

Briefing Memo

Soviet Military and Diplomacy in the Nomonhan Incident

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1. Introduction

The battle described widely as the “Nomonhan Incident” in Japan and as the “Battle of Khalkhyn Gol” in Russia and Mongolia, was an intense modern conflict that took place between the Japanese-Manchurian army and the Soviet-Mongolian army over a roughly four-month period between May and September 1939. The main cause of this conflict is considered to be the clashing perceptions between Japan and the Soviet Union about the Manchurian-Mongolian border; the Japanese-Manchurian army regarding the Khalkha River as the border and the Soviet-Mongolian army regarding a line approximately 20 km east of the river as such. As two different names suggest, the Nomonhan Incident took place in the area around Nomonhan-Büird-Oboo (a grave-mound of a Tibetan Buddhist holy priest), and both camps deployed large-scale military forces with more than two or three divisions. However, as neither the Japanese nor the Soviet governments made an official declaration of war, the conflict did not escalate into a full-out war.

Due to the influence of judgements of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (known as the Tokyo Trial), there has been a strong tendency until now to regard the Nomonhan Incident as a one-sided crushing defeat. This defeat has been largely recognized as the result of the Kwantung Army’s strategy to ignore the Army General Staff’s non-expansionary policy and cross the Manchurian-Mongolian border on the pretext of a punitive expedition to stir up and expand the conflict, during which they suffered a counterattack from the Soviet mechanized troops. For this reason, it is described as a “recurrence” of the Battle of Cannae, which was a major battle of the Second Punic War that took place in Apulia on the southeastern part of the Italian peninsula in August, 216 BC. In this battle, General Hannibal Barca of the Carthaginian army surrounded and annihilated the Roman army, which had a greater army strength, and led the Carthaginian army to victory. And the Nomonhan Incident is considered to have contributed to form the historical recognition which the Soviet Union and the Mongolian People’s Republic, which belonged in the same socialist camp during the Cold War era, had combined their forces to defeat the Japanese army. Not only was the Nomonhan Incident an example of a regional conflict, but it has also been raised as an example of lessons of war history analyzed by Ryoichi Tobe and others in *Shippai no Honshitsu* (Chuokoron-Shinsha, Inc., 1991), a book renowned as a study on the organizational theory of the Japanese military. It has also been cited as a case study used in critical evaluation of organizational strategy theories from perspectives such as the ambiguity of strategy, excessive vertical divisions in an organization, the importance of communication between the central command and local

headquarters, and presence or absence of governance.

Among these, the fruits of research in recent years have revealed that a large number of casualties were suffered on both sides. According to Grigori Krivosheev, a former professor at the Russian Academy of Military Science, the estimated number of casualties on the Russian side increased significantly to 25,655 men following the declassification of historical documents and archives after the collapse of the Soviet Union; this greatly exceeds the number of casualties on the Japanese side, shown to be in the vicinity of some 18,000 to 20,000 men in an analysis by modern Japanese historian Ikuhiko Hata. On the other hand, the research based on the methodology of international history, which focuses on the international context used by multinational or multilingual archives, has provided us with the multiple and wide breadth of knowledge, bringing current research on the Nomonhan Incident into a new phase of development.

From this point of view, the author seeks to pursue the historical truth of the Nomonhan Incident by focusing on the external background and military developments from the aspect of the Soviet side as well as by shedding light on the Soviet military and diplomacy during the Nomonhan Incident. In doing so, it offers insight into how this regional conflict occurred in the Far East with the diplomatic strategy and military operations. With regard to war leadership for both camps in the Nomonhan Incident and escalation of the conflict, please refer to the author's other article listed in the "Reference" section.

2. External Background

Focusing on the external background of the Nomonhan Incident allows us to examine the process in which the Soviet Union's firm and unyielding stance against Japan was established. There are three possible factors behind this.

Firstly, the Soviet military leadership had paid great attention to regional defenses of the Far East in order to take precautions against the military attack of the Kwantung Army; these precautions were based on a strong sense of wariness toward the Manchurian Incident and the founding of Manchukuo thereafter. In particular, the Red Army attained the modernization of its forces in phases through a significant increase in the number of forces and the strengthening of technological equipment based on the Second Five-Year Plan, and the construction of large-scale military infrastructure in the Far East. The Soviet Union also established the Pacific Fleet in 1932 and began constructing the military port city, Komsomolsk-on-Amur. In 1935, it established the Far Eastern Military District as the core troops for the Special Red Banner Far Eastern Army (which later became the Far Eastern Front).

The second factor is the diplomatic strategy aimed at confronting the anti-Soviet and anti-communism camps, based on the Anti-Comintern Pact concluded between Japan and Germany in November 1936. To circumvent the crisis in the security environment of a pincer attack on the east-west border, the Soviet Union not only strengthened its own military forces, but also its firm anti-Japanese stance by building a collective security system in East Asia through the formation of a military alliance with the Chinese Nationalist Government and the Mongolian People's Republic. In particular, the Sino-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact signed immediately after the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in August 1937 served to heighten the tensions between Japan and the Soviet Union indirectly through

its provisions on supplying aircraft support and arms from the Soviet Union to the Chinese Nationalist Government. The fruits of research in recent years have revealed that a highly confidential “verbal statement” existed as a part of the Sino-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, which stated that the Soviet Union was not to conclude any non-aggression treaties with Japan in the period until the official resumption of normal relations between the Chinese Nationalist Government and Japan. In addition to being one of the external factors affecting the Nomonhan Incident, this same document is also considered to have had a significant impact on the signing of the Japanese-Soviet Neutrality Pact in April 1941 and the relationship between Japan and the Soviet Union during the Pacific War.

The third factor is the stationing of the Soviet military troops in the Mongolian People’s Republic based on a Protocol of Mutual Assistance signed between the Soviet Union and Mongolia in March 1936. In particular, the 57th Special Corps positioned under the Transbaikal Military District (the core troop of the Soviet-Mongolian army during the Nomonhan Incident), strengthened the military alliance between the two countries, and at the same time it increased the risk of causing armed conflicts or skirmishes with the adjoining Manchukuo. This is also closely related to the many occurrences of military clashes in the Manchurian-Soviet border region during the same period, of both small and large scales. During this period, the number of recorded border conflicts between Manchukuo and the Soviet Union was 152 times from 1932 to 1934, 176 times in 1935, 152 times in 1936, 113 times in 1937, 166 times in 1938, and 159 times in 1939. For the Mongolian People’s Republic, which became the main battlefield, the Nomonhan Incident was like a Patriotic War in which it combined their forces with the Red Army to fight back against military offensive by the Japanese-Manchurian army into its territory.

3. Military Background

Focusing on the military background of the Nomonhan Incident allows us to examine large-scale military developments in which the Red Army realized its encircling operation at the divisional level. There are also three possible factors behind this.

The first is the balance between military operations and logistics. Particularly with regard to military logistics, the great success achieved in military transportation originating from Borzya Station along the Trans-Siberian Railway, approximately 650 km from Nomonhan-Bürd-Oboo, was an important factor that contributed to the realization of military operations during the Nomonhan Incident. It is widely known that various troops and units centered the 57th Special Corps were reorganized as the First Army Group on July 19, 1939, and that Georgy Zhukov, who was appointed as the Commander of the Group, controlled the strategic offensive. However, research outcomes in recent years have also drawn attention to the logistical support provided by Grigori Shtern, Commander of the Far Eastern Front Group. And under the Shtern, preparations for military operations and logistics for the August Offensive proceeded steadily; it is clear that in addition to supplying the necessary personnel for the encircling operation, he also supplied tanks, armored cars, firearms, aircraft, and military supplies from the Transbaikal Military District. In commending the military achievement of the Nomonhan Incident, it has long been a trend in historical studies of the Soviet era to regard Commander Zhukov as a hero for his contribution to the battle, as well as for his decisive role in

the Great Patriotic War that broke out thereafter. Today, however, there are more who rate the contributions of both men highly.

The second factor is the battle experience from the Spanish Civil War of 1936 and the Changkufeng Incident (or Battle of Lake Khasan) of 1938. Until now, the Nomonhan Incident had been frequently discussed in connection with the Second World War, but in the light of the primary historical sources from the Russian side, we would see that the battle experience gained from the Spanish Civil War was applied to the battle in the Nomonhan Incident. In particular, it is important to note that Shtern, who served as the military adviser during the Spanish Civil War, held command during the Nomonhan Incident, and historical facts show that tactics of tank deployment and encrypted telegrams, as well as the deployment of airborne fleets, were utilized. Furthermore, the Changkufeng Incident was a border conflict between the Soviet Union's Far East Front Army and the 19th Division of the Korean Army; it was a modern war in which Soviet military aircraft and tanks were injected. We could say that this battle played an important role as a battle experience prior to the Nomonhan Incident, in the sense that the Soviet military leadership executed military action at the front level in the Far East.

The third factor is the communication between the Soviet central General Staff of the Red Army and its local Command Headquarters. Until now, the Nomonhan Incident has often been analyzed with a critical viewpoint toward the confronting strategic policies within the Japanese Army General Staff and the Kwantung Army. However, looking at the primary historical sources on the Russian side, while it is difficult to say that there was an internal conflict only within the Japanese military, differences of strategic perception have also been found within the Soviet military, between the General Staff of the Red Army and the Command Headquarters of the Far East. For example, a telegram sent to the Command Headquarters of the Far East on July 12, 1939, signed jointly by Kliment Voroshilov, People's Commissar for Defense, and Boris Shaposhnikov, Chief of General Staff of the Red Army, contained rigorous criticisms on the fact that the 82nd Rifle Division, a main force of the Soviet-Mongolian army, was injected into fighting despite being warned not to do so, as well as on the combat operation that involved the deployment of the tank units. On July 14 the same year, in response to the retreat of the bridge head forces from the east to west bank of the Khalkha River under the order of Grigory Kulik, First Deputy People's Commissar for Defense who had been dispatched to Chita at the time, Voroshilov and Shaposhnikov sent a telegram reprimanding this operation and ordering a directive for immediate restoration to the original circumstances. This was a difference in strategic policy and did not reach the level of a confrontation; in the Nomonhan Incident, the communication between the Soviet central and local commands did not collapse. Nevertheless, historical verification aimed at exploring the possibility that the strategic policy of the Soviet military leadership had not been monolithic is considered to hold important significance.

4. Conclusion

Although the Nomonhan Incident did not escalate into a full-scale war between Japan and the Soviet Union, it was a regional conflict in which both camps deployed large-scale forces of more than two or three divisions. Through

the Soviet Union's diplomatic strategy of the firm and unyielding anti-Japanese stance and its large-scale military developments, it was able to produce significant achievements in the conflict. The author can point out two elements as the modern significance of these research outcomes. The first is the relationship between the Nomonhan Incident and the entry of the Soviet Union into the war against Japan in August 1945. In the war against Japan toward the end of the Pacific War, the Soviet Union established an international security environment based not only on the Yalta Conference's "secret agreements" with the U.S. and the U.K., but also on the dispute for rights and benefits in East Asia with the Chinese Nationalist Government. At the same time, it undertook preparations for military operations and logistics for the Strategic Offensive in Manchuria. In view of this diplomatic strategy and military operations by the Soviet military leadership, the Nomonhan Incident can be regarded as a prelude to the Soviet Union's entry into war against Japan. The second element is Russia's "Land power," which has relevance to security studies not only on the Soviet Union, but also on the Russian Federation. In particular, its mobilization capability based on land transportation, which harnesses the Trans-Siberian Railway from Europe to the Far East as the main artery, could be understood as the foundation of Russia's strength as a major military power.

Finally, as the author explained at the beginning of this paper, the fruits of research in recent years have revealed that the Nomonhan Incident brought about an immense number of casualties for both the Japanese-Manchurian army and the Soviet- Mongolian army, and that it had not been a one-sided crushing defeat of the Japanese-Manchurian army. However, it is important to note that the victory in war is not based on the number of casualties among officers and soldiers on both sides, but on the success in achieving the goal of the strategy. It is vital to bear this in mind when considering and understanding the Nomonhan Incident.

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