

Shrines in Karafuto and the Northern Territories

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The main objective of this paper is to discuss the history of shrines in Karafuto based on materials from the pre-Russo-Japanese War period before Japan took over southern Karafuto. A comparison of shrines in Karafuto and other areas found three major characteristics of Karafuto. First, religious activities were allowed in the name of religious freedom between the invasion of the Soviet military and the repatriation of Japanese people. Second, Japanese made up a large majority of the population. Third, deities that people worshiped were diverse.

From the second half of the Edo period, shrines—mainly those enshrining Benten or a goddess of water and fortune—started to be built in Karafuto. Japanese there engaged in religious activities even when Karafuto was inhabited by both Japanese and Russians from the end of the Edo period to the beginning of the Meiji period. It was confirmed that these shrines existed until the middle of the Russian occupation from 1875 to 1902. After southern Karafuto became Japanese territory as a result of the country's victory in the Russo-Japanese War, many Japanese moved there and built new shrines. The vast majority of the population in Karafuto was Japanese, and shrines were built according to religious practices in mainland Japan. Therefore, shrines in the region have a historical background different from that of other overseas shrines in a narrow definition. It is unique that Japanese people in Karafuto were allowed to be involved in religious activities during the one and a half years between the Soviet invasion in August 1945 and the second repatriation of Japanese in January 1947.

279 shrines including those under the supervision of the colonial government of Karafuto and others managed by local communities were places of worship for Japanese in the area, despite differences in size and rank. Karafuto Shrine—a Japanese government-sponsored great shrine established in 1910 with construction completed on August 22, 1911—was run by the national government but had strong commonalities with those established by local people.

When comparing shrines and temples in terms of numbers of structures and monks, we realize that temples were far more powerful and influential. After Japan's defeat in World War II, shrines disappeared from Karafuto. They were founded for Japanese and thus perished when they left the region.

In this paper, the history of shrines in the Northern Territories will be introduced based on materials from the Edo period. These materials indicate that no shrine in the territories was recognized by the Japanese government, and that local Japanese strived to have their shrines recognized.