

Trade Wars and Territories: The Ainu-Mongol Conflict

In the mid-thirteenth century, Ainu in Sakhalin were involved in a prolonged conflict with the Mongol-led Yuan dynasty. This struggle, which lasted nearly forty years, was the result of the growing influence of both Ainu and Mongols in the region.

Ainu from Hokkaido began migrating to Sakhalin and other areas around the Sea of Okhotsk from around the thirteenth century, gradually expanding their sphere of influence. Their trade network stretched from the lower reaches of the Amur River, along what is now the border between Russia and China, up to the Kamchatka Peninsula, over 1,000 kilometers northeast of Hokkaido.

As Ainu advanced into Sakhalin, tensions arose with the Indigenous Nivkh people over territory. This prompted Nivkh leaders to seek assistance from the Yuan dynasty, which was actively expanding its own influence over the lower Amur region and Sakhalin.

In 1264, the Yuan dynasty dispatched an armed force to support the Nivkh and fought a series of intermittent battles with Ainu groups over the next four decades. Ainu forces proved to be resilient, managing to launch multiple counterattacks on the Eurasian continent, but were eventually forced to surrender in 1308. As part of the peace agreement, Ainu in Sakhalin paid an annual tribute to the Yuan dynasty of valuable furs and pelts. Relations between Ainu and Nivkh groups shifted from adversaries to trade partners.