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Japanese intelligence and the Soviet-Japanese border conflicts in the 1930s

小谷 賢

【要約】

本稿は、今年度の第 33 回国際軍事史学会（於ケープタウン）において発表した、「1930 年代における日ソ国境紛争とインテリジェンス」に関する原稿である。

テーマは、日本陸軍の対ソ連赤軍に対する情報の優越であり、人的情報（ヒュミント）、通信情報（シギント）、公開情報（オシント）に区分し、これらの情報が実際の国境紛争（チャンカーズ事件、張鼓峰事件等）においてどのような役割を果たしていたのかについて検討した。

二つの国境紛争において、日本軍はソ連赤軍との圧倒的劣勢な戦力差にも関わらず、ソ連赤軍に対して互角以上の戦いをなした主要因は、日本軍がソ連赤軍について深く研究するとともに、保有する情報を適時適切に作戦に活用する等、上記三種の情報の優越にあったことを検証するものである。

1. Introduction

In the summer of 1938, a regional conflict arose between Japan and the USSR around the area of Lake Khasan, the border of Soviet, Korea and Manchuria. Both armies severely fought against each other for taking a small hill, “Changkufeng”. During the two weeks battle, only 7,000 Japanese soldiers, without any tanks or aircraft, fought against the Russian mechanized force which possessed 15,000 soldiers, 237 artillery guns, 285 tanks and 250 aircraft. In the night of 30 July, the Japanese 19th Corps started to attack the Russian troops, which had kept the field position on the border. The Japanese troops succeeded in pushing back the Soviet troops into her territory, but the Russians started to counterattack on 6 August and finally the front line reached a deadlock on the small hill. As a result, the Japanese ambassador to the USSR, Mamoru Shigemitsu, made an armistice with the Soviet on 11 August and both

troops withdrew from the border¹.

During the two weeks battle, the Russians suffered 792 deaths and 2,752 wounded while the Japanese suffered 526 deaths and 914 wounded. These number show the Japanese fought very hard against the overwhelming Russian troops. I can point out one reason the Japanese could fight well was that Japanese intelligence did break some Russian signal traffic, which contributed to Japanese operations in the battle.

The border conflicts between Japan and Soviet occurred over 1000 times from 1938, and the biggest one was the battle of Nomonhan in June 1939 and the second was Changkufeng / Khasan incident. In other words, the Japanese armies in Manchuria and Korea were always facing the menace of Russian pressure in the 1930s and spent a lot of energy to grasp the situation of the Soviet military presence in the Far East. This report will focus on the Japanese intelligence against the Soviets and how they exploited their intelligence for the border conflicts.

2. Human sources

Soviet security in the 1930s was quite severe and it was almost impossible to access secret sources in the Soviet. Lord Chilston, British ambassador to the USSR, pointed out that diplomats stationed in Moscow were “deprived of almost all personal contact with those whose tendencies and reactions he is to estimate...Soviet officials and officers did not speak to foreigners on sensitive subjects.”² The situation was much more serious for Japanese attaché in Moscow, because Japan was Russian’s archenemy in the Far East and Stalin was afraid of Japanese aggression against the USSR in the late 1930s³. Colonel Saburo Hayashi, chief of the Soviet section, the Japanese Army General Staff Office wrote, “Japanese attaché in Moscow was obliged to stay in a certain hotel, and their telephone and letters were always tapped by a notorious Russian secret police, NKVD. When they went out, they were tailed by the NKVD

¹ Alvin Coox, “The anatomy of a small war : the Soviet-Japanese struggle for Changkufeng -Khasan, 1938” (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977).

² Paul W. Doerr, “The Changkufeng / Lake Khasan Incident of 1938: British intelligence on Soviet and Japanese Military Performance”, *Intelligence and National Security*, (July 1990), p. 187.

³ James Harris, “Encircled by Enemies: Stalin’s Perceptions of the Capitalist World, 1918-1941”, *The Journal of Strategic Studies* (June 2007), pp. 531-541.

officers and sometimes tailed in public lavatories.”⁴

Although the Japanese were facing severe counterintelligence activities in the Soviet Union, Lieutenant colonel Isamu Asai, a specialist of Soviet intelligence, recalls that the Japanese Army had human and signal intelligence sources in the USSR.

The Japanese Army's expeditionary force to Manchuria, the Kwantung Army, possessed a special intelligence branch, the Harbin Tokumu-kikan. The Branch was composed of 1000-2000 intelligence officers, who were educated in Russian studies at the Army intelligence schools, such as the Nakano School and the Russian educational center of the Kwantung Army. These schools supplied almost 100 Russian-speaking officers to intelligence sections of the Japanese Army every year.

The most reliable human intelligence source was direct observation of Russian territory from the border of Manchuria and USSR. The spotter groups of the Kwantung Army were watching the Russian territories everyday and recorded the number of soldiers, tanks and horses in the USSR. In 1933 the group recorded that the Russians had started to construct pillboxes along the border.

Japanese diplomatic couriers, who were covered by the Japanese intelligence officers were also one of the useful information sources, since they were allowed to take the Siberian railway from Vladivostock to Moscow. They were trained to count how many trains were passing, how many joints went by and the length of railroad bridges. Based on the information, the Japanese Army finally organized an exact diagram of the Siberian railway and this information was useful to estimate the capacity of Russian rail transportation to the Far East, especially during the battle of Changkufeng and Nomonhan. The Polish Army was also interested in the diagram, and the Japanese army passed it to the Polish exchanging for the Polish Signal intelligence.

There were two Russians who leaked information to Japanese. In 1936, Lieutenant Colonel Hayashi Yamamoto, an intelligence officer of the Japanese army succeeded in bribing a Russian, Mikhailov, who was working for the Soviet consular office in Harbin, Manchuria. Mikhailov was a telegrapher of the consular office and he passed secret telegraphs to Yamamoto⁵. The Japanese army paid 5,000 yen monthly to Mikhailov

⁴ Saburo Hayashi, "Our intelligence on the USSR.", *NIDS Library*.

⁵ Yukio Nishihara, *Zen Kiroku Harubin Tokumukikan (The Records of the Harbin Special Branch)*, (Tokyo: Mainichishinbunsha 1980), pp. 144-147.

(this is almost equal to 30,000 dollars today), and obtained secret information. However the Soviet consular member noticed soon after that Mikhailov had something to do with the Japanese and began to leak false information. This information was called “Harbin Special Intelligence” by the Japanese, and the British GC&CS found out by signal intelligence that the Japanese Army was obtaining Harbin Special Intelligence⁶ . The British report suspected that the Japanese army broke Russian signal traffic and got information, but the real source was Mikhailov.

In June 1938, General Genrikh Liushkov, the Far Eastern Regional NKVD directorate, was exiled to Manchuria. At Stalin’s orders he had led the purge of the Far Eastern NKVD organization and the Far East army command. After Japanese Manchurian police detained Liushkov on the border of Manchuria, the Japanese quickly took custody of him and sent him to Tokyo, where he was debriefed by the Russian section of the Army’s Intelligence Department. Liushkov lived until 1945 in Tokyo, more or less under house arrest, working for the Japanese Army’s intelligence and propaganda apparatus. In 1945 the Japanese military sent him back to Manchuria to advise the Kwantung Army, which faced a massive Soviet assault in August 1945. There a young Japanese intelligence officer shot him, when the Soviet invaded Manchuria⁷ .

Liushkov provided the Japanese with information about NKVD insider politics, the number of executions during the Great Terror from 1936 to 1938 and Soviet military dispositions. Only 2 months after the Liushkov’s exile, the Changkufeng battle happened. The possibility can not be denied that Liushkov’s information contributed to the outcome of the battle of Changkufeng, but unfortunately there is no surviving documental record on Liushikov in Japan.

3. Signal sources

Japanese signal intelligence on the Soviet was not insignificant and the signal intelligence was called “Toku-jo (special intelligence)” by the Japanese. The Japanese army began to study the Russian signal traffic and its cipher in 1923, inviting a Polish

⁶ Security of British and Allied Communications, HW 40/8, *PRO*.

⁷ Matthew E. Leno, “Key to the Kirov Murder on the Shelves of Hokkaido University Library.” (http://src-home.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/pdf_seminar/20060317/lenoe.pdf)

cipher specialist, Jan Kowalevsky, captain of the Polish army. In addition, the Japanese General Staff sent 4 intelligence officers to Poland to study Soviet ciphers. In 1934 the Special Signal Intelligence Section was set up in the Kwantung Army and started codebreaking activities of Russian signal traffic. There were 8 intercept stations in Manchuria and almost 1000 staffs were working on Soviet codebreaking. Each station intercepted 20 Russian signal traffics everyday. In sum, the Kwantung Army obtained 50,000 signal data in a year⁸.

In May 1936, the section obtained one of the Soviet Red Army's cipher code, called "OKK5" through the Polish General Staff. Based on the code book, the Japanese team succeeded in breaking the Soviet Army's 4 digits code cipher and the Soviet border guard's code, "PK1" in July 1936. This success was applied to the Soviet-Japanese border conflicts in the late 1930s. On 19 June 1937, Russian border guards landed on the Kanchatzu island in the Amur river, the border line between Manchuria and USSR and occupied the island. During the incident, the Japanese team broke the Soviet border guard's 4 digits code, the Soviet Red Army's 4 digits code and the Soviet Air Force's 3 digits code and gathered information. The team revealed that the border guard's reckless landing was not an order from Moscow, but the result of a judgment by the local commander and that Moscow did not want to fight against the Japanese. The Japanese codebreakers also confirmed that the Soviet General Staff did not order a sortie of their air force in the Far East. According to the signal intelligence, the Japanese government started diplomatic negotiations with the Soviets. On 30 June, three Soviet gunboats suddenly invaded the Manchurian side of river and fired at the riverbank. However the signal intelligence foresaw the Russian operation and the Japanese and Manchurian border guards fired back on the gunboats, sinking one and damaging others.

One year later, signal intelligence again revealed that the Russians had started to construct field positions on the Changkufeng hill, on the border of Manchuria and the USSR. It was 6 July 1938. In the signal intelligence, the Soviet border guards were planning to capture the small hill, because it was a tactically vital point on the border. The border line between Manchuria and USSR was ambiguous and Japanese and Russian troops were not stationed in the area.

⁸ Toshijiro Okubo, *The Codebreaking on the USSR.*, *NIDS Library*.

The Japanese General Staff in Korea took the signal intelligence seriously and ordered the 19th Corps to scout the situation at Changkufeng. As a result of the reconnaissance, the Soviet's development on the border was confirmed and the Japanese troops advanced toward the border line. The number of Russians on the border was gradually increasing from 10 to 50 persons. Finally the Japanese General Staff ordered that a battalion to be sent to keep the border line, after which both troops were confronting each other. On 29 July 1938 the tension was broken by Japanese blow on the Soviet troops and the border conflict began.

During the battle, the signal intelligence that showed developments of the Russian troops on the ground was a great help for the Japanese troops. Especially, the Japanese codebreaking team could follow the Soviet tank troops' movement from Vladivostock to Changkufeng and the signal intelligence contributed to the Japanese tactical success⁹.

Also, during the battle of Nomonhan, June 1939, the Japanese signal intelligence section broke border guard's 4 digits code, the Army's 4 digits code and Air force's 3 digits code. The signal success gave tactical advantage to the Japanese troops on the front line.

After the battle of Nomonhan, the Soviet Red Army adopted a new 5 digits code, "OK40", which was quite difficult to break for the Japanese. However the 5 digits code had been broken by the Finnish codebreaking team during the Russo-Finnish War, which started in November 1939. The Japanese team obtained the data from the Finnisshs and succeeded to decode the 5 digits code. The Japanese also succeeded in breaking the 4 digits code of the Soviet Navy and Air Force.

4. Conclusion

Alvin Coox, the military historian famous for his studies on Nomonhan, wrote, "The Japanese system of net assessment in the period prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 was relatively unsophisticated, parochial, fragmented, adamantine, spasmodic and often vague or waffling to boot."¹⁰ But as far as the Japanese

⁹ Saburo Hayashi, *Kantogun to Kyokuto Sorengun (The Kwantung Army and the Soviet Army in the Far East)*, (Tokyo Fuyoshobo 1974), pp. 113-134.

¹⁰ Williamson Murray and Allan Millett, *Calculations* (New York: The Free Press 1992), p. 298.

intelligence on the USSR is concerned, it was relatively sophisticated, unrestricted, flexible, continuous and precise. Besides human and signal sources, the Kwantung Army hired 50 Russian political refugees and set up an open source intelligence section. The section assembled the personal data of 4000 Soviet staff officers and discovered details of their troop dispositions, by analyzing journals, such as Pravda and Izvestia, and radio broadcasts in the Soviet Union. Based on the open source intelligence, the Japanese General Staff could foresee the Russian invasion of Poland in September 1939.

The Japanese Army spent a lot of energy on taking information on the Soviets and tried to exploit it for the Japanese strategy in Manchuria. The Japanese Army was stuck in the military quagmire against China from 1937 and the Kwantung Army was afraid of being stabbed in the back by the Soviets. This was why the Kwantung Army paid much attention to the USSR. It could be said that the Japanese intelligence on the Soviets was relatively a success, which was proved in the border conflicts such as Kanchatzu and Changkufeng in the late 1930s. However once the Pacific War came in December 1941, it gradually became impossible for the Japanese Army to concentrate on the UK and US in addition to the USSR. Therefore, after Pearl Harbor, the Japanese intelligence ability became dispersed and deteriorated, as Coox wrote.

(防衛研究所戦史部 教官)