

The Four Northern Islands in the 18th and 19th centuries

18th-19th centuries: Encounters with Russians and the development of a shared perception of the border

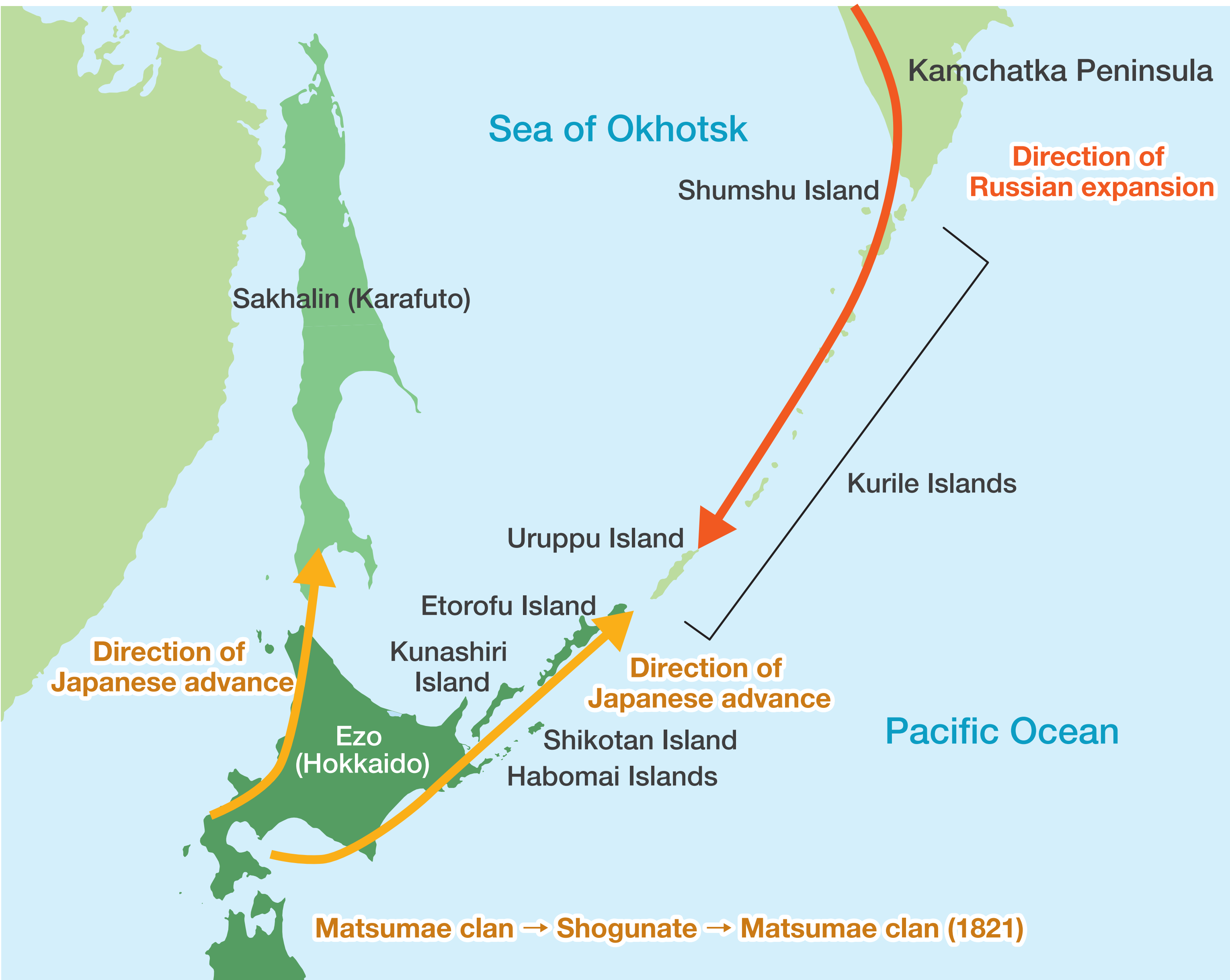
In the Edo period, the Matsumae Domain recognized the Four Northern Islands as part of its own fiefdom as early as the beginning of the 17th century, and gradually established control over them. As Russia advanced southward at the end of the 18th century, the Edo Shogunate became increasingly concerned. From the end of the 18th century to the beginning of the 19th century, the Edo Shogunate decided to directly govern Ezo (Hokkaido) and also developed the Four Northern Islands by building guard posts, fishing grounds, shipping lanes, and roads.

Russia requested trade with Japan, but the Edo Shogunate refused. A Russian warship, angered by the Shogunate's response, attacked Japanese outposts on Etorofu Island and Sakhalin Island in 1806-1807.

In response, the Japanese captured a Russian military officer named Golovnin in 1811. Tensions rose, but in 1813, a Russian governor submitted a letter stating that the attacks were the personal actions of the attackers, Golovnin was released, and the crisis passed. After Golovnin returned to Russia, reports from him and others led the Japanese and Russian sides each coming to the common understanding that the islands to the north, up to Etorofu Island, belonged to Japan.

Image of Takadaya Kahei (from Ricord's “An Account of Negotiations with Japan”)

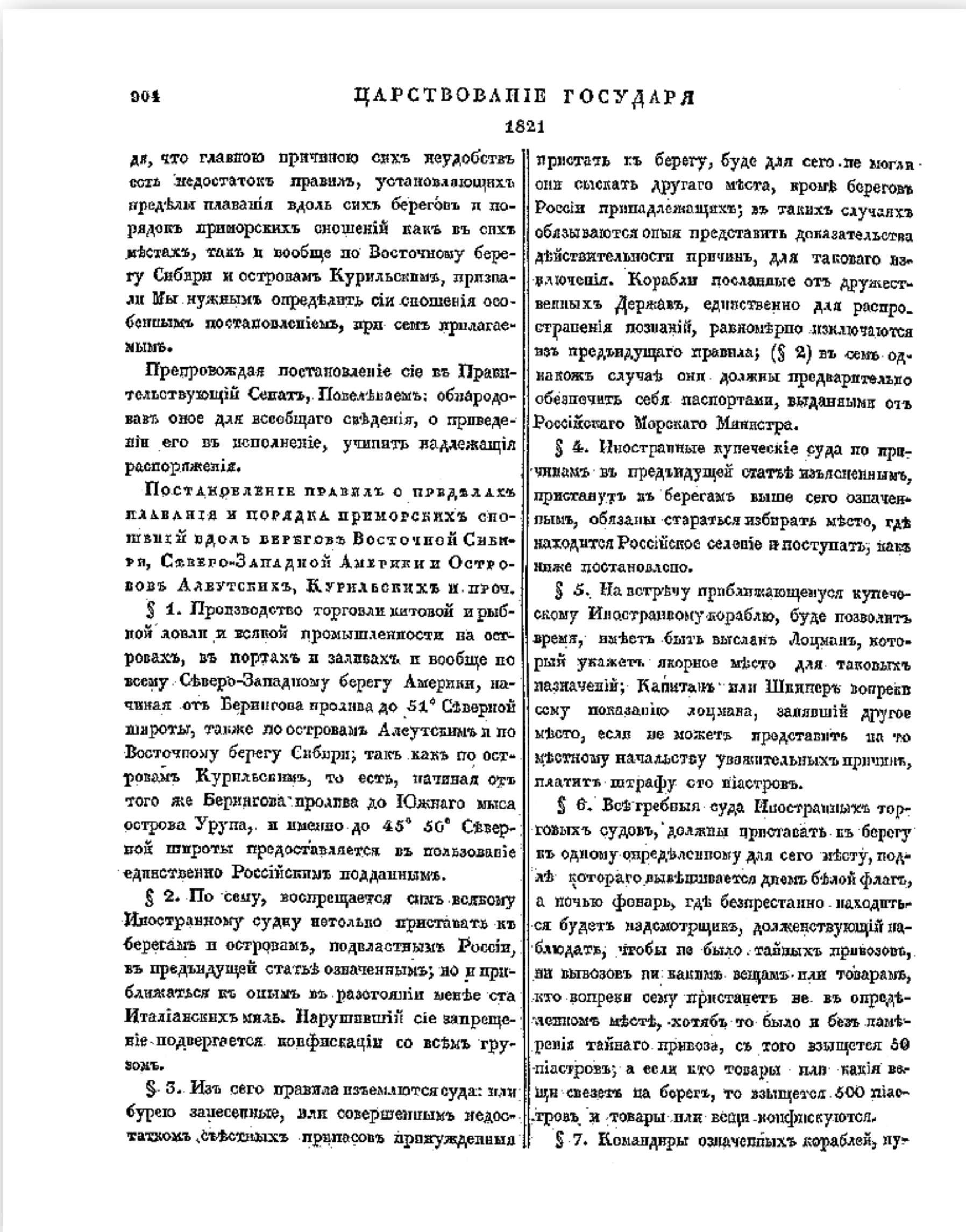
Takadaya Kahei played a major role in the development of the Four Northern Islands at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century. Takadaya Kahei was captured by the Russians in 1812, but he played a major role in mediating between Japan and Russia, such as advising the Russians on the conditions for the release of Golovnin, who was being held by the Japanese at the time.



Decree by Emperor Alexander I (1821)

In 1821, the Russian Emperor, Alexander I, banned industrial activities by foreigners in the Kurile Islands, which are the islands to the south up to Uruppu Island.

(Complete Code of Laws of the Russian Empire, vol. 37, 1821, Law Number 28747)



Hokui Den (Account of the Northern Barbarians), Vol. 5, depicts the arrival of the Russian ship when Golovnin was released.

Hokui Den (Account of the Northern Barbarians), Vol. 5, “Account of the Time of the Release of Golovnin and the Others”
Repository: National Archives of Japan

In the early 19th century, Japan and Russia overcame their differences peacefully and were able to share a common view on the border!

