

### Occupation or Annexation?

Soviet forces occupied the Northern Territories in 1945, following Stalin's commitment to Roosevelt and Churchill at Yalta in February 1945 to enter the war against Japan within two or three months of Germany's surrender. Since the Yalta agreement included an "understanding" among the three great powers that Moscow would, *inter alia*, regain the Kuriles as a reward for helping to defeat Japan, the Soviets wasted little time in landing forces on the islands even though occupation could not be completed until after Japan's surrender.<sup>2</sup>

It is not known why the western Allies agreed to the transfer of the Kuriles, though some observers have suggested that President Roosevelt, who was under the impression that Japan had taken all of the Kuriles by force from Russia in the 1904-5 Russo-Japanese War,<sup>3</sup> failed to take into account a State Department memorandum recommending that Japan be allowed to retain the islands.<sup>4</sup> This understanding was subsequently reflected in the terms of the peace treaty which Japan concluded with the United States and other Allies at San Francisco in 1951. The Treaty reads, in part:

"Japan renounces all right, title and claim to the Kurile Islands and to that portion of Sakhalin and the islands adjacent to it over which Japan acquired sovereignty as a consequence of the Treaty of Portsmouth of September 5, 1905".<sup>5</sup>

The leader of the Japanese delegation to the San Francisco peace conference, Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida, sought to protect Japanese territorial integrity by arguing that Czarist Russia had not opposed to Japan's 1875 acquisition of Etorofu and Kunashiri, and that Shikotan and the Habomais group had been administratively part of Hokkaido Prefecture, and had never been treated by Tokyo as having belonged to the Kuriles proper.

Yoshida received little support in his efforts and, under considerable pressure to bring the conference to a conclusion, agreed to the text cited above. The Soviet's were equally dissatisfied with the lack of definition as to which territories were to be included and that, while the treaty indicated that Japan would cede territories, it did not specify which country was to receive them. This was a major factor in Moscow's subsequent refusal to sign the peace treaty.<sup>6</sup>

The San Francisco treaty stipulated that only signatories could be beneficiaries which, in Japan's view, negated any Soviet (now Russian) claim to the Northern Territories. Other early arguments cited by Japan were: