistent fogs for concealment. The islands would soon become a target themselves, causing Japan to deploy fighters and two infantry divisions to protect its northern flank. After U.S. forces repelled the **Japanese invasion of Alaska**, B-25 and B-24 bombers began striking the distant islands in 1943 and 1944, with limited success. Fuel-starved bomber crews sometimes landed in Soviet territory seeking assistance — but were always interned, as Moscow had signed a neutrality pact with Tokyo in 1938.

That was something the U.S. government was keen to change, as it contemplated the possibility of a bloody invasion of the Japanese home islands. At the Yalta Conference in February 1945, an ailing Roosevelt got Stalin to promise that once Nazi Germany was defeated, the Soviet Union would break the neutrality pact. Stalin stipulated that he would require U.S. military aid, and three months to transfer the necessary forces to the east. The Yalta agreement also bluntly stated, “The Kuril Islands shall be handed over to the Soviet Union.” After all, the archipelago offered convenient stepping stones for a Soviet invasion of Hokkaido.

Soviet D-Day

Germany surrendered on May 8, 1945. Exactly three months later as promised, the Red Army unleashed a massive ground offensive in Manchuria that swiftly demolished the Japanese Kwantung Army and secured the southern half of Sakhalin Island. Stunned by the loss of China and the U.S. atomic bombings, Tokyo announced on Aug. 15 that it was ready to surrender, and instructed Japanese troops to cease offensive military operations, and to only fire in self-defense. But the same day, the Soviet Second Far East Front received orders to invade the two northernmost Kuril Islands, Shumshu and Paramushiro. Stalin wanted to snatch them before American occupiers arrived.



Soviet invasion plans of Shumshu

Unlike their Western allies, the Soviets lacked specialized boats for amphibious landings on defended beaches. But under Project Hula, the U.S. secretly transferred 149 ships to the Soviet Navy through Cold

Bay, Alaska — and trained 12,000 Soviet personnel how to operate them. This included 30 Landing Craft Infantry: 48-meter-long shallow-draft vessels capable of depositing 200 troops directly onto an unprepared beach. The Soviet amphibious fleet eventually mustered 62 ships, including 16 LCIs, to transport 8,821 troops of the 101st Rifle Division and a naval infantry battalion.

The landing force lacked tanks, and had only the minesweeper *Okhotsk* to provide heavy fire support with its 130-millimeter gun. However, there were four 130-millimeter shore batteries within range of Shumshu Island on the Kamchatka Peninsula to provide artillery support. In addition, the 128th Composite Aviation Division would assist with 78 warplanes, including two regiments of American **P-63 Kingcobra fighters**, as well as a mixed regiment of SB-2, Il-4 and A-20 Havoc bombers.

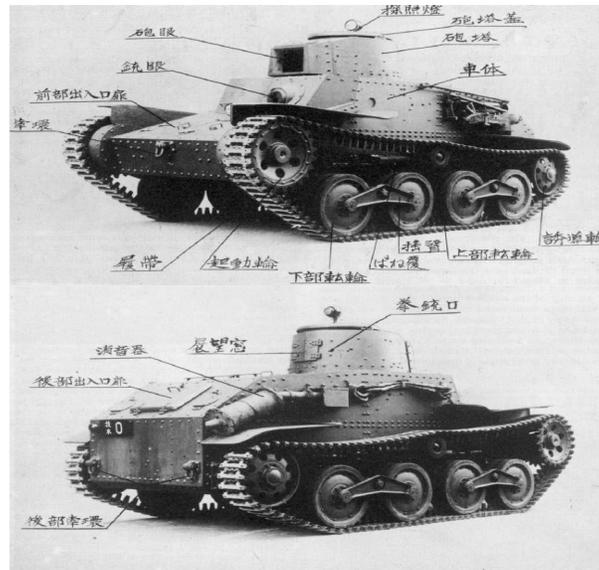
The Kurils were notoriously foggy, and the Soviets had limited opportunity to conduct reconnaissance. The amphibious force set sail early on Aug. 17, and at 2:30 the following morning, the first wave of naval infantry hit the Takeda Beach on the flat, windswept island of Shumshu. The Japanese were taken completely by surprise due to the fog, and initially could not determine *which* country was attacking them. However, the defenses on Shumshu and nearby Paramushiro were considerable, including 149- and 105-millimeter shore batteries in concrete emplacements, 64 tanks of the Eleventh Tank Regiment and 8,500 troops from the Japanese 91st Infantry Division.

The inexperienced Soviet marines failed to capture key Japanese emplacements quickly enough, and the 91st Division's troops swiftly manned the island's formidable fortifications. Blistering Japanese artillery and machine gun fire pinned the follow-up Soviet wave on the beach, while heavy batteries began blasting the assembled fleet. Japanese Ki-43 *Hayabusa* fighters and B5N *Tenzan* torpedo bombers swooped down to attack, though several were destroyed by naval flak. By 9:00 a.m., five of the crucial LCIs had been sunk, including one carrying a regimental headquarters. The second wave was unable to land badly-needed heavy weapons. Troops on the shore could not call for air or artillery support, having lost all their radios.

Takeda's Tanks in the Breach

Meanwhile, Col. Takeda Sueo's elite 11th Tank Regiment rolled in to counterattack the Soviet beachhead. At first, a company of 11 Type 95 *Ha-Go* light tanks armed with small 37-millimeter guns rumbled into battle. The Soviets only had four 45-millimeter cannons to shoot back — but dozens of 14.5-millimeter anti-tank rifles. Obsolete versus German armor, the rifles proved effective against the thinly armored Japanese vehicles, knocking out seven. Still, the tanks pushed Soviet troops back to Mount Severnaya, where they dug into abandoned Japanese positions.

By then Col. Takeda had arrived with 20 to 30 beefier Type 97 *Chi-Ha* medium tanks. Takeda's tanks charged between the crests of two hills, blasting their 47-millimeter guns as anti-tank rounds smacked into their armor. In a 1969 memoir, Soviet Major Shutov recalled Takeda's last moments: "The tanks formed up and thundered towards us. On one of them, banner in hand, was a Japanese officer. We prepared to deflect the counterattack. I could see the grimace on the officer's face. I press on the **submachine gun's trigger**. The officer falls, the banner falls with him. A moment later, his tank stops."



The Japanese Type 95 Ha-Go tank.

Soviet infantry resorted to suicidal assault tactics to disable the armored vehicles with anti-tank grenades — as attested by several posthumous medal citations. In two hours of furious fighting, 21 to 27 tanks were destroyed. The rusting wrecks remain on Shumshu to this day, as you can see [here](#). By the afternoon, the landing force reestablished radio communications, allowing shore batteries and warplanes to pound Japanese emplacements. Soviet marines constructed a temporary pier allowing heavy artillery to be unloaded and join the fight. In the evening, Red Army infantry took advantage of the darkness to creep close to Japanese pillboxes and assault them, clearing away the defenses overlooking the beachhead.

Surrender, maybe?

The next day, heavy artillery bombardments paved the way for a renewed Soviet advance. But Japanese resistance continued, and a kamikaze plane sank the minesweeper *KT-152*. But Gen. Fusaki, mindful of orders from Tokyo, dispatched an aid to announce his desire to surrender. The offer was accepted, bringing fighting to a halt at 6 p.m.

But when Soviet ships approached Kataoka airfield the following morning, Japanese troops opened fire with 75-millimeter howitzers, striking the *Okhotsk* and the patrol boat *Kirov*. Soviet forces sporadically resumed air and artillery bombardments until Aug. 23 when the last of the garrison finally capitulated. Then through Sept. 1, Soviet detachments made successive amphibious landings into the southern Kuril Islands — and even attempted an airborne landing using Catalina flying boats. At each island, Japanese forces capitulated peacefully.

The Soviet Army and Navy combined lost more than 800 dead and 1,400 wounded in the Battle of Shumshu, compared to 370 Japanese dead and 700 wounded. This made it the only battle in which the Soviets suffered heavier losses than the Japanese. The Kurils' 17,000 Japanese civilian residents were deported, while captured Japanese troops were interned in Siberia and employed in forced labor camps. The last survivors returned in 1950.

The Situation Today

Japan insists that the southern Kuril Islands accorded to it by the 1855 treaty remain its sovereign territory, as the 1943 Cairo Declaration stated that Japan would only be “expelled from territories seized by violence or greed,” and Imperial Russia had agreed the islands were Japan’s prior to Tokyo’s expansionist campaigns. Thus, the Kurils should be returned based on a language in the Potsdam agreement allowing Japan to retain “such minor islands as we determine.”

However, Moscow argues that the Yalta agreement explicitly gave it control of all the Kurils. Strategically, the Kurils allow Russia to control access to the Sea of Okhotsk. Today, 19,000 Russian citizens inhabit the island chain, a population which grew to support a substantial garrison, which today includes S-400 surface-to-air missiles, Su-27 jet fighters, an improved *Kilo*-class submarine, ground-based anti-ship missiles and Ka-52 attack helicopters.



A Russian Kh-35 missile of the kind deployed to the Kirils.

Public opinion surveys show both the Japanese and Russian public strongly support their respective claims to the southern Kuril Islands. Nonetheless, there are renewed diplomatic effort between Moscow and Tokyo to arrive at a resolution to the more than 70-year dispute. While both nations could enjoy enduring benefits from putting the conflict to rest, compromise could prove difficult due to diverging strategic alignments and strong sentiments for islands both nations sacrificed dearly to control.

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