The Changkufeng And Nomonhan Incidents - The Undeclared Border War And Its Impact on World War II

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THE CHANGKUFENG AND NOMONHAN INCIDENTS
– THE UNDECLARED BORDER WAR AND ITS
IMPACT ON WORLD WAR II

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THE CHANGKUFENG AND NOMONHAN INCIDENTS

- THE UNDECLARED BORDER WAR AND ITS IMPACT ON WORLD WAR II

by

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Introduction

“One of the strangest of wars is now going on along the Outer Mongolian-Manchukuo frontier. It is both undeclared and self-liquidating. ... It is raging in a thoroughly out-of-the-way corner of the world where it cannot attract a great deal of attention.”


This passage from the article “A Strange War” published in the New York Times on July 23, 1939 sums up the battle of Nomonhan in a simple way. It was a conflict fought between the Empire of Japan and the Soviet Union on the Mongolian Steppes that would influence the fighting and the outcome of World War II in Europe as well as in the Pacific theater without attracting attention around the world.

The clash between the Japanese and the Soviet Union was inevitable due to their interest in expansion into the same areas in East Asia, in particular Manchuria and Korea. Japan, which had industrialized in a very short time following the Meiji Restoration, looked for continental expansion to fuel its growing military and industrial needs. To guarantee the success of its expansionist policies, Japan relied on its rich warrior tradition. During the centuries of isolation and internal conflict, the samurai, the well-defined military class of Japan developed. After the forced opening of Japan, the spirit of that military class would find its way into the modern Japanese army during the late 19th century. The Japanese soldiers were highly

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skilled in the use of hand-to-hand combat, but also their spiritual strength would enable them to overcome any adversary during battle. These soldiers were trained not to fear death in combat, but rather to embrace it as the proper end of a warrior. As a result, Japan would have a fighting force with a tactical doctrine centered almost entirely on the infantry; it would embrace close quarters battle, and despise anything that would detract from these aspects of war, including the avoidance of death.

With their victory against the Russian army during the Russo-Japanese War in 1904-05, the discipline and fearlessness of the individual Japanese soldier brought their army offensive success even against formidably defended positions at Port Arthur. This would result in a policy in which the decision makers in the Imperial Japanese Army would stay the course, but dramatic technological developments of World War I and the interwar years changed the face of armed conflict forever. With well-armored tanks, long-range heavy artillery, and the appearance of the aircraft to provide support for infantry armed with grenades and heavy machine guns in large quantities, warfare ultimately changed. No longer was the simple use of infantry expected to win the day, but combined, mobile warfare. The Red Army in particular would adapt to that principle during the interwar years and achieved material superiority for this particular kind of warfare compared to most armies in the world. The Red Army would more than triple its arsenal of tanks and planes in the 1930’s and would be able to use and test this new kind of warfare during its engagement with the Japanese at Changkufeng and Nomonhan.²

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With only limited involvement in World War I, the Imperial Japanese Army failed to adapt to these developments and alter their battlefield tactics and army doctrines sufficiently to integrate these changes into their order of battle; consequently they would find themselves coming up short against the modern armies they would face off with. This would become apparent in the border conflicts with the Soviet Union’s Red Army in 1938-39. The intangible, here especially the “spiritual superiority,” the remaining legacy of the samurai, granted the Japanese forces a well-deserved reputation as ferocious fighters, but ultimately proved insufficient to achieve victory.³

Immediately following the Mukden Incident in 1931 and the founding of Manchukuo, the Japanese supported puppet state in northeastern China, the Imperial Japanese Army found itself again face to face with their old enemy Russia, now the Soviet Union. The border disputes between these two countries would soon become armed conflicts. The Japanese Korea Army as well as the Kwantung Army, stationed in Manchuria, would soon follow a policy of limited war against the Soviet Red Army, here in particular during the battles of Changkufeng, in 1938, and Nomonhan in 1939.

These two battles proved to be groundbreaking, but neither of these battles received significant attention due to events in Europe and the outbreak of World War II. However, these battles showed serious implications for the Imperial Japanese Army and the Red Army of the Soviet Union. More importantly, these forgotten battles between the Empire of Japan and the Soviet Union became an important measuring point on military doctrine and the use of modern military tactics, such as the combined use of tanks with air support, an early version of the

Blitzkrieg. Furthermore, the outcome of these battles helped decide the direction of further Japanese expansion and the adaptation of the so-called “Southern Advance Strategy.” For the Soviet Union, these battles would ultimately give decisive indications for the upcoming battles fought in the Eastern European Theater during World War II, such as the use of Siberian troops during the battle of Moscow, and combined mobile warfare during the battle of Kursk and Operation Bagration.
Chapter 1: Hostilities – Origins of the Conflict between Japan and the Soviet Union

To understand the origins of the conflict at Changkufeng and Nomonhan, it is important to consider the historical rivalry in that particular area of the world. With Japan being forced to end its centuries-long isolation, Meiji Japan introduced programs to rapidly modernize the nation. These reforms would put an end to the all-powerful Samurai class; it would introduce a new system of public education, and would reform the military based on European standards. The Japanese navy would largely be modeled after the navy of Great Britain. The army on the other hand would be modeled after Germany, because early influence of the French army lacked a planning and operational command, a General Staff, which proved significant after Germany’s crushing defeat over the French army in 1870/71. These reforms would catapult Japan into becoming an industrialized nation and the leading power in Asia. Japan’s military reform was at the heart of this effort and the active part of the slogan of the times: “rich nation, strong army.”

The Russian Empire on the other hand, began to decline during the late 19th and early 20th century. It was mainly based on a rural society with limited industrial capacity and an army built on conscription, but with a low level of morale throughout its ranks. This was largely based on the resentment of the peasants who were not very enthusiastic to fight for a regime that refused to give them any rights. The development of these two empires could not be more

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5 Edward J. Drea, *Japan’s Imperial Army: Its Rise And Fall, 1853-1945* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2009), 254.
different at the end of the 19th century, but both tried to expand into Korea and northern China. This development would ultimately result in a clash between the Empire of Japan and Imperial Russia after the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95.

During the First Sino-Japanese War, Japan’s army and navy completely defeated the Chinese Qing forces on land and at sea.\(^7\) By the end of the conflict Japan gained its first colonial possession in the form of Formosa, modern-day Taiwan, and the Pescadores Islands to the south of Japan. Japan further demanded China’s recognition of the ‘independence’ of Korea, and parts of the Liaotung Peninsular, including Port Arthur. Unfortunately, with these demands Japan pushed its luck too far and as result representatives of Russia, France, and Germany offered ‘friendly advice’ to the Japanese Foreign Ministry and urged Japan to renounce its territorial demands.\(^8\) Ultimately, the “triple intervention” left Japan “very resentful” and without any further territorial gains.\(^9\)

The Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, represents a turning point in the history of the Empire of Japanese as well as for the Russian Empire. The war itself can be considered "the first great war of the 20th century." As mentioned before, the war was the result of the imperial ambitions of the Russian Empire and the Empire of Japan to expand into Manchuria and Korea. For Russia it was important to seek a warm water port on the Pacific Ocean for its navy and for its Pacific trade. Vladivostok, the only large Russian port on the Pacific was only operational

\(^8\) Harris, *Soldiers of the Sun*, 62.
during the summer months, but Port Arthur at the Liaotung Peninsula would be operational all year around.\textsuperscript{10}

Since the end of the First Sino-Japanese War, both countries continued to negotiate over their spheres of influence. Japan itself was willing to offer recognition of Russian dominance in Manchuria and asked in exchange for the Russian recognition of Korea as a Japans sphere of influence.\textsuperscript{11} Russia ultimately refused and Japan would regard war as the only option to counter the Russia’s aggression in Asia. In February 1904, the Japanese Navy attacked the Russian fleet at Port Arthur without official declaration of war. What followed was a disaster for the Russian military. Poorly trained and organized, and its troops lacking motivation to fight, Russia was defeated in battles on land and at sea.\textsuperscript{12}

One of the greatest disasters of the war was the destruction of the second Pacific squadron of the Russian navy. Assembled in the Baltic Sea and made up of the main parts of the Baltic Fleet, it would be sent around the globe and ultimately destroyed by the superior Japanese Fleet at the battle of Tsushima. Before that fleet left the Baltic Sea, Russian propaganda announced “that the second Pacific squadron would sail around the world, unite with the first Pacific squadron, defeat the Japanese Fleet and win back the Russian superiority over the sea.”\textsuperscript{13} This was only wishful thinking and the result of the battle was total destruction of the second Pacific squadron.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{12} Harris, \textit{Soldiers of the Sun}, 92.
With the victories in the hard-fought battles, the Japanese ultimately defeated the Russians at sea, capturing Port Arthur, and securing ultimate victory at Mukden in central Manchuria.\textsuperscript{15} With the defeat of Russia, Japan finally joined the community of Great Powers. This process would include the international recognition of Japan’s “natural sphere of influence in northeast Asia” and the growing empire now included Korea.\textsuperscript{16} At the same time Japan rose to power in East Asia, Russia suffered a series of setbacks. The public discontent following the defeat, as well as the loss of international prestige, would result in the first Russian Revolution, and “show the world the desolate state of the Russian Empire and its rotten Imperial leadership.”\textsuperscript{17}

During the years following Japan’s victory in the Russo-Japanese War, Japan started to build up a large military presence in Korea, not only for the defense of their growing Empire, but also due to extensive fear of an attack by the Russian Army to avenge the defeat suffered during the Russo-Japanese War. This military presence would later be known as the Kwantung Army, which would become the major player in the events unfolding in the East Asian mainland theater, including the numerous border conflicts with the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{18}

After its limited participation in World War I, Japan would get involved in the Russian Civil War which followed the Russian Revolution in 1917. In early 1918, the Imperial Japanese Army General Staff explored the possibility of freeing Japan from future threats from Russia by occupying Siberia and establishing a Japanese controlled buffer state.\textsuperscript{19} The Army planned on using an attack on two fronts, from Vladivostok to Khabarovsk along the Amur River and along

\textsuperscript{15} Mason and Caiger, \textit{A History of Japan}, 268.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 269.
\textsuperscript{17} Nowikow-Priboi, \textit{Tsushima}, 189.
\textsuperscript{18} Drea, \textit{Japan’s Imperial Army}, 124.
\textsuperscript{19} Harris, \textit{Soldiers of the Sun}, 122.
the Chinese Eastern Railway towards Lake Baikal, the natural boundary of the Russian Far East.\textsuperscript{20}

The Japanese government refused to allow such an expedition and it was not until the following year and the request of President Wilson that the Japanese administration agreed to send 12,000 troops to Russia under Japanese command rather than as part of an international coalition. After this decision had been reached, the Imperial Japanese Army took over full control of the expedition and eventually deployed 70,000 troops.\textsuperscript{21} Contrary to the policy of the other intervening Allied powers, Japanese forces penetrated as far west as Lake Baikal. As a result, Japanese companies like Mitsubishi began to open offices and factories in the area of Vladivostok and Khabarovsk, and brought more than 50,000 civilian settlers to the area.\textsuperscript{22}

Following the withdrawal of the international coalition, Japanese forces would still occupy Russia’s Far East region. Even though Japan still supported the White Russian leader Admiral Kolchak, and later the regime of Ataman Semenov, political opposition in Japan prevented the Army from annexing the resource-rich region.\textsuperscript{23} Ultimately, on June 24, 1922 Japan announced that it would withdraw from all Russian territory with the exception of northern Sakhalin Island.\textsuperscript{24} What was the main motivation for Japan’s long involvement in Siberia? For one, it was the intense hostility of the Japanese government to communism and its determination to stop its spread in Japan’s sphere of influence. Furthermore, the Japanese

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 122.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 123.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 123.
\textsuperscript{23} Erickson, The Soviet High Command, 221.
\textsuperscript{24} Harris, Soldiers of the Sun, 124.
government saw the intervention as an opportunity to settle the "northern security problem" by creating a friendly buffer state on its northern flank.25

Concerned with the threat Russia still posed; the Japanese High Command identified the Russians still as its major concern and would view Russia as the “primary hypothetical enemy” in its Imperial National Defense Policy.26 The policy represented the beginning of offensive planning in the event of war, and set the tone as a concept of pre-emptive warfare. The reorganized defensive and offensive force became officially the Kwantung Army in 1919.27 Events that made the Kwantung Army special were its willingness to get directly involved in local affairs, without orders or approval of the officials in Tokyo. An important base for the independent actions of the Kwantung Army was the shared belief of its officers that “the War Ministry and General Staff in Tokyo did not fully realize the dangers posed by the Soviet Union” to Japanese interests.28

The Mukden Incident in 1931 became one of the examples that show direct local action. The staged attack on a Japanese railway would result in military operations of the Kwantung Army forces against the Chinese in northeast Asia and the invasion of Manchuria.29 The incident, also known as the Manchurian Incident, was engineered by Japanese military personnel as an excuse for an invasion of northern China, known as Manchuria. On September 18, 1931, an explosion on the Japanese controlled South Manchuria Railway near Mukden was used as an excuse by the Imperial Japanese Army to begin a full scale invasion of northern

25 Drea, Japan’s Imperial Army, 145.
28 Drea, Nomonhan, 12.
29 Drea, Japan’s Imperial Army, 168-169.
China that ultimately led to the occupation of Manchuria where Japan established its puppet state of Manchukuo only six months later.\textsuperscript{30}

The Chinese troops represented no match for the experienced Japanese troops and within five months of the Mukden Incident, the Imperial Japanese Army had overrun all major towns and cities in the provinces of Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang. Due to these circumstances, the Chinese government turned to the international community and the League of Nations for a peaceful resolution.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry issued a protest to the Japanese government and called for the immediate stop to Japanese military operations in Manchuria. On October 24, 1931, the

\textsuperscript{30} Varian Fry, \textit{War in China – America’s Role in the Far East}, (New York: The Foreign Policy Association, 1938), 51.

League of Nations did pass a resolution mandating the withdrawal of Japanese troops. However, Japan rejected the League of Nations resolution and argued for direct negotiations with the Chinese government, but negotiations went on without much result.\(^\text{32}\)

United States Secretary of State Henry Stimson proclaimed the Stimson Doctrine on January 7, 1932, stating that the United States would not recognize any government that was established as the result of Japanese actions in Manchuria. On January 14, a League of Nations commission, headed by Victor Bulwer-Lytton, arrived in Shanghai to examine the situation. In March, the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo was established, with the former emperor of China, Aisin-Gioro Puyi, as head of state.\(^\text{33}\)

In October of the same year, the Lytton Report was published and rejected the Japanese claim that the Manchurian invasion was an act of self-defense. The report further established that Manchukuo was the product of Japanese military aggression in China and the League of Nations refused to acknowledge Manchukuo as an independent nation. As a result of these developments, Japan resigned from the League of Nations in March 1933.\(^\text{34}\)

Within five months of the Mukden Incident, the entire Japanese High Command had been dragged, with some resistance, into the “conquest of all Manchuria” by the Kwantung Army.\(^\text{35}\) As a result of this invasion and the alliance between Manchukuo and Japan, the Soviet Union and the Empire of Japan would now face each other on an enlarged border. As a result, border incursions would begin what ultimately would end in the battle of Nomonhan.

\(^{32}\) Fry, *War in China*, 52.
\(^{33}\) Ibid., 57-58.
\(^{34}\) Ibid., 60.
\(^{35}\) Coox, *Nomonhan*, 40.
Even though the new established border with the Soviet Union posed a renewed threat, an even greater concern for the Kwantung Army was China.\textsuperscript{36} To guarantee the security of Manchukuo, and secure the southern flank in the event of a Soviet invasion, the Kwantung Army launched continued operations against China in the south which ultimately would result in full-scale war with China in 1937. The idea behind these operations was that the fractured forces of the Chinese army were not able to launch an effective resistance against the Japanese in Manchukuo.\textsuperscript{37}

The starting point of the full-scale conflict was the Marco Polo Bridge Incident on July 7, 1937, just outside of Beijing. Just prior to the incident, the Japanese army had occupied the Fengtai railway junction close to the Marco Polo Bridge, southwest of Beijing. During the night of July 7, 1937, a small Japanese force on maneuvers near the Marco Polo Bridge demanded entry to the town of Wanping in order to look for one of their soldiers. The Chinese garrison in the town refused the Japanese entry, and shortly after a shot was heard, both sides began firing. Following the incident, the Chinese government refused to make any concessions in the negotiation of the dispute. Both sides maintained their position and as a result the localized conflict continued to grow.

Following the Marco Polo Bridge incident, fighting spread to central China where the Japanese were able to achieve successive victories. Based on public pressure and support, the Japanese governments decided to continue the fight in China in search of a quick and decisive victory. However, a quick victory would not come and as a result, both sides continued the fight which would become known as the Second Sino-Japanese War which lasted from 1937 to 1945.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 67-68.
\textsuperscript{37} Drea, \textit{Japan’s Imperial Army}, 182.
Even with the newly started war against China, the so-called “Northern Problem” with the Soviet Union was the greatest concern for the Kwantung Army. Conscious of the passive policy by the Soviet government concerning Japanese expansion in the region, the Kwantung Army did avoid any unnecessary provocations during the Mukden Incident in 1931.\textsuperscript{38} The Soviets, alarmed by Japanese actions, would begin to build-up troops along the border. However, consideration for operations of the Soviet forces to assist the Chinese was quickly quashed by Stalin himself.

Simultaneous with the force build-up, the Soviets would begin to construct defensive fortifications, which included barricades and concrete pillboxes near the Amur River as an additional fortification line protecting the Trans-Siberian rail lines.\textsuperscript{39} These efforts were defensive and would not place the Soviet forces in position to attack Manchukuo, so they did not pose any threat for the Japanese. Contrary to the developments on the ground, Kwantung Army strategists began to plan for the possibility of a preventative war against the Soviet Union, and the ultra-nationalists in the Japanese government, like the Japanese War Minister Araki Sadao, made numerous statements suggesting Japan’s intent to wage war against the Soviet Union for a second time.\textsuperscript{40}

Hostilities would come to an unexpected and sudden halt in 1935 due to two important developments. The first development was the conclusion of the sale of Chinese Eastern Railway by the Soviet Union to the Japanese. The sale eased tensions between both countries enormously, especially after some leading officers of the Kwantung Army suggested that the

\textsuperscript{38} Coox, Nomonhan, 74.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 76-77.
\textsuperscript{40} Drea, Japan’s Imperial Army, 176.
purchase was not necessary because the army could simply seize the railway.\textsuperscript{41} That proposed move could have resulted in a large scale military confrontation, and so the sale of the railway presented good news for Soviet-Japanese relations in the region, at least for the time being.

The second development that put some ease on the strained Soviet-Japanese relationship was the announcement in March 1935 of the rearmament of Germany. This move diverted some Soviet attention from the Far East and delayed the Soviet troop built-up even further, because the Soviets had now to plan for the defense of their western border as well. Even with trouble brewing in Europe, Japanese Officers still concluded that the Soviet troops stationed on the border were better equipped and outnumbered the Kwantung Army. To offset this unbalance, Kwantung Officers looked to Japan for more armaments and better equipment, but Japan was not able to compete with Soviet Russia, where “the Russians devoted themselves predominantly to the build-up of military industry, thereby depressing living standards to a level so appalling that it would have provoked revolution in Japan” in the opinion of an Japanese intelligence expert.\textsuperscript{42}

To offset the military imbalance, the Japanese started a propaganda campaign of underestimating the enemy’s capabilities despite the intelligence briefing that would show otherwise. One story produced during this propaganda campaign, was that Stalin’s purge of the army did leave the Red Army leaderless. Major General Honma Masaharu told the Japanese press that the Stalinist purges of army leaders had pushed the Red Army to very near “disintegration and destruction.”\textsuperscript{43} These statements were intended to bolster the contempt

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{41} Coox, \textit{Nomonhan}, 75.
\textsuperscript{42} Coox, \textit{Nomonhan}, 85.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 85.
\end{flushright}
among Japanese military men for Soviet capabilities, solely based on the battles of the Russo-Japanese War and the 1918 Siberian Intervention against the Bolsheviks. Japanese soldiers would see the Soviet forces as badly equipped and largely, similar to the untrained Chinese soldiers that they had fought in Manchukuo. Although the Red Army’s command structure had been crippled by the purges, it still maintained a strong force of arms and was hardly a non-threat, especially along the border to Manchukuo. Furthermore, some Japanese Generals who served in Manchukuo voiced a contrary opinion. General Giga Tetsuji and General Tanaka Ryūkichi, stated that the Soviet forces were not comparable with the Chinese forces, because the Chinese were “weak-spirited.” But these voices of reason were effectively ignored.

Despite the propaganda of superiority the Japanese were fully aware of their numerical inferiority and shortage of modern equipment, but contrary to the doctrine of other armies, the Japanese considered this not to be an issue. The Japanese High command developed plans, in which the army was structured to win by encirclement against a force three times greater than the Kwantung Army. This strategy revealed how seriously the Japanese army underestimated the capability of individual Soviet soldiers and their officers. The basis of such an operation would be the traditional combat tactics of the Kwantung Army and the entire Imperial Japanese Army, encirclement of enemy forces based on superior speed and battlefield tactics, detouring of enemy reinforcements, and ultimate victory would be secured by traditional, hand-to-hand combat against an isolated foe. Field Service Regulations issued in 1928 had removed every

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44 Drea, *Japan’s Imperial Army*, 142.
45 Coox, *Nomonhan*, 86.
46 Ibid., 86
47 Drea, *Japan’s Imperial Army*, 159.
reference to “surrender,” “retreat,” and “defense,” erasing them as sanctioned maneuvers.\textsuperscript{49} In addition, “no Japanese field army had higher morale or motivation” than the Kwantung Army, because it was considered to be always ready for hostilities with the enemy from the north.\textsuperscript{50}

This ideology laid the base for the Japanese belief that their fearlessness, superior spirit, and close combat would enable them to smash the Red Army in spite of the total number of troops on the battlefield. In their view, this was not unreasonable because only a rapid and decisive attack into Soviet territory could result in victory. The fact is, an endurance-based fight was basically not winnable for the Japanese Army due to the greater resources available to the Red Army. This would be proven in their inevitable showdown with the Soviets during the Changkufeng Incident.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 13.
  \item \textsuperscript{50} Coox, “Kwantung Army”, 423.
\end{itemize}
A serious diplomatic issue lay at the heart of all the military preparations being made. Though efforts had begun as early as 1924 to clearly determine the border between Chinese Manchuria and Soviet territory, the weakness of the Chinese state and the strong Russian sphere of influence effectively intervened to prevent any sharp lines from ever being drawn. What the Japanese had claimed as Manchukuo then, was an area with “ambiguous and indefinite” borders, regularly expanding in the south and virtually demarcated in the north, northwest, and northeast.\(^{51}\) Conflict over this particular region was not new and the earliest conflict between the Empire of Japan and Czarist Russia dates back to 1910 and just seven years later, in 1917, Russian border guards attempted to occupy the contested territory.\(^{52}\) Consequently, the reality of borders came in the form of military power, as both sides started programs to fortify their border positions, send reinforcement, and engage in espionage. The Japanese reported that between 1932 and 1934, 152 small scale disputes occurred, often in the form of Soviet abduction of natives, intelligence-gathering operations, or interference with the mail. Several violations of Japanese airspace, minor attacks on shipping, and weapons fire across the border were also recorded.\(^{53}\)

The frequency of such violations, and the intensity of them, continued to increase as the border issue remained unresolved. An armed dispute over a small island on the Amur River led to the sinking of a Soviet gunboat in 1937, but diplomacy and the unfinished military

\(^{51}\) Kikuoka, *Changkufeng*, 30.
\(^{53}\) Coox, *Nomonhan*, 92.
preparations on both sides narrowly averted a major conflict.\textsuperscript{54} In the same year, the Japanese government announced a “Five-Year Plan for the Production of War Materials” as a direct response to the developments in the region.\textsuperscript{55} The unstable relation between the Soviet Union and the Empire of Japan would further deteriorate as time went on and the border negotiations failed to reach any binding agreement. Tensions between both sides began to intensify again in 1938. It would only be a matter of time until Japan and the Soviet Union would be engaged in a full-scale conflict. The Soviet side would pay much attention to their Eastern Frontier and Foreign Commissar Litvinov stated that the Soviet Union was aware that the Japanese aggression was not only conducted towards China, but posed a direct threat to the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{56} He further stated that “aggressors will always seek new prey in those territories whose masters have shown their flabbiness and their inability to defend their position.”\textsuperscript{57} Both sides would ultimately exchange blows for the first time at the battle of Changkufeng, or Lake Khasan, in 1938, which was centered on a hill called Changkufeng.

This battle did not involve the Kwantung Army directly, but rather the Imperial Japanese Army of Korea, the Japanese garrison force of colonial Korean, largely organized for occupational duties rather than offensive actions. Changkufeng would present a significant step towards the seriousness of the conflicts that had marked the border. These conflicts would not only involve growing numbers of troops, but also armor and air support as part of its operations.\textsuperscript{58} The battlefield was the border region between northeastern Korea, Southeast

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 112-114.
\textsuperscript{55} Kikuoka, Changkufeng, 5.
\textsuperscript{56} Coox, Nomonhan, 120.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 120.
Manchukuo, and the Soviet Maritime Province. Like most of the frontier, the area was continuously contested, and Changkufeng presented an important high ground for the defense of the local region. The area, despite being more a part of Manchukuo than of Korea, was guarded by the Japanese army garrison at Hunchun, a part of the Korea Army. Nevertheless, the Kwantung Army was directly involved in the proceedings of the fighting, and the battle of Changkufeng would offer a variety of lessons in terms of the implications of modern armor, artillery, and fundamental Soviet capability.

The incident started with the interception of a decoded message on July 6, 1938. The Signal Intelligence (SIGINT) of the Japanese Kwantung Army decoded a Soviet message that stated that Soviet Border Guards occupied the Changkufeng Hill and started to construct field positions. The occupation of this territory posed a strategic threat for the Japanese Korean Army because it commanded the Korean port-city of Rajin, and threatened the strategic railways linking Korea to Manchuria. Over a period of two weeks, the Soviet Border troops were able to fortify the mountain substantially by building emplacements, observation trenches, barb entanglements, and communications facilities. The occupation of this particular mountain was interpreted by Imperial Japanese Army in Tokyo as demonstrating that “the Soviet government had obvious intentions to intervene in the Far Eastern conflict on the side of China” and as a result Japan could face its first important conflict since the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05 and its two interventions in China. Furthermore, Japan had never faced such a

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59 Kikuoka, Changkufeng, 8.
61 Coox, Nomonhan, 121.
well-trained and equipped enemy like the new armies of the Soviet Union and a drawn-out conflict could undermine the Japanese war effort in China.\(^{63}\)

Map 2 – The Changkufeng Incident, July-August 1938\(^{64}\)

Kwantung Army intelligence would send decoded order to the Korea Army headquarters at once, who observed on that same day the presence of Soviet horsemen performing reconnaissance operations on the hill. The Japanese, anticipating the imminent expansion of operations against China, decided to adopt a ‘wait-and-see’ tactic. One week later, additional mounted soldiers arrived at Changkufeng and began an expansion of the outpost, preparing

\(^{63}\) Ibid., 94.
\(^{64}\) Goldman, *Nomonhan, 1939*, 57.
gun emplacements, observation points, and communications facilities, all supported by a logistical network newly established all across the Changkufeng and Lake Khasan area; their disposition made it clear that the Soviets intended a “stay of indefinite duration.” The Japanese 19th Division was sent to reinforce the insufficient border guards in the area, but would not launch operations against the Soviets, waiting for further instructions from High Command. The Kwantung Army, on the other hand quickly moved to provide a harsh warning to the Korean garrison forces. If they did not act, the Kwantung Army would be left with no choice but to handle matters in the region on their own. To avoid being seen as weak, the garrison units immediately began to make plans for force reconnaissance operations against the Soviet positions, with the aim of conducting a “limited” operation without pursuit into Soviet territory.

However, this minor border crossing incident in a remote area would escalate suddenly, and would become a textbook example of a ‘limited’ war. The battle plan called for the use of the 19th Division, operating without tank or air support, to resume control of Changkufeng. If the Soviets would bring their full regional might to fight this limited opponent, they would most certainly defeat it with ease, but the Imperial Japanese Army was confident that they would not expand the conflict due to the potential involvement of the Kwantung Army. Furthermore, Japanese commanders believed that Stalin would not be willing to waste resources in an area where the Sino-Japanese conflict had already shown the “enormous human resources and

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65 Coox, *Nomonhan*, 122
66 Ibid., 122.
67 Ibid., 124.
artillery shells consumed in the prolonged fighting,” an ironic statement considering the outcome.69

The situation around Changkufeng quickly escalated. On July 15, a Japanese patrol near Hill 52, to the southeast of Changkufeng, came under fire from Soviet small arms, and was forced to retreat. The Japanese saw this as an ambush set against them in their own territory. The Soviets, on the other hand, saw a Japanese incursion on to their territory. The official protest by Japan’s ambassador to the Soviet Union, Shigemitsu Mamoru, was met with a cold Soviet resolve to retain their position.70 By July 18, Soviet strength near Changkufeng totaled around 130 men with several heavy guns, and the Japanese forces in the region were told to make one more effort to negotiate. An envoy was dispatched to the Soviet forces with a message informing them that the encroachment on Changkufeng would be considered an invasion and that “necessary action... will be taken... with firm determination” by the 19th Division if they did not leave.71 Simultaneously, the Japanese Foreign Office would release a statement that indicated that “responsibility for all possible complications... shall be laid on the Soviet government.”72 Furthermore, the Japanese government stated that the conflict was initiated by Soviet troops and that these troops had fired first.73 This and an additional Soviet intrusion on July 29 demanded a Japanese response.74 Finally a platoon would be dispatched to immediately evict the Soviets.

69 Kikuoka, Changkufeng, 82.
71 New York Times, 19 July 1938, 12, quoted in Coox, Small War, 39.
74 Kikuoka, Changkufeng, 112.
The Soviet troops were outnumbered but with the support of a light machine gun, were able to halt the Japanese offensive. A break in fire ultimately allowed a Japanese charge to succeed, and the Japanese troops would kill eight Soviet soldiers in close combat. Soviet cavalry who moved from near Lake Khasan to counterattack would be stopped by Japanese mortar fire. The repulsion of the Japanese attack would be confirmed by the Soviet government. The Soviets stated that “on July 29, two Japanese-Manchurian detachments crossed the Soviet frontier and tried to seize heights on Soviet territory,” but the “frontier guards” were able to repel the encroachment. The conflict quickly escalated as more Japanese reinforcements arrived to face Soviet forces now moving in from the northwest as General Grigori Shtern, the commander of the 1st Independent Red Banner Far Eastern Army, began to commit additional units to the fight.

The Soviet troops committed to Chankufeng would include the 39th Rifle Corps, consisting of three Rifle Divisions and the 2nd Mechanized Corps, which would engage the Japanese 19th Division along with some Manchukuo units. At the same time, one Japanese unit moved against the fortifications on Changkufeng, which had opened up with machine gun fire. The Soviet counterattack on the same day was supported with tanks and artillery fire, and prompted further Japanese reinforcement.

On July 30, daytime troop movements were restricted, and plans were made for a decisive night attack. During the same time, the Soviet positions had been reinforced, and the Japanese estimated that they faced at least a battalion and a half in the area as well as twenty

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76 Erickson, *The Soviet High Command*, 497.
tanks, artillery, and three hundred soldiers emplaced on Changkufeng itself.\textsuperscript{78} To strike a decisive blow against the Soviets, the Japanese soldiers were instructed to charge without firing, and enter quickly into hand-to-hand combat range: “The key to success in a night assault lies in the absolute prohibition of firing by our side. Great success can be expected from... a charge. Moreover, human beings are bestowed with life for the first time after they die.”\textsuperscript{79} This invocation of the ‘way of the warrior’ to justify a costly offensive would not be the last and can be observed throughout the war in the Pacific theater and once again showing their miscalculating judgment for victory.

At first, the Japanese attack began smoothly under the cover of darkness, opening two breaches in the Soviet lines before being detected by guard dogs and revealed by flares. The Changkufeng defenders, taken by surprise, were unable to place accurate fire on the attacking Japanese, who were forbidden to return fire and betray its position. Around 2:15 am, the wire obstacles were cleared and bayonets were fixed in preparation for the main attack toward the Soviet emplacements. By 2:30 am, the Soviets had organized their defensive lines and were supported by light and heavy machine gun fire, grenades, tanks, and emplacement guns, but still the attacking Japanese would only use sword and bayonet.\textsuperscript{80}

In realization of an additional line of entanglement ahead, mostly made of barbed wire obstacles, the Japanese advance slowed down in the hail of machine gun fire. To clear the newly encountered obstacle, a clearing team, not unlike the teams used at Port Arthur in the

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 129-131.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 132-133.
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 143-144.
Russo-Japanese War, breached the wire with heavy casualties.\textsuperscript{81} A Japanese regimental report on the attack would disdainfully note that the Soviets “relied exclusively on fire power; there was no instance of a brave enemy charge employing cold steel.”\textsuperscript{82} Interestingly enough, the Japanese troops were hoping for fire support of their own as they began to attempt to overpower the Soviet positions.\textsuperscript{83}

At the end of that attack, the Japanese would claim that at least 300 Soviets were killed; the Soviets would admit only 68, at a combined cost of 45 Japanese killed and 133 wounded. This would include a disproportionately large number of officers who led the bayonet charges, a recurring phenomenon during the Pacific war which would deprive the Imperial Japanese Army of its experienced leadership. Despite the success of the battle itself, the loss of leadership was a major problem. One Japanese staff officer recommended that after Changkufeng “night attacks should not be conducted too often because of the loss-of-leaders problem.”\textsuperscript{84}

Nevertheless, the Japanese were not impressed with the Soviet defense of the hills. Soviet soldiers would retreat as soon as they came under heavy fire, which suggested that running in the face of a barrage “must be only natural for a foe that relies exclusively on firepower.”\textsuperscript{85} The Japanese assumed control of the Soviet fortifications, and had only to dig in and wait for a diplomatic end to the conflict, thinking that they had settled the matter in “one blow,” so they believed.\textsuperscript{86} The Red Army’s response to the Japanese seizure of Changkufeng

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{81} Coox, \textit{Small War}, 145.
\item \textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 147.
\item \textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 149.
\item \textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 169.
\item \textsuperscript{85} 75th Infantry Regiment sentô shôhô [battle report], 1 July 1938, as quoted in Coox, \textit{Small War}, 171.
\item \textsuperscript{86} Coox, \textit{Small War}, 185
\end{itemize}
was delayed. They would not launch an immediate counterattack, but instead additional Russian ground forces were moved to the area, and for the first time the Soviet Air Force would be used against the Japanese. The inaccurate Japanese anti-aircraft fire would enable the Russian aircrafts to fly low and engage their targets more easily, but the poor aim of the Soviet pilots would deny the Japanese army an opportunity to learn how important air power would be in the future battles to come. As a result of these attacks, tactical air power would remain a poorly understood element of Japanese military engagements until later engagements in World War II.

The remainder of the battle of Changkufeng would be fought on the ground. On August 2, the Soviets would launch their counterattack, under the leadership of Marshal Blyukher. The Japanese had reinforced their units at Changkufeng, Shachaofeng, and Hill 52 in preparation for the Russian advance and their forces did repulse several daytime advances and a night attack, which were, contrary to the Japanese advances, supported by Soviet artillery, armor, and aircraft bombardment. The pattern of Soviet attack, and Japanese repulsion, Soviet retreat and regrouping would be repeated over the next few days. The Soviets, due to their superior firepower and aerial cover, would escape and buildup strength relatively easily due to the large amount of troops available to them.

General Suetaka, commander of the Japanese 19th Division, continued to move Japanese forces into the region, and by August 3 he had his entire division committed to the defense. Soon, however, unrest began to grow among his men, constantly under siege by

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87 Ibid., 187-188.
88 Erickson, The Soviet High Command, 498.
89 Coox, Small War, 207-209.
Russian shells and persevering through numerous light offensives, all while being unable to make a single aggressive move due to the ‘political’ insistence on waging a strictly limited war. Defensive warfare, after all, proved to be a poor fit for the Japanese military ethic, which stressed the attack and the glory of death in battle, not the ingloriousness of defense during which the soldier would be pounded by artillery shells fired without any chance of retribution. A coordinated Soviet offensive on August 5 did little to boost their spirits. Hitting the Japanese with the full might of their combined arms, including tanks, bombers, artillery, and infantry, the Soviets attacked the Japanese at all three major defensive points simultaneously, and inflicted large numbers of casualties by zeroing in on the defensive fortifications.90

By evening on August 6 Changkufeng was in danger of being overrun, with hand-to-hand fighting taking place only fifty meters from the last fortifications, and the Soviets continued to reinforce their units without hindrance. By August 10, however, the diplomatic process resulted in an armistice, which was put into place on the battlefield by noon, on the next day.91 The negotiated terms would make further fighting unnecessary because the Japanese had to abandon their hard-defended hills and return back across the Tumen River with the Soviet flag flying over the heights of Changkufeng.92

Even though the first large engagement between the Japanese Army and the Soviet Red Army resulted in a defeat for the Japanese, with 600 killed and more than 2,500 wounded compared to 236 killed and 611 wounded on the Soviet side, the Imperial Japanese Army staff

90 Ibid., 230-231.
92 Coox, Small War, 247.
would not use the outcome to adjust accordingly.\textsuperscript{93} Japanese interpretation of this particular engagement saw the Soviets as less skillful in the use of tactics and troop deployment. Furthermore, the Kwantung Army concluded that the ongoing purges of the Red Army leadership impaired its efficiency.\textsuperscript{94} With continuous border clashes between Japan and the Soviet Union, more than 1,000 confrontations occurred between 1938 and 1945, the Kwantung Army would pay a steep price for its miscalculation in the upcoming engagement at Nomonhan.\textsuperscript{95} The fight at Chankufeng would have consequences not only for the Kwantung Army, but also in Japan itself. The Emperor was furious over the renewed independent move by the Kwantung Army and ordered that “no one soldier is to be moved again without the express permission of the Throne” and the incident would result in the dissolving of the Konoye cabinet, a cabinet dedicated to forceful expansion in China and Siberia.\textsuperscript{96} They had overlooked the ultimate reason for their failure to win at Changkufeng and once again would pay the price with their defeat at Nomonhan.

\textsuperscript{93} North-China Herald, “Both Sides Withdraw,” August 24, 1938, p. 320.  
\textsuperscript{94} Drea, Nomonhan, 14.  
\textsuperscript{95} Kotani, Japanese Intelligence, 123.  
\textsuperscript{96} Edwin P. Hoyt, Warlord: Tojo Against The World (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2001), 16.
Chapter 3: The Battle of Nomonhan Incident (Khalkin Gol) – the Beginning of an Undeclared War

Only one year after losing at the battle of Changkufeng, the Japanese and Soviet armies would again meet in a major conflict, but the consequences from Nomonhan would be far more severe for the Japanese than for the Soviets. The Nomonhan Incident would be remembered as “the baptism of modern military conflict” for both the Imperial Japanese Army and the Soviet Red Army, featuring “direct, fierce fighting” with a diversity of types of military engagement.97

The conflict would showcase the failure of Japanese tactics and equipment against a Red Army force led by Georgi Zhukov, the future Hero of the Soviet Union, who used tactics that combined the use of aircraft and tank units, a tactic later known as Blitzkrieg. The stage for the new conflict was located in western Manchuria, a flat zone of grasslands and deserts connected to the disputed ‘border’ of the Mongolian People’s Republic, a communist Soviet satellite state. The focus of the disputed border lay at the Halha River, also known as Khalkin Gol. When Manchukuo was established, following the Japanese intervention, the border situation remained unclear, and the Kwantung Army determined that it would be better to leave the region vague until Manchukuo was strong enough to establish a clear and beneficial border line.98 By 1938, the Japanese and Manchukuoan governments clarified their position, and asserted that the Halha River was the boundary of Manchukuo. This assertion meant cutting into the area claimed by the Mongolian People’s Republic by about twenty miles. The disputed area held major strategic value because if the Japanese were able to extend control into

97 Drea, Nomonhan, 14.
98 Coox, Nomonhan, 143.
Mongolia, they would severely threaten the Soviet Far Eastern territories, cripple the most effective base for Soviet activities in North China, and be in a great position to threaten the Trans-Siberian Railway in an event of war between Japan and the Soviet Union.

The Kwantung Army, in anticipation of these events, fortified the western regions of Manchukuo, which led to a build-up of Mongolian People’s Republic forces (MPR) along the border of their own. Between the years, 1935 and April 1939, 108 “shooting incidents” occurred in the disputed area. These “minor incidences” included the use of armor, aircraft, and artillery as well as the usual variety of infantry skirmishes. These incidents involved only

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99 Goldman, Nomonhan, 1939, 78.
100 Coox, Nomonhan, 149-159.
forces of the MPR, the Kwantung Army, and the Manchukuoan Army, without the direct involvement of the Soviet Union. Despite Stalin’s announcement that the Soviet government would support the MPR against Japanese aggression, which was based on a ten-year mutual defense agreement, only a “few Imperial Japanese Army intelligence officials detected the significance of recent changes in Soviet military doctrine regarding supporting the MPR.”

On the eve of the outbreak of major hostilities, the main Kwantung Army force in the region was the 23rd Division, commanded by Lieutenant General Komatsubara Michitarō, with a total strength of around 13,000 men. The 23rd Division was inexperienced in comparison with other units of the Kwantung Army. Many of the soldiers were one-year volunteers, as well as cadets, and reservists filling in the leadership positions. Another major problem for the 23rd Division was its equipment. The division had only one light tank company, one transport truck unit, and some cavalry. With armor and artillery clearly dominating the battlefield, the 23rd Division was massively underequipped in that sector as well. An ever larger deficit could be found in the anti-tank capabilities of the infantry, where the reconnaissance regiment had no anti-tank weapons at all, and the engineer companies had only explosive charges.

Clearly, the 23rd Division was not the expected elite force to face the Soviet enemy in the upcoming border conflict. Based on the Japanese underestimation of their enemy, the 23rd Division was a perfectly suited fighting force for effectively handling Mongolian cavalry and light infantry forces, but the Division was by no means prepared for a major encounter with a modernized Red Army. The main reason to send the 23rd Division was that the Kwantung Army

102 Coox, Nomonhan, 175-176.
103 Ibid, 178-179.
was busy with major operations at the time, and two-thirds of available divisions were already deployed to China. The combination of overstretched resources and underestimating the enemy forces would have dire consequences during the small border skirmish that spiraled out of control. This conflict would provide a thorough test for “Japanese tactical innovation, alterations in force structure, and doctrinal development designed specifically to fight the Soviets.”

On May 4, 1939, a Mongolian cavalry force of around thirty to fifty horsemen moved toward the Balshagal Heights near Nomonhan and established an outpost. This action was seen by the Japanese as an intrusion on their claimed territory. On the other hand, the MPR saw itself moving within its own boundary. Both sides reported this incident in different ways, the Japanese reports suggest a fortified base was being constructed, while the MPR and Soviet story spoke only of a cavalry unit grazing its horses along the eastern bank of the river. Unfortunately, a firefight broke out between a Manchukuoan Army border patrol and the MPR cavalry detachment, resulting in a retreat across the river by the Mongolian horsemen. The next day saw a second clash between the two forces and the horsemen were driven back across the river a second time.

Events quickly got out of control due to the Kwantung Army Operations Order 1488, which encapsulated the ideal for resolving border disputes along the boundaries of Manchukuo. The designated plan was based on the idea of victory through ‘one blow’. In any case, Kwantung Army forces would counter any enemy “ambitions by completely destroying them,” and to accomplish the mission, the troops were authorized to cross any poorly defined

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104 Drea, In the Service of the Emperor, 1.
105 Coox, Nomonhan, 189-191.
borders and “establish boundaries on their own initiative.”\(^{106}\) Furthermore, the Japanese troops were authorized to “challenge the enemy courageously and endeavor to triumph in their zone of action without concerning themselves about the consequences, which will be the responsibility of higher headquarters.”\(^{107}\)

The commander of the 23\(^{rd}\) Division, General Komatsubara, reacted quickly to the May 10 and 11 incidents by drawing up a plan to commit his reconnaissance regiment, two infantry companies, and all available Manchukuoan Army forces, against the Mongolian cavalry forces. He further requested that reconnaissance aircraft and fighters be attached to his command from the Kwantung Army. This request would be granted and both fighters and light bombers would be attached to his division. Light tanks being field tested in the region were also placed under his control.\(^{108}\) This was a tremendous excess of force to handle the situation, but it represented the precise implementation of the spirit of Operations Order 1488. However, Order 1488, rather than preventing escalation as it was deliberately intended, would set off the most devastating battle of the entire border conflict.

On May 15, a small, mobile Japanese force engaged the Mongolian forces, driving them across the Halha River and dropping bombs well into territory recognized as part of the MPR even by Japanese standards.\(^{109}\) With this attack, General Komatsubara hoped that the mere appearance of his forces “would frighten away the trespassers.”\(^{110}\) Only two days after this ‘punitive action’, MPR forces reappeared on the eastern side of the river, a move which Komatsubara interpreted as a provocation. By assembling a new force of more than 1,600

\(^{106}\) Ibid, 186.
\(^{107}\) Ibid, 186-187.
\(^{108}\) Ibid, 193-194.
\(^{109}\) Ibid, 197-199.
\(^{110}\) Drea, *In the Service of the Emperor*, 2.
Japanese soldiers, Komatsubara prepared to move immediately against the MPR cavalry, but warnings from Kwantung Army staff officers against unnecessary haste caused him to wait until May 27 to launch his attack.  

Map 4 – Nomonhan, May 28-29, 1939

Japanese forces would move by night to encircle the enemy, and then attack and cut off all possible escape routes. This would lead to the complete destruction of MPR forces east of the Halha River. Rapid mop-up operations would follow the destruction of the MPR forces, after which Japanese forces would withdraw to their side of the River. The new plans didn’t include any “concern” for an enemy counterattack. All of the planning was concentrated on preventing

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their escape. The Japanese, after all, did not think highly of the MPR horsemen, and even the presence of Soviet forces was hardly considered, especially since their “purged” leadership was unlikely to be able to take the initiative.\textsuperscript{113}

On the morning of May 28, the Japanese reconnaissance force that was ordered to cut off the retreat of the MPR troops was annihilated. Led by Azuma Yaozo, the reconnaissance force of horsemen, light tanks, and trucks preceded in a rapid drive through the left side of the MPR defenses. Near 10:00 am, Azuma came under attack from the flanks and rear by a well-equipped enemy force, which forced him to fall back behind a nearby slope to avoid direct fire. The Japanese reconnaissance unit had no artillery support, which severely limited their tactical possibilities. In hope of a breakthrough from the main force, which Azuma believed was fighting nearby, the reconnaissance unit chose to stand and fight rather than retreat.\textsuperscript{114}

By the night, despite suffering casualties and limited reinforcements, the Japanese began to make plans for a decisive counterattack in the darkness. Soviet units in the area, anticipating the move launched their own attack with 500-600 infantry, supported by tanks, artillery, and searchlights. Azuma rapidly organized his men and ordered an offensive by all soldiers. This offensive drove the Soviet troops back when they were within fifty meters from the Japanese position.\textsuperscript{115}

By May 30, the task force was ordered to disengage, mainly on the basis that the “enemy’s limited intentions on the right side of the Halha River were smashed and the foe’s

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid, 205-206.  
\textsuperscript{114} Drea, \textit{Nomonhan}, 28.  
\textsuperscript{115} Coox, \textit{Nomonhan}, 206-211.
fighting spirit was eroded, causing him to remain on the left bank for now."\textsuperscript{116} Despite this development, the Kwantung Army was optimistic that they would be able to “drop the matter.”\textsuperscript{117} When Komatsubara was preparing his plans for the assault, he had virtually no knowledge that a Soviet mechanized battalion with around 100 attached aircraft arrived in the vicinity of the MPR forces. Even worse, by underestimating the situation no one in the Kwantung Army Staff expected that the Soviets would become heavily involved in the fighting at Nomonhan.\textsuperscript{118} Indeed, an erroneous assumption with grave consequences for the Kwantung Army. The Soviets, however, would take notice of a Deputy Commander named Georgi Zhukov.

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid, 239.
\textsuperscript{117} Drea, \textit{Nomonhan}, 4.
\textsuperscript{118} Coox, \textit{Nomonhan}, 246.
Chapter 4: The Battle of Nomonhan Incident (Khalkin Gol) – Zhukov Takes Command

Following the debacle of the Japanese reconnaissance unit, both sides began to build-up reinforcements. The Soviet Union made a major change in the command of the forces that supported the MPR. On June 5, Deputy Commander Georgi Zhukov arrived at the headquarters of the 57th Corps, the mechanized group that had successfully repulsed the earlier offensive. Zhukov, who would later become the most decorated Russian officer of all time for his counteroffensive against Nazi Germany, represented a new generation of Red Army officers who had survived the purge and taken charge of rebuilding the Soviet armed forces.

Zhukov, born into a poor peasant family in a small town in the Kaluga Governorate, was conscripted into the Russian Army in 1915, where he served in a Cavalry Regiment during World War I. Like many young soldiers, Zhukov joined the Bolshevik Party shortly after the October Revolution and fought in the Russian Civil War that lasted from 1918 to 1921. Following his service during the Russian Civil War, Georgi Zhukov commanded a number of Cavalry Regiments and was named Deputy Commander of the Belarusian Military District in 1938. These assignments would lay the base for his understanding and success in mechanized warfare.

On June 1, 1939, Zhukov was ordered to Moscow to an immediate meeting with the People’s Commissar for Defense, Marshal Voroshilov. Following the recent arrests and execution of leading members of the Soviet officer corps, Zhukov and his wife assumed that he would be on the way to imprisonment or even execution. Rather than being arrested, Zhukov

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was briefed by Voroshilov on the event that occurred on the Mongolian steppes. He would inform Zhukov that the Japanese had made a surprise attack and invaded the territory of “friendly Mongolia,” and that the Soviet government assumed that the Japanese had started a “major military adventure” that threatened Mongolia and the frontier of the Soviet Union.120

After assuming command, Zhukov quickly assessed the situation and found the preparations and forces in the area insufficient for dealing with what he expected to be a continuing “Japanese military adventure.”121 The first measure taken by Zhukov was the request of major reinforcements, which he received during June 1939. The reinforcements included a tank brigade, three mechanized brigades, a motorized rifle brigade, a heavy artillery detachment, and an additional MPR cavalry division, as well as more than one hundred fighter aircraft and twenty one special pilots, all recipients of the Gold Star Medal of the Hero of the Soviet Union.122 One of these pilots, A.W. Woroshejkin, later recalled how important this fight against the Japanese was. “The fight against the Japanese Imperialistic forces represented a great chance for the proletariat forces of the Soviet Union. With this fight we were able to show the world that the Soviet soldiers are capable to withstand the pressure of the Imperialist world directed against the U.S.S.R.”123 This commitment in combination with political schooling would prove that the Japanese had made a huge mistake by underestimating the Soviet fighting abilities. Soviet soldiers and pilots would prove that they were equally well trained and equipped to counter the Japanese offensive. These opposing forces began to assemble along

121 Coox, Nomonhan, 252.
122 The Memoirs of Marshal Zhukov, p. 150.
123 A.W. Woroshejkin, Jagdflieger (Berlin: Militärverlag der Deutsche Demokratischen Republik, 1985), 218.
the border as soon as they arrived. These measures would show the Kwantung Army that the border issue had not been resolved.124

On the Japanese side, the Kwantung Army formed a new, powerful task force from the core of the elite 7th Division, under the command of Lieutenant General Yasuoka Masaomi. The Yasuoka task force was then placed under Komatsubara’s command, in keeping with the Kwantung Army decision to place all confidence in his actions in the western theater.125 The 23rd Division was reinforced with anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns as well as additional infantry companies.126

The immediate operational goal was to surround and rout the entire group of Soviet and Mongolian troops east of the Halha River, to cross the river and destroy any remaining Soviet reserves and to seize and expand the bridgehead west of the Halha River to lay the way for future operation in the area.127 In the eyes of the Japanese, this would be a “short war” fought to a “quick and decisive conclusion,” the ideal solution for the Japanese strategists involved in the planning.128 The next clash between the Imperial Japanese Army and the Red Army would prove that the planning staff of the Kwantung Army was utterly misled. The spearhead of the attack force arrived on June 22 and quickly became involved in local skirmishes with the enemy. These enemy units were identified as “definitely and entirely Soviet troops,” rather than a mix of Soviet and Mongolian forces.129

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124 Coox, Nomonhan, 255.
125 Ibid, 260.
126 Drea, Nomonhan, 29.
127 The Memoirs of Marshal Zhukov, p. 151.
128 Coox, Nomonhan, 261.
129 Ibid., 285.
On July 2 and 3 a river-crossing operation began across a single bridge under the cover of night, which quickly seized the local high ground from unprepared Soviet defenders. Nevertheless, the Japanese encountered a defense sector established during the earlier operations, meaning that breaking through a single line only brought them face-to-face with another set of fortifications. Heavy counterattacks on July 3 stopped the Japanese offensive and forced them to take defensive positions on a battlefield that suddenly became “black with

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130 Goldman, Nomnonhan, 1939, 113.
131 Drea, Nomnonhan, 39.
enemy armor.”\textsuperscript{132} The defense was only successful for a brief time, during which a significant number of enemy armored vehicles and tanks were destroyed by ‘human bullet’ tactics, including firebombs, grenades thrown into hatches, and direct boarding with swords drawn.\textsuperscript{133}

However, Zhukov was not about to lose the vital heights, and immediately mobilized the 11\textsuperscript{th} Tank Brigade, the 3\textsuperscript{rd} Battalion, and all available MPR elements against the Japanese forces that struggled to gain a foothold across the Halha River. To counter this attack, Japanese soldiers were filling cider bottles with gasoline, which would ignite when shattered against the hot armor shell of the Soviet tanks. By setting the enemy armor on fire, Soviet tankers would flee out of their tanks, where they could be met with rifle fire or flashing blades.\textsuperscript{134} Even though it was an effective strategy which destroyed several enemy tanks, the overall effect was insignificant, because the Soviets still had large numbers of tanks at their disposal.

General Komatsubara, after determining that the losses were getting out of hand, ordered a retreat to the opposite side of the Halha River. A senior non-commissioned officer in Komatsubara’s headquarter would describe the battlefield situation as terrible with rumors emerging that “our own units were surrounded by a huge number of enemy tanks and faced complete destruction.”\textsuperscript{135} After the disorganized retreat, Japanese engineers blew up the bridge they had constructed across the Halha River to prevent pursuing Soviet tanks from striking their rear.\textsuperscript{136} Although Japanese attacks and Soviet counterattacks would continue into mid-July, none of these engagements achieved any decisive results and at last, Komatsubara ordered a retreat in preparation for another all-out general offensive.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[\textsuperscript{132}] Coox, \textit{Nomonhan}, 300.
\item[\textsuperscript{133}] Ibid, 301-302.
\item[\textsuperscript{134}] Ibid, 309-311.
\item[\textsuperscript{135}] “Diary of Otani,” as sided in \textit{The Memoirs of Marshal Zhukov}, 153.
\item[\textsuperscript{136}] Coox, \textit{Nomonhan}, 338.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
The new plan was straightforward and optimistic: following a two hour bombardment by artillery, infantry rifle units would push to the riverbank with the support of the Japanese Air Force. The second phase would be a cleanup operation securing the main bridgehead of the Soviet forces then quieting the remaining artillery.\textsuperscript{137} The plan was a classic offensive, but it was completely ignoring the battlefield situation. Japanese forces would have only minimal support from armored vehicles and few tanks, which did not match the enemy.\textsuperscript{138} In addition, no changes had been made in terms of antitank capabilities, which were based almost entirely on gasoline-filled cider bottles made on the field and simply used as Molotov cocktails.

The attack began on the morning of July 23. After an additional hour of bombardment, observers reported insufficient destruction of the enemy fortifications, but the Japanese artillery soon turned to attacking the Soviet guns to provide suppressive fire for the advancing infantry.\textsuperscript{139} The ground attack was stopped after some early successes, particularly with the arrival of Soviet armor.\textsuperscript{140} Following two days and two nights of attacks, the Japanese troops still had not made it to the river, or reclaimed the ground lost in early July.\textsuperscript{141} Soviet combined arms were directly to blame, but the failure of the attack was already ensured in the tactical planning phase, which had dramatically underestimated the challenge of pushing the enemy back across the Halha River after allowing more than ten days for fortification and defensive build-up on their part. As long as the Japanese were forced to fight on the defensive, they were

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid, 526.
\textsuperscript{138} Drea, \textit{Nomonhan}, 53.
\textsuperscript{139} Coox, \textit{Nomonhan}, 529.
\textsuperscript{140} Drea, \textit{In the Service of the Emperor}, 2.
\textsuperscript{141} Coox, \textit{Nomonhan}, 542.
unable to make use of their prized offensive tactics, which slashed their chances of success dramatically.\textsuperscript{142}

Following the defeat, the combat transitioned into “a war of attrition,” and Japanese forces began to dig in.\textsuperscript{143} This would present the perfect opportunity for a general Soviet counterattack on a battered and exposed foe. Zhukov would earn his reputation as a brilliant commander for his leadership in the European theater, but it was his offensive against the Japanese in August of 1939 which began his brilliant career. He devised an attack to be launched no later than August 20, with the goal of defeating all Japanese forces in the area originally claimed by Soviet demarcations of the Mongolian border.\textsuperscript{144} To guarantee success against the overconfident Kwantung Army, Zhukov maximized his available troops. He obtained two rifle divisions and a rifle regiment, a tank brigade, an airborne brigade, an artillery regiment, an anti-aircraft regiment, and several tank companies, as well as additional attack aircraft from the Soviet interior. To supply such an enormous force, Zhukov organized a massive truck force of at least 4,000 vehicles driving daily to provide adequate supplies. In comparison, in their internal documents the Imperial Japanese Army considered 200 trucks to be “many”; this helps to explain their continuous trouble with supplies throughout the incident.\textsuperscript{145} However, astonishingly the total force prepared by the Soviets would include 57,000 men, 498 tanks, and 346 armored cars, all striking together across a thirty kilometer front.\textsuperscript{146}

Zhukov’s offensive began as scheduled in the early morning of August 20, beginning with an enormous wave of artillery fire, which revealed targets for the Soviet air force, and

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{142} Drea, \textit{Nomonhan}, 57. \\
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid, 7. \\
\textsuperscript{144} \textit{The Memoirs of Marshal Zhukov}, 154. \\
\textsuperscript{145} Coox, \textit{Nomonhan}, 580. \\
\textsuperscript{146} Drea, \textit{Nomonhan}, 9.
\end{flushright}
collapsed many fortifications, “burying their occupants in sand, dirt, and debris.” In combination with the artillery attack, more than 150 bombers and their fighter escorts bombarded positions across the Japanese-controlled area, including direct attacks against the lines as well as raids against emplacements in the rear. This “storm of fire” continued until 9 AM, when the infantry and armor assaults began, in several places pushing directly through the hard-hit Japanese forces to the border claimed by the MPR.148

Although this attack followed the same pattern that had been repeated again and again in the brief war, Zhukov’s offensive was the most severe instance of what the Japanese would face, combining superior fire support of artillery and aircrafts, with encirclement by armor and fast infantry movement which devastated the Japanese positions and showcased their tactical weaknesses. General Zhukov would recall that much of the tactical weakness could be associated “with the ideological brain-washing of the Japanese army” because the Red Army was “pictured to the Japanese soldiers as technically backwards and was compared to the old Tsarist army that fought Japan during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05.” In contrast, Japanese soldiers would see the powerful attacks of the Red Army as a big surprise.149

After four days of desperate fighting, the Kwantung Army was reorganized sufficiently to launch a counterattack. Consequently, the forces spearheading the counterattack, few of them at full strength and without functional support, openly questioned their chances of success. But when headquarters was consulted, they were only assured that “the offensive could be pushed

147 Ibid, 72.
148 Coox, Nomonhan, 663.
149 The Memoirs of Marshal Zhukov, 161-162.
through ‘because we were Japanese soldiers.’ On August 24 the counterattack was underway, but in the worst of conditions for Japanese tactics: an attack in broad daylight without any attempt of reconnaissance or supporting artillery fire. Predictably, the counterattack was a disaster, with the disorganized units throwing themselves against the Soviet lines in what historian Alvin Cox compared to as “the charge of the Light Brigade.”

The three days of counterattacks resulted only in meaningless losses for the Japanese, as the Russians continued their devastating blows. By August 31, the new configuration of battle lines made it unmistakably clear who would be the victor. Japanese forces had been uniformly evicted from the Nomonhan region, pushed back across the border claimed by the Soviets and the MPR. Though the hard fighting continued into September, the Japanese were never able to come close to recapturing their lines and finally diplomacy lead to a cease-fire on September 16. The truce could only be understood as a “devastating defeat” for the Kwantung Army.

In the aftermath, the Japanese government and the Kwantung Army came to the realization that they could not sustain an all-out war with the Soviet Union, which was proven by Zhukov’s offensive. The Soviets, on their part, had new ambitions in Europe, namely the division of Poland, and had little interest further invested in Nomonhan, especially after achieving their goals and upholding their defense pact with the Mongolian People’s Republic. Although met with fury and frustration by many Japanese officers in Manchukuo who were still

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150 Cox, Nomonhan, 707.
151 Ibid, 708.
152 Ibid, 841.
153 Kikuoka, Changkufeng, 7.
hoping to launch a retaliatory strike, the cease-fire came with great timing for the Red Army and the Soviet Union, who would launch their invasion of Poland on the very next day.

Map 6 – Nomonhan, Soviet Offensive, August 20-30, 1939.\textsuperscript{154}

The final lesson of Nomonhan was devastating, showing how dangerously close the battle came to moving far beyond the ideals of ‘limited war.’ Though the numbers are inconsistent from source to source, Japanese internal records admit that “at least” 18,000 casualties were sustained, including dead, missing and wounded, from a total manpower

\textsuperscript{154} Goldman, Nomonhan, 1939, 138.
Especially striking is the number of officers lost: 82 percent of battalion commanders and above, 72 percent of company commanders, and 78 percent of platoon leaders were killed or wounded in the fighting. This meant that the command structure of many units was shattered throughout much of the conflict.

The Soviet admissions of casualties only totaled 9,284, but Zhukov’s willingness to spend his soldiers’ blood would become well-known after Nomonhan. In any case, it is abundantly clear that the cost of Nomonhan was tremendous on both sides. The experiences at Nomonhan offered the Imperial Japanese Army an array of new information on what war with a modern, well-equipped army was like, especially after the experience of so-called ‘limited war’ at Nomonhan had included infantry, armor, and artillery operations, major logistical networks, air-ground and air-air combat by the air forces on both sides, and even close air support and tactical bombing had been featured.

On the desolate steppes of Mongolia, future battles techniques of World War II were tested, but most of the world failed to watch. The lessons for the Japanese were unmistakable. The losses of officers sustained during the attack were disastrous to the combat capability of individual units, which were often sent into battle piecemeal where they became cannon fodder for the enemy that had defeated them previously. Furthermore, Japanese technology and weaponry had been proven to be inferior. They proved to be no match for the Red Army in any category on the ground, from rifles and grenades up to tanks and artillery.

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157 Ibid, 947.
Although many of the battle experiences suggest that the individual Japanese soldier was a more aggressive fighter than his Soviet counterpart, and that his ‘spiritual superiority’ provided a measurable difference in hand-to-hand combat effectiveness, these assets were forcibly countered by a high volume of automatic fire, the Soviet defense capabilities, and fire support. This experience would be repeated in the Pacific War and never reconsidered as a tactic by the Japanese. As late as 1943, Japanese officers are recorded as having expressed ideas that “lack of equipment gave us Japanese a chance to demonstrate our superior spirit and valor.”

As for the Soviets and Zhukov, the Nomonhan campaign had significance beyond the immediate, local outcome. During the campaign, Zhukov used battlefield techniques which would later be used against the Germans on the Eastern Front during World War II. Some of these techniques included the use of combined air and tank power to encircle an enemy, the Blitzkrieg. Furthermore, it would lead to the improvement of the battle-effectiveness of inexperienced units, by simply adding troops with battlefield experience to ensure efficient training and raise the overall morale. In particular, after the Nomonhan campaign veterans were transferred to units that had not seen combat, which helped to spread the knowledge of their battle experience. Other valuable experience includes the use of underwater bridges and the evaluation of the light BT tanks. This would lead to the development of the T-34 medium tank, considered by most as the outstanding tank of World War II. For his victory, Zhukov was declared a Hero of the Soviet Union, but Zhukov’s superb use of tanks remained

\[160\] Coox, *Nomonhan*, 1082.
\[161\] Ibid., 991.
\[162\] Chaney, *Zhukov*, 75.
little known outside of the Soviet Union. Zhukov would later consider Nomonhan as an invaluable preparation for the operations he led during World War II. The Japanese however, in their misdirected strategy for military success, which relied heavily on their proud heritage, would instead cause them humiliating defeat.

163 Coox, Nomonhan, 996.
Chapter 5: The Kwantung Army – from Occupational Force to Independent Policy Maker

Following the Nomonhan Incident, Japanese strategists and planners began to revisit army policies. From a strategic standpoint, the Nomonhan proved to be an example of an army dictating the foreign policy of a nation. The Kwantung Army invaded Mongolia without the permission of the Imperial Japanese Army or the civilian government in Tokyo. Military and civil authorities in Tokyo recognized this critical vulnerability and took corrective measures to reassert their authority over the Kwantung army. As their first step, they replaced the key leadership of the Kwantung Army and re-established the authority to commit the Japanese armed forces. But even with these measures, the civilian authorities never gained full control of the Kwantung Army and the question remained, how was it possible that the Kwantung Army became the force capable of dictating foreign policy?\(^{164}\)

The beginning of these developments can be traced back to the end of the Russo-Japanese War. Based on the terms of the Treaty of Portsmouth in 1905, which ended the Russo-Japanese War, Japan gained control over the Kwantung Territory in southern Manchuria. The treaty, in particular Article V, assigned “the Imperial Government of Japan, with the consent of the Government of China, the lease of Port Arthur, Dalian and the adjacent territorial waters, and all rights, privileges and concessions connected with or forming part of such lease, and it also transfers and assigns to the Imperial government of Japan all public works and properties in the territory affected by the above-mentioned lease.”\(^{165}\) This lease


resulted in the stationing of Imperial Japanese troops in this area and so gave birth to the Kwantung Army.

Map 7 – Kwantung Leased Territory in 1921 with the Area of Influence.\(^{166}\)

One year after taking control of the Kwantung territory, the Imperial Ordinance No. 196 of 1906 established that the Governor-General was to "take charge of the defense of the territory within the limits of his jurisdiction" and he was further authorized to employ military

force in the existence of emergencies. The main purpose for the deployment of Japanese troops in that particular area was to guard Japanese railroad interests in the area. According to the Sub-Article to Article III of the Treaty of Portsmouth, “contracting parties reserve to themselves the right to maintain guards to protect their respective railway lines in Manchuria.” The article further established that “the number of such guards shall not exceed fifteen per kilometer and within that maximum number the commanders of the Japanese and Russian armies shall by common accord fix the number of such guards to be employed as small as possible while having in view the actual requirements.” Ultimately, the original number of troops stationed in the southern part of Manchuria was to be around 12,000 to 13,000 railroad guards, under the command of the Kwantung Governor-General.

The strength of the Kwantung Army, consisting of only one army division stationed in the Kwantung Territory on a two-year tour, would not change until the Mukden Incident of 1931 and the establishing of the puppet state Manchukuo in 1932. With the signing of a "mutual defense treaty" between Japan and Manchukuo, Japanese expansion had reached the borders of the Soviet Union to the north, and Outer Mongolia to the west. By establishing a new 3,000 mile border between Manchukuo and the Soviet Union and the Mongolian People's Republic, Japan was forced to start a massive build-up of its ground and air force in the area. During this time, the Soviet Union was still Japan’s number one enemy in the area and as a result, Japan moved its Kwantung Army Headquarters to the Manchukuo capital, Hsinking, and

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168 Treaty of Portsmouth.
169 Ibid.
170 Coox, “High Command and Field Army”, 302.
continued to increase its ground and air strength and by 1939, the Kwantung Army reached a total of 250,000 troops.\textsuperscript{171}

With an imprecise border, clashes became common, particularly in the steppes of western Manchuria and eastern Mongolia. Based on these developments, the Soviet Union signed a military assistance agreement in March 1936 with the Mongolian People’s Republic. The agreement allowed the Soviet Union to use the Mongolian People’s Republic as a buffer state to protect its central Siberian border and to move troops to the territory of the Mongolian People’s Republic to oppose Japanese expansion into Outer Mongolia.\textsuperscript{172}

Throughout the 1930’s border clashes continued and intensified in early 1939. In April, Kwantung Army Headquarters issued its secret operations order No. 1488-1, the "Principles for the Settlement of Soviet-Manchurian Border Disputes." The order stated the guidelines for the defense of Manchuria in which the Kwantung Army would follow a basic policy of neither committing nor allowing others to commit violations of the frontier, but rather challenging intrusions committed by forces of the Soviet Union or the Mongolian People’s Republic. To counter these intrusions, the Kwantung Army would use resolute, punitive action to prevent aggravation or recurrence of border disputes. Throughout the order, it was encouraged that friendly units must challenge courageously and triumph regardless of relative strengths or location of boundaries.\textsuperscript{173} This basically meant that commanders of units stationed at the border were to actively seek engagements with the Mongolian or Soviet troops without facing any form of retaliation by the Imperial Japanese Army Headquarter in Tokyo. Furthermore, it

\textsuperscript{171} Ibid., 303.
\textsuperscript{172} Bruce Elleman & Stephen Kotkin, Mongolia in the Twentieth Century: Landlocked Cosmopolitan (New York: M.E. Sharpe Inc., 1999), 118.
\textsuperscript{173} Goldman, Nomonhan, 1939, 84.
was permissible for area defense commanders to enter Soviet territory on a temporary basis to lure enemy troops onto Manchurian soil and to establish boundaries in unclear districts based on their own initiative. These aggressive orders were written by staff officers, like Major Tsuji Masanobu, from the Kwantung Army without the consensus of the High Command in Tokyo or the civilian government.\(^{174}\)

These orders were put to the test at the beginning of the Nomonhan Incident during which the Kwantung Army Headquarter supported the aggressive approach of the area field commanders. Even though alarmed by the daily escalation on the Manchukuo-Mongolian border, the High Command of the Imperial Japanese Army promised reinforcements for the Kwantung Army but encouraged them to keep the conflict localized. Throughout the beginning weeks of the conflict, the High Command in Tokyo was mostly kept in the dark and was only informed sporadically or late by the Kwantung Army Headquarters.\(^{175}\)

At the end of June, the High Command in Tokyo gained knowledge of the fact that the Kwantung Army operations order of April 1939 had indeed allowed so-called "temporary" crossing of border lines. Based on this information, Kwantung Army Headquarters was advised that such action would require Imperial approval, and on June 29, orders arrived from Tokyo that ultimately denied such authority, which would prove vital to limiting the conflict at Nomonhan. Rather than following the instructions of the High Command, the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Kwantung Army, General Yamo Otosaburo, had flown to the front to instruct General Komatsubara to mount the already scheduled attack of July 2.\(^{176}\) This particular action

\(^{174}\) Ibid, 85.

\(^{175}\) Coox, “High Command and Field Army”, 304.

\(^{176}\) Coox, 305.
shows the independent nature of the Kwantung Army. The secret operations order No. 14881 stated that an area commander can establish their own border in a disputed area; the ownership of the area east of the Halha River was disputed, but the Kwantung Army knew that the territory to the west of the river lay definitively inside Outer Mongolia. In other words, part of the Japanese offensive was to operate "temporarily" on the west side of the river, a clear contradiction of orders from the High Command.\footnote{\textit{\textsuperscript{177}}}

Following the failed offensive of General Komatsubara’s 23\textsuperscript{rd} Division, the High Command refused additional support for the Kwantung Army operations in the Nomonhan area, and on July 20 the General Staff presented its "Essentials for the Settlement of the Nomonhan Incident." This proposal includes a plan to evacuate the disputed sector when appropriate, a proposal that the Kwantung Army Chief of Staff strenuously objected. General Yamo Otosaburo stated that "we cannot abandon a region where controversy has erupted and where thousands of heroes' lives have been sacrificed."\footnote{\textit{\textsuperscript{178}}}

Fortunately for the Japanese the evacuation plans did go in effect, because the Red Army had stopped their operations voluntarily at the boundary lines claimed by the Mongolian People’s Republic, east of the Halha River. Even after having failed on the battlefield, the Kwantung Army still refused to accept the civilian diplomatic approach. Lieutenant Colonel Hattori stated that the Kwantung Army “rather feared that if Japan proposed armistice parleys, they would only serve to stiffen the attitude of the opposing sides. Accordingly our headquarters repeatedly advised Tokyo to avoid diplomatic negotiations, in order to maintain

\footnote{\textit{\textsuperscript{177}}\textit{Ibid.}, 305.} \footnote{\textit{\textsuperscript{178}}\textit{Ibid.}, 306.}
the nation’s prestige.” Later, after the defeat was imminent, the Kwantung Army supported a diplomatic approach, but only if the Russians proposed an armistice that would be quite acceptable and Tokyo should not take the lead, because it would furnish propaganda benefits for the Soviet Union. To avoid confrontations with Kwantung Army, the High Command of the Imperial Japanese Army supported diplomatic negotiations without announcing it to the field army. Based on the High Command’s support, Ambassador Togo Shigenori had been conducting discussions with the Soviets since late August and on September 15 Vyacheslav Molotov, the Soviet foreign minister, announced that the Soviet Union “could accept the Japanese proposal of cessation of hostilities.”

Based on these developments as well as the developments in Europe – the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact had been signed on August 23, 1939, and World War II had started in Poland on September 1, 1939 – Japanese Foreign policies were seen to be in disarray and furthermore it seemed that the Kwantung Army was operating in a political vacuum. The Kwantung Army had attempted to invade a foreign country without Imperial consent and no official declaration of war. It further withheld information from the High Command, ignored its own government and conducted diplomacy at gunpoint. How could it be possible for the Kwantung Army to have such a massive impact on diplomatic and state affairs?

There are many explanations why the Kwantung Army was different from any other Imperial Japanese field army. The Kwantung Army was particularly favored for its critical anti-Soviet role. The army was confronting its old, continental enemy on a daily basis, but rather

179 Ibid., 306.
than being cautious, the Japanese military planned to win an engagement against an enemy that largely outnumbered them simply based on tactical superiority. For this reason, the Kwantung Army viewed a defensive approach as defeatism and interference by Tokyo as unacceptable; this came to light in particular after Tokyo intervened during the Changkufeng Incident.\textsuperscript{182} Ironically, though the Imperial Japanese High Command always wanted the Kwantung Army to defend the Manchurian frontiers, it was furious with the freewheeling ways of the Kwantung Army, which continued and resulted in the Nomonhan Incident during which the Kwantung Army used its “Border Defense Guide” as a carte blanche to invade the territory of the Mongolian People’s Republic.\textsuperscript{183}

Contribution to the independent movement of the Kwantung Army was the Japanese military doctrine of \emph{dokudan senko}, or “initiative and originality in emergencies." This particular doctrine provided a certain degree of flexibility to commanders and units in the field. This doctrine became very important at Nomonhan and later during the Pacific campaign. Due to the great distances, complicated terrain and poor communications between the Army Headquarters and frontline units, \emph{dokudan senko} gave unit commanders a certain freedom to conduct their operations.\textsuperscript{184}

Another factor that affected the core of the Japanese military doctrine was \emph{gekokujo}, or "domination of seniors by juniors," which was used throughout the Imperial Japanese Army. It became particularly important for a semi-independent and aggressive field army, such as the Kwantung Army. The predominant part of the officer corps which used the chukon shoko, were

\begin{footnotes}
\item[183] Ibid., 86.
\item[184] Coox, “High Command and Field Army”, 308.
\end{footnotes}
mid-level officers, usually from the ranks of first lieutenant to the rank of lieutenant colonel. In the case of the Kwantung Army, Major Tsuji Masanobu, a strategy planner, was one of the prime examples of *gekokujo* and a driving force behind the Nomonhan offensive. General Inada Masazumi, the chief of the Army General Staff’s operations section in 1939, would recall that "Tsuji was too much for me this time" at Nomonhan. To break the independence of the Kwantung Army and curtail *gekokujo*, Inada remarked that “there are two ways of controlling an unruly horse. One is to apply the whip mercilessly and drive him until he dies of exhaustion; the other is to control him beforehand by dashing cold water on him. The attempt to save face for the Kwantung Army, while simultaneously smoothing out matters, ultimately ended in failure. The only alternative was to “apply the whip mercilessly upon the Kwantung Army, to end the notion that the Kwantung Army was the sole master of the situation, which had to be wiped out. This was one way to make up for the tremendous losses sustained by that army at Nomonhan."\(^{185}\)

Lastly, the Kwantung Army considered the use of diplomacy only useful when all other measures failed, contrary to the more widely used notion that force is only being used when diplomacy fails. Nevertheless, the civil government and the closest advisers of the Emperor insisted on a diplomatic approach to any future conflict. In particular Yuasa Kurahei, Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal, advised the Emperor less than a year before the outbreak of the Nomonhan Incident in regard to that particular issue. Yuasa remarked, that “Strategic significance ... may be one thing, but the location of the state frontier is another. We cannot take territory belonging to another country, by the use of force, regardless of strategic

\(^{185}\) Goldman, *Nomonhan, 1939*, 14-16.
importance. The prime consideration must center on the question of which side is in the right. ... We ought not to fight the USSR now, from the broader standpoint.”\textsuperscript{186} This unheeded warning proved to be correct; Japan was defeated in its first major attempt to fight the Soviet Union on a large scale and its military planners had to begin a search for a new diplomatic approach after the defeat at Nomonhan.

\textsuperscript{186} Coox, “High Command and Field Army”, 310.
Chapter 6: After the Nomonhan Incident – Diplomacy and Japan’s Search for a New Strategy

Following their defeat at Nomonhan, Japanese and Soviet military planners and diplomats began to reevaluate their diplomatic and military strategy for the upcoming military conflict. One important development, was the decision of Japan’s ally Germany to sign the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact on August 23, 1939. This resulted in the reconsideration of the German-Japanese partnership, and a new analysis of a coordinated strategy against Japan’s enemy to the North, the Soviet Union. With Japan’s diplomatic and military strategy based on the notion of forming a Greater Asia under its leadership and the search for economic resources needed to make this goal possible, a strategy and diplomacy had to be developed to determine which direction Japan wanted to advance in and which enemy would represent the necessary target for the next possible strike.\(^{187}\)

The Japanese strategy for expansion until the mid-1930s was dominated by the Imperial Japanese Army with the focus of a northern advance and the southern defense. This strategy was long-standing and can be dated back to the early Japanese involvement in Korea during the late 19th century.\(^{188}\) During the mid-1930s, the Imperial Japanese Navy developed its own advanced strategy to compete with the army, the southern advance and northern defense strategy. The navy developed its strategy for two reasons. First it looked for a larger defense budget to expand its surface fleet – during the 1930’s much of Japan’s focus was directed towards the army – and second, the Imperial Japanese Navy realized the need for strategic


\(^{188}\) Kenneth Colegrove, “Militarism in Japan’s Foreign Policy,” Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Vol. 215, America and Japan, (May, 1941), 11.
resources and recognized the abundance of strategic materials, mainly oil, in the region of southeast Asia, particularly in Dutch Indonesia.\textsuperscript{189}

Map 8 – The Northern Strategy of the Imperial Japanese Army\textsuperscript{190}

By 1936, the newly developed Navy strategy was seen as equal to the older Army strategy, but with the beginning of the second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, the balance of both strategies changed and the Imperial Japanese Government and military leadership shifted their strategic focus back to the Army.\textsuperscript{191} With the outbreak of World War II in Europe in 1939, Japanese policy shifted towards the idea of non-involvement, which was supported by the

\textsuperscript{189} Ibid., 13.
\textsuperscript{191} Kenneth Colegrove, “Militarism in Japan's Foreign Policy,” 13.
Army as well as the Navy. The shift towards non-involvement was a direct result of the embarrassing defeat at Nomanhan in the same year and the signing of the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact on August 23, 1939.\(^\text{192}\)

During the first six months of 1940, the Imperial Japanese Army realized that the war with China could not be concluded militarily with the current strategy because it used too much valuable manpower and strategic resources. Furthermore, the success of the German Wehrmacht in Europe convinced the Japanese leadership that Great Britain would soon be defeated and as a result, Japan needed to take action soon.\(^\text{193}\) Based on this assessment, the Imperial Japanese Army aligned its strategy with that of the Navy and moved to the southern strategy. This strategy became national policy in July 1940. Modifications added by the Navy called for the settling of the China conflict, followed by a move against French Indochina.\(^\text{194}\)

By September 1940, Japanese troops began to occupy the northern part of Indochina which marked the beginning of the southern advance.\(^\text{195}\) The signing of the Tripartite Pact between Japan, Germany, and Italy in 1940 resulted in the collapse of the negotiations with Chiang Kai-shek over the settlement of the Sino-Japanese war.\(^\text{196}\) Furthermore, the United States and Great Britain imposed their first economic sanctions against the Empire of Japan. Due to these imposed sanctions, Senior Japanese naval officers voiced their opinion that even if Germany would be successful in defeating Great Britain, the newly adopted southern advance strategy would ultimately lead to war with the United States. In March of 1941, the sanctions of


\(^{194}\) Kenneth Colegrove, “Militarism in Japan’s Foreign Policy,” 15.


\(^{196}\) Goldman, *Nomonhan*, 168.
the United States regarding the Japanese expansion ultimately caused the Imperial Japanese Army to adapt the view of the Navy, and plans were established to assume that a war with the United States was unavoidable.\(^{197}\)

The German invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941 reduced the threat of war in the north, which gave Japan more flexibility towards future advances to the south. During the month of July, 1941, Japanese troops occupied the southern part of Indochina to complete the occupation of the French colony and control its vital raw materials.\(^{198}\) The response of the United States and Great Britain came quickly and resulted in the freezing of Japanese assets and a complete embargo of Japan.\(^{199}\) The largest problem resulting from this total embargo was the concern over the essential oil supply. This problem resulting from the embargo became so severe that a swift resolution by military or diplomatic means was necessary to fuel future advances. The Japanese Imperial Army established that based on the oil supply, resources were so limited that a simultaneous advance towards the south and the north was not possible and plans for a conflict with the Soviet Union would not be advanced. Further, the embargo and the Japanese fuel shortage pushed Japan to seize the Dutch East Indies for its vital oil supply.\(^{200}\)

Throughout the fall of 1941, the Japanese foreign ministry continued negotiations with the United States to avoid war and was even willing to make significant concessions in regards to China. Rather than negotiate with the Japanese, President Roosevelt took a hard line to

\(^{197}\) Ibid., 170.
\(^{198}\) Hotta, *Japan 1941*, 133.
\(^{199}\) Ibid., 139-140.
\(^{200}\) Ibid., 143-144.
avoid or delay the looming war.\textsuperscript{201} As a consequence of the failed negotiations with the United States, the Konoe cabinet resigned in mid-October 1941 and General Hideki Tojo became Prime Minister of Japan.\textsuperscript{202}

Meanwhile the Soviet Union began to search for a permanent settlement of the Far East border issue following its decisive victory at Nomonhan. The main aim of Soviet diplomacy was directed towards the protection its own territory and of its national interest, and was based on the international events of the time, mainly the signing of the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact on August 23, 1939. With the defense of the territory of the Soviet Union as the primary goal, Soviet diplomacy was now mainly concerned with the security of the Soviet Far East and its borders.\textsuperscript{203} The principles of Soviet foreign policy towards neighboring states were defined by Josef Stalin in his Report to the Communist Party Congress in March 1939. During that speech, Stalin stated that “we stand for peaceful, close and friendly relations with all the neighboring countries which have common frontiers with the U.S.S.R. This is our position; and we shall adhere to this position as long as these countries maintain like relations with the Soviet Union, and as long as they make no attempt to trespass, directly or indirectly, on the integrity and inviolability of the frontiers of the Soviet state.”\textsuperscript{204}

As early as December 1931, the Soviet Union made the first offer of a non-aggression pact to Japan. Although this was considered the "correct" approach at the time, many incidents occurred along the Japanese-Soviet border. The attempt of a peaceful solution to the Far East border disputes finally ended with the signing of the German-Japanese Anti-Comintern Pact in

\textsuperscript{201} Ibid., 189-190.
\textsuperscript{202} Hoyt, \textit{Warlord}, 62-63.
\textsuperscript{203} Asiaticus, “Soviet Relations with Japan”, 272.
\textsuperscript{204} Ibid., 272.
Rather than being isolated even further, the Soviet Union strengthened its international position. It became a member of the League of Nations in 1934 and established diplomatic relations with the United States in 1933. To counter the expansionist policy of Japan, the Soviet Union would sign a nonaggression pact with China in 1937 and began to deliver aid.

The German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact resulted in a sharp reaction from Japan. This was based on Japan’s involvement in the border war at Nomonhan against the Soviet Union and as a result, Japan sent a sharp protest to Berlin that the new pact was a contradiction of the Anti-Comintern agreement. Following these developments, both sides agreed to a truce shortly after the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact and Japan began to look for better relations with the Soviet Union.

During the summer of 1940, Foreign Secretary Molotov remarked that Soviet-Japanese relations had "lately begun to assume a somewhat normal character." He further stated that with the agreement concerning the demarcation of the border in the Nomonhan area the “unfavorable effect on the regulation of relations between the U.S.S.R. and Japan, as well as between the Mongolian People's Republic and Manchukuo had been resolved.” This meant that it was possible to regulate relations of both countries, and define the spheres of their former conflicts in Manchuria and Mongolia.

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206 “Soviet Relations with Japan”, 273.
208 “Soviet Relations with Japan”, 277.
209 Ibid., 277-278.
Following the settlement of the border issue in Nomonhan the new direction of Japanese expansion became more apparent. During a Soviet Supreme Council meeting on August 1, 1940, Molotov addressed the changes occurring in Japan's policy. He stated that it has become “apparent that the southward expansion of which Japanese newspapers are noisily shouting has been attracting the attention of leading circles in Japan to an ever greater extent, particularly in view of the fact that changes which have occurred in Europe cannot but have their reverberations in districts in which these Japanese circles are interested.”

For this reason, two questions remained for the Soviet Government. Did the Japanese Government adjustment of its relations towards the Soviet Union mean only an armistice or a permanent normalization of Soviet-Japanese relations? And what were Japan’s obligations to its allies Germany and Italy concerning further expansion in Europe and towards the southward expansion in Asia? Regardless of these questions, Molotov pointed out that even though further clarification was needed, “indications of a desire on the part of Japan to improve relations with the Soviet Union" was of interest for both parties and that both sides understood that “improvement of relations between Japan and the Soviet Union is possible.”

Following the success of Germany in Europe in 1940, Japan decided to join the new tripartite pact in September 1940, with Germany and Italy. As a result, the Soviet newspaper Pravda would comment that “the pact does not represent anything particularly unexpected for the Soviet Union, ... because it constitutes in effect an embodiment of relations already formed between Germany, Italy, and Japan, ... and because the Soviet Government had been informed by the German Government about the impending conclusion of the tripartite pact before it was

210 Ibid., 278.
211 Ibid., 278.
published.”


213 Three-Power Pact Between Germany, Italy, and Japan, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/triparti.asp.

five. Furthermore, both sides agreed to maintain "peaceful and friendly relations" and to respect each other's "territorial integrity." Both sides also agreed to "observe neutrality for the duration of the entire conflict" in case either side became subject to military action by other states. An additional declaration concluded with the treaty was concerned with Mongolia and Manchukuo, where both sides agreed and extended the pledge to maintain peace to the sphere of their former conflicts.

The Soviet-Japanese neutrality agreement proved to have great significance. It represented the beginning of a new stage in Soviet-Japanese relations and extended to Japan the general policy of peaceful and friendly relations with neighboring states, since the Japanese Government was willing to maintain the same type of relations with the Soviet Union. Diplomacy proved to be a necessity at this time, although Japan still considered the Soviet Union a main target of its expansionist policy.

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Chapter 7: Effects of the Nomonhan Incident on Europe’s Eastern Front during World War II

Towards the end of combat operations at Nomonhan, the Soviet leadership began to turn its focus to its European area of interest. With the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact on August 23, 1941, Stalin and Hitler devised a plan for the renewed division of Poland. Furthermore, Stalin focused now on the more pressing issue, the protection of the Soviet border and extending the Soviet influence into the European continent. The first operation conducted to expand Soviet interest in Europe would come during the conflict with Finland in 1939 – 1940. The so-called Winter War began with the Soviet invasion of Finland on November 30, 1939 and would finally end with the Moscow Peace Treaty on March 13, 1940. The reason for Stalin’s first conflict in Europe was Soviet claims to Finnish territory. In particular, substantial border territory which for security reasons were needed to protect the second largest city of the Soviet Union, Leningrad.  

Due to the refusal of Finland to negotiate, the Soviet Union began a massive invasion of the Scandinavian country. The enormity of the Red Army – the Soviets possessed more than three times as many soldiers as the Finns and a hundred times as many tanks – resulted in an overconfidence of the Soviet leadership and a quick victory was expected. General Kirill Meretskov addressed his troops on November 29, 1939, and announced that the Red Army would march against the Finns and crush their resistance in a short matter of time. This overconfidence would become a big problem for the Red Army, because the capable leadership of the Red Army was severely crippled by Soviet leader Joseph Stalin’s Great Purge of 1937.

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218 Ibid., 107.
Stalin's purges had devastated the officer corps of the Red Army, and those purged included three of five Soviet marshals, 220 of the 264 division-level commanders or higher and more than 30,000 officers of all ranks were executed or imprisoned.\(^{219}\) As a result, fewer than half of the officers remained in total and were replaced by soldiers who were less competent, but in majority more loyal to their superiors. Furthermore, after the purge, unit commanders were superseded by a political commissar, who had to make military decisions on their political merits rather than tactical understanding of the battlefield situation.\(^{220}\) This newly introduced system complicated the Soviet chain of command and the established system of dual command destroyed the independence of commanding officers. Based on these factors, and the extremely high morale of the Finnish army, Finland was able to repel the Soviet attacks for several months. Following the complete reorganization and the adoption of different tactics, the Red Army and its overwhelming numbers overcame the Finish defenses and Finland had to agree to cede territory originally demanded by the Soviet Union.\(^{221}\)

Even though the Soviet Union was victorious; its international reputation had suffered extremely. Militarily, the Winter War showed the weakness of the Red Army and its leadership. Shortly after the battle at Nomonhan, Soviet high command had become divided into two factions. One side represented the Spanish Civil War veterans General Rychagov, who represented the Red Air Force, General Pavlov the Soviet tank expert, and Marshal Kulik, the chief of artillery, who was Stalin’s favorite general. These generals favored the use of tanks for

\(^{219}\) Erickson, *The Soviet High Command*, 505.
infantry support only, and separate operation of the army and air force.\textsuperscript{222} The other, more modern faction was represented by Nomonhan veterans General Zhukov of the Red Army and General Kravchenko of the Red Air Force, who supported the large scale, independent use of tank units in combination with the Air Force.\textsuperscript{223} Also due to this divided command structure and Stalin’s favoritism, the important lessons of the Soviet Union's "first real war on a massive scale using tanks, artillery, and aircraft" at Nomonhan were not utilized. Due to these developments, the light BT tanks had only limited success during the Winter War, and the Soviet Union needed three months and over a million men to achieve the result Zhukov achieved during the battle at Nomonhan in only ten days.\textsuperscript{224}

During the following 13 months, the Red Army concentrated on replenishing its losses of the Winter War and moving forces into the newly acquired territories of eastern Poland, bordering Germany. Time would go by without any major restructuring of the Soviet armored units which would again result in disaster for the Red Army during the first month of the German invasion of the Soviet Union. This invasion, codenamed Operation Barbarossa, began on June 22, 1941 and did catch the Soviet Union and its leadership unprepared which was surprising because Stalin and the other leaders were warned on numerous occasions by its top spy Richard Sorge.\textsuperscript{225}

Throughout the early stages of World War II, Richard Sorge was working in Tokyo, Japan and his spy ring supplied the Soviet Union with vital information concerning German military operations and coordination of Japanese operations with its German allies. By 1941 Sorge had

\textsuperscript{222} Coox, Nomonhan, 996.
\textsuperscript{223} Ibid., 994–995.
\textsuperscript{224} Goldman, Nomonhan, 1939, 167.
learned about Operation Barbarossa, the upcoming invasion of the Soviet Union by German and other Axis forces. Rather than acknowledging the intelligence reports from Sorge, Joseph Stalin and other top leaders of the Soviet government ignored Sorge's warnings.  

Stalin even ridiculed Sorge and his intelligence reports before Operation Barbarossa and was quoted as saying that “there’s this bastard who's set up factories and brothels in Japan and even thinks that he knows the exact date of the German attack as June 22. Are you suggesting I should believe him?”  

Stalin did not listen to these reports and the attack of the German army on June 22, 1941 against the Soviet Union caught him completely by surprise.  

During the month of July and August, the Red Army was defeated time and again and much of their western army was destroyed by the German Wehrmacht, who was able to encircle the large Soviet armies with its Blitzkrieg tactics with the use of a tank led pincher movement. These huge victories of the German Army put the Soviet Union and its Red Army to the brink of defeat. Due to the threat presented by the Kwantung Army in Manchuria, the Soviet Union was not willing to move experienced troops from the Far East to the European front and open up the Far East to an invasion of the Japanese army.  

This would change on September 14, 1941, when Richard Sorge advised the Red Army that Japan would not attack the Soviet Union until the following events have occurred; (a) Moscow was captured, (b) the size of the Kwantung Army would reach three times the size of Soviet Far Eastern forces and (c) a civil war had started in Siberia.  

This information provided by Richard Sorge “made possible the transfer of Soviet divisions from the Far East, although the presence of the Kwantung Army

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226 Ibid., 347.  
228 Ibid., 403.  
229 Prange, Target Tokyo, 407
in Manchuria necessitated the Soviet Union’s keeping a large number of troops on the eastern border..."\(^{230}\)

To prevent the total collapse of the Red Army at the gates of Moscow, Stalin sent General Zhukov to the defense of Moscow. Just days before, the entire Soviet Western Front had been encircled in the Rzhev-Vyazma salient and an estimated 750,000 Soviet soldiers were lost.\(^{231}\) Following the latest defeat, Zhukov suggested a merging of the main defending forces which made Zhukov leader of all the forces defending the Soviet capital city. The last attempt of the Germans to take Moscow began on November 15, 1941, but Zhukov had learned from his experience at the battle of Nomonhan and repositioned many of his centrally located forces to reinforce his flanks.\(^{232}\) With these changes, Zhukov was able to stop the German advance towards Moscow with limited losses to his own troops. Rested reserve forces and a number of Siberian divisions released from the Far East for the Battle of Moscow helped save the Soviet capital from conquest.\(^{233}\)

Following a massive counteroffensive which began on December 6, 1941, the Red Army was able to push the German forces between 100 and 250 km away from the Soviet capital Moscow.\(^{234}\) The battle of Moscow represented the first time during World War II, that the German army had been defeated in a large-scale battle and the failure of Operation Barbarossa.\(^{235}\) Perhaps even more important, the combination of Richard Sorge’s information that allowed the transport of Siberian troops to the Eastern Front, together with the ability of

\(^{230}\) Ibid., 407.
\(^{231}\) The Memoirs of Marshal Zhukov, 322.
\(^{232}\) Ibid., 338.
\(^{233}\) Ibid., 346-347.
\(^{234}\) Montefiore, Stalin, 406.
\(^{235}\) Chaney, Zhukov, 201.
the Soviets to withstand the German assault ensured the Soviets that they were able to win and thus convinced the Japanese not to get involved in the war against the Soviet Union.236 Following the battle, Zhukov would be considered the savior of Moscow and even Stalin praised his General to a great length; “the motherland and the Party will never forget the action of the Soviet commanders in the Great Patriotic War. The names of the victorious generals who saved the Motherland will forever be engraved in the honorary steles placed at the battlefields. Amongst these battlefields, there is one battlefield with exceptional meaning, and that is the great one at Moscow. And the name of Comrade Zhukov, as a symbol of victory, will never be apart from this battlefield.”237

Following his success at Moscow, Zhukov, newly promoted Deputy Commander-in-Chief, was sent to Stalingrad to take command of the Southwestern Front and take charge of the defense of Stalingrad. By October 1942, Zhukov and General Vasilevsky were in charge of planning the counteroffensive to save the city. Code named Operation Uranus, the counteroffensive was launched on November 19, 1942 and just four days later the encirclement of the entire German 6th Army was completed.238 Following two months of desperate fighting, the remainder of the 6th Army surrendered on February 2, 1943.239 The battle showed Zhukov’s ability to plan for and command large forces in battle and use modern strategies, like the use of tank led pinchers to surround the German Army.

Following their decisive victories at Stalingrad in February of 1943 and at the Battle of Kursk in the summer of 1943, Zhukov began to organize Operation Bagration which was

236 Montefiore, *Stalin*, 403.
238 Ibid., 224-226.
239 Ibid., 236.
designed to remove all remaining German forces on Soviet soil. During this Soviet summer offensive in 1944, the Soviets were able to destroy the German Army Group Center, surround and destroy 30 German army divisions, and advance between 350–500 km west and completely push the Wehrmacht out of Soviet territory.\textsuperscript{240} These operations proved that the Soviets and their chief planner Zhukov, now Marshal of the Soviet Union, had fully adapted to the battlefield techniques and strategies first used during the Nomonhan campaign. Adoption of strategies like the tank led pincher movements and the use of combined air and tank power to encircle an enemy would lead to the complete victory and the surrender of Nazi Germany on May 8, 1945.\textsuperscript{241}

\begin{footnotesize}
\bibitem{zhukov544} The Memoirs of Marshal Zhukov, 544.
\bibitem{ibid} Ibid., 628.
\end{footnotesize}
The border clashes in 1938 and 1939 were not the last conflicts fought between the Soviets and the Japanese. Even though largely overshadowed by the American use of the atomic bomb, the Soviet invasion of Manchuria in August of 1945 demonstrated how both sides had adjusted their military doctrine to the lessons of Nomonhan. The Soviets on one side adopted a strategy that combined the use of armored tank formation and the support of the air force, which had been successful during the war against Germany. Little had changed in the tactics and doctrine of the Imperial Japanese Army, even after more than half a decade of fighting against different modern armies. However, by 1945 the Kwantung Army was not its former self; based on the concerns on the Pacific fronts in 1944 and 1945, sixteen of their best divisions had been transferred from Manchuria in little over a year.242 By September of 1944, the Imperial General Headquarters officially changed the status of the Kwantung Army from an offensive force, a status it had held since its creation, to a defensive one.243 On the eve of the attack, estimations were made by the Soviet intelligence service that the Kwantung Army was made up of slightly more than a million men. Furthermore, of these men, the majority lacked the quality and extensive military training. The units that had been transferred to other fronts were the veteran soldiers, and the remaining forces were made up largely of reservists and

This was not the Kwantung Army of the past operations, and it was not prepared and equipped to resist the Soviet attack coming from the north.

To make matters even worse, most of the material strength of the Kwantung Army was depleted. For the one million men, the Kwantung Army had only 1,155 tanks, 5,360 gun and artillery pieces, and 1,800 aircraft. These limited resources were also poorly distributed to face the eminent invasion. Most units still lacked artillery and antitank weapons in any numbers. In 1945, Imperial Army Headquarters did not consider a single Kwantung Army unit to be “combat ready”, and some divisions were at as little as fifteen percent of acceptable levels.

By contrast, the Soviet forces were in an excellent position on the eve of the attack. A Far East Command was specifically created under the command of Marshal A. M. Vasilevsky to handle the Manchurian invasion, and three front headquarters were assigned to it. The combined armed strength of the Far East command consisted of 1,577,725 operational troops. These forces were supported by 5,556 Soviet tanks, 3,721 aircraft, and more than 85,000 light vehicles.

Unlike the relatively inexperienced troops that the Kwantung Army had to rely on, most of the Soviet infantrymen were veterans of the war with Germany. The 39th Army and 5th Army, for example, were assigned to fight in the most fortified areas of Manchuria. This assignment was made due to their previous success in combat in Germany's fortified Königsberg area.

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245 Ibid, 28.
246 Ibid, 32.
247 Ibid, 37
Furthermore, the Soviet 53rd Army and 6th Guards Tank Army were deployed in the Grand Khingan Mountains region of western Manchuria, based on their experiences in the Carpathian Mountains of Romania. The Soviet forces were substantially better equipped and armed than their Kwantung Army counterparts, and most were veterans of serious combat on similar terrain. In addition, by 1945 the Soviet Union had completed the restructuring of its armed forces after its weakness to 'blitzkrieg' attacks had been demonstrated in 1941 and 1942, and nowhere would this become more evident than in Manchuria. The new forces were designed as combined arms regiments, meaning that they included infantry, artillery, tank, and anti-aircraft forces. Ultimately, this meant that it was not a question of whether or not the Soviets would be victorious, but rather how soon they could succeed.

On August 9, 1945 this storm finally rolled into Manchuria, encountering a fully unprepared Kwantung Army. Although the Japanese Imperial Headquarters managed to correctly predict that the Soviet Union would prepare to enter the war against Japan in August of 1945, this was not seen as particularly significant. The Japanese did not anticipate that an attack would be launched immediately, relying on the Neutrality Pact signed in 1941, which had been cancelled on April 13, 1945. To defend their position on cancelling the Neutrality Pact, the Commissar of Foreign Affairs of the USSR, V.M. Molotov stated that with Germany's attack “on the USSR, and Japan, ally of Germany, is aiding the latter in its war against the USSR” the “circumstances the neutrality pact between Japan and the USSR has lost its sense.”

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251 Ibid, 59.
with the cancellation of the Neutrality Pact the Japanese leadership still relied on the one year “grace period” which would last until 1946.\textsuperscript{253}

To estimate the amount of troops that were being moved to the Manchurian front, Japanese intelligence were counting train cars moving through cities with Japanese consulates. Even as late as August 3, an official analysis by the Imperial General Headquarters Army Department was still relying on this inaccurate method to predict Soviet operational readiness. The resulting report indicated that only 40 to 50 Soviet divisions were in place at the time of the attack, compared to the estimated 55 to 60 believed necessary for an invasion of Manchuria. Presented with this information after the war's end, a Soviet general would admit that there had been 80 divisions in place at the time of the invasion.\textsuperscript{254}

Although Soviet intelligence had also made mistakes, it was due to the overestimation of mass artillery and manpower they deployed which was more than necessary to crush the Kwantung Army, because “the Japanese were unprepared strategically, operationally, or tactically for the massive Soviet blow that fell on August 9, 1945.”\textsuperscript{255} Soviet forces swept through Manchuria in the first days of the attack by effectively using their new tactics of combined mobile warfare.

With the beginning of the offensive, Japanese units were forced to make a quick retreat from the border areas. Without accurate intelligence, Japanese units would find themselves surrounded by the fast-moving Soviet offensive, with their planned defensive points often overrun before they could even be occupied. Within only a week, “the Soviets had

\textsuperscript{253} Drea, “Missing Intentions,” 68.
\textsuperscript{254} Ibid, 69.
\textsuperscript{255} Ibid, 70.
accomplished all their major objectives and destroyed the Kwantung Army.” This was not due to the Japanese being demoralized at the time of the attack; rather the defenders “fanatically resisted” the Soviets, fighting against overwhelming odds. Their efforts meant little in the face of the significant Soviet advantage, and they were easily swept aside by the force of the ‘August Storm.’

In the time span of six years of continuous war since the end of the Nomonhan Incident, the Imperial Japanese Army had failed to evolve its tactics, and was mainly relying on ideology to overcome their enemies. However, with these tactical and strategic mistakes in mind, it was a combination of their military doctrine and tactics as well as the limitation of Japanese industry to supply its armed forces with the needed supplies to fight a modern war that ultimately resulted in the defeat of the Imperial Japanese Army and Navy. The Soviets on the other hand adapted well to the new forms of combat. Brilliant leaders, here in particular Marshal Zhukov, reorganized the Red Army and adapted to the modern battlefield. Every army that faces tactical and strategic challenges on the battlefield would do well to study the lessons of the Changkufeng Incident and the fighting on the steppes of Nomonhan, as it may well make the difference between victory and defeat.

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256 Ibid, 70.
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Vita

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