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**“Because We Were Japanese Soldiers”: The Failure of Japanese Tactics at Changkufeng
and Nomonhan and Lessons Left Unlearned**

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Honors Thesis

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Abbreviations

AA – anti-aircraft

AP – armor piercing

CER – Chinese Eastern Railway

IJA – Imperial Japanese Army

MG – machine gun

MPR – Mongolian People's Republic

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Introduction: The Winding Course to War

The Japanese people have never been strangers to conflict. Centuries of internal strife led to the creation of a well-defined military class, the samurai, which persisted in idea if not in reality even after the abolition of their special rights and the birth of a modern conscript army in the late 1800s. The samurai – and his successor on the battlefield, the Japanese soldier – was prized for his high martial skill, his prowess with the blade and in hand-to-hand combat, and his spiritual strength, which was able to overcome any adversary. He was not to fear death in combat, but rather to embrace it as the proper and fitting end for a warrior. The practical result of this, in terms of Japanese military doctrine, was a fighting force with a tactical doctrine centered almost entirely around the infantry, prizing close quarters battle, and despising or shunning almost anything that detracted from these aspects of war – including the avoidance of death.

In other words, the basic nature of the Imperial Japanese Army by the time of the Asia-Pacific War was hardly changed from that which had long served them so well. Victorious against Qing China in 1895 and again ten years later in the Russo-Japanese War, the discipline and fearlessness of the individual Japanese soldier had always carried their army to offensive success even against such formidably defended positions as Port Arthur. It was only natural that their decision makers would wish to ‘stay the course,’ but the dramatic technological developments of World War I – which Japan only marginally participated in – and the interwar changed the face of armed conflict forever. Well-armored tanks, long-range heavy artillery, and remarkable new aircraft provided support for infantry armed with grenades and heavy machine guns in large quantities, sniper rifles with high-quality optics, and hand-held automatic weapons. The Imperial Japanese Army failed to closely follow these developments and alter their tactics and doctrine sufficiently to integrate these changes with their order of battle, and consequently

they found themselves coming up short against the modern armies they faced off with, a fact first apparent in their border conflicts with the Soviet Union's Red Army in 1938-39. The intangible which was to close the gap, that "spiritual superiority" remaining as a legacy of the samurai, granted the Japanese forces a well-deserved reputation as tenacious fighters, but ultimately proved insufficient as a reliable means of achieving victory.

After the 1931 Mukden Incident and the subsequent foundation of Japan's puppet state in northeastern China, Manchukuo, the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) found themselves face to face with their old enemy, Russia – now the Soviet Union. Border disputes soon turned hot, and a policy of limited war brought the forces of the Japanese Korea Army and Kwantung Army up against the Soviet Red Army on two separate battlegrounds in this theater: Changkufeng in 1938, and Nomonhan in 1939. Despite their groundbreaking importance and the serious implications of these engagements' results for the future of the Japanese military and empire, neither received significant study or scrutiny at the time, largely eclipsed by the events in Europe and the subsequent outbreak of world war. A New York Times editorial from the time remarked tellingly on this "strange war" in a "thoroughly out-of-the-way corner of the world where it cannot attract a great deal of attention."¹

These conflicts remain relatively unknown in the popular consciousness even today, but historians finally began to study them in the late 1970s, in no small part due to their connection with the Soviet Union. Most prominent among these works are those by Alvin Coox, whose 1977 study of the Changkufeng Incident entitled *The Anatomy of a Small War* is one of the only thorough scholarly works on this battle. Additionally, Coox's 1985 magnum opus, *Nomonhan: Japan Against Russia, 1939*, brought this pivotal engagement into the spotlight, and his archival

¹ "A Strange War," *New York Times*, July 20, 1939, 18, quoted in Edward J. Drea, *Nomonhan: Japanese-Soviet Tactical Combat* (Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute, 1981), ix.

research and interviews have formed the backbone of virtually every work on the incident published since. The first military analyses of these battles also came out around the same time, with the work of Edward Drea at the Combat Studies Institute at Leavenworth providing the foremost study of the tactical and organizational aspects of the individual maneuvers of the battles. With the exceptions of these authors, scholarship has been limited; these far-off battles fought as supposedly limited engagements have failed to capture the imaginations of writers, despite their tremendous significance as omens of what was to befall the Japanese in later combat. Although Coox, Drea, and others detail precisely *how* the Japanese lost each battle, as any military text must, none of them endeavor to fully consider *why* they were so frequently unable to achieve victory on the field, nor do they dwell on the fundamental problems with Japanese tactics in a modern war. This paper will explore this aspect by examining the details of battle presented in these histories and determine what they implied about the future efficacy of the Japanese Army's tactical doctrine. In short, the 'forgotten battles' between Imperial Japan and Soviet Russia are not yet a closed book, and the details that can be gleaned from their close study have meaningful implications for how the battlefield history of World War II in Asia should be written and remembered.

For this study I have relied heavily on the secondary sources of the authors mentioned above, especially the works by Alvin Coox. Coox's work is based heavily in Japanese archival sources and interviews with veterans of the conflicts; very few of his sources are available outside of Japan, or even outside of their respective archives, and so I am content to trust his interpretations of the battles from a Japanese perspective. Where I have used the available primary sources, I have endeavored to the greatest of my abilities in Japanese to read them correctly, but it is not unlikely that I have made mistakes. I also acknowledge the lack of a

Russian documentary perspective in this work, but many of the documents remain unavailable to the public and fewer yet have been translated or studied in any depth. The relative obscurity of these conflicts curses any author to a limited interpretation, but what is presented here is based on the most current available research in English.

Before embarking on a consideration of the IJA's tactical mistakes at Changkufeng and Nomonhan, it is important to clearly establish what is meant by 'tactics,' since this is a word which has come into somewhat confusing usage in modern times alongside 'strategy.' Clausewitz provides the classical definitions: "tactics teaches *the use of armed forces in the engagement*; strategy, *the use of engagements for the object of the war* [emphasis in original]."² In other words, a consideration of tactics is not concerned with whether the war was winnable, correct, or well-reasoned from the start; it is only interested in the experiences in combat of the forces on the battlefield. Tactics is intimately related with low-level issues such as the specifications and capabilities of weaponry, the training and preferred maneuvers of soldiers, and the basic doctrines that form the foundation upon which a war is built. This is transformed into a "tactical doctrine," thought of as "the officially approved methods for [the various units of an army]... to fight on the battlefield."³ Contentions raised here, then, will not directly address the wisdom of the Japanese commanders in waging a war against the Red Army, nor will it consider the role of individual battles toward achieving Japanese goals. Instead, the focus is on the conduct of war at its most basic level: man versus man and all of those technological implements which extend the range of that primitive, deadly clash. This thesis will show how the Japanese neglect of technological advances in warfare at last made their dated tactics too costly to guarantee victory, thus irrecoverably dooming any greater strategy.

² Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 128.

³ Edward J. Drea, *Nomonhan: Japanese-Soviet Tactical Combat* (Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute, 1981), ix.

Section I: A Natural Sphere of Influence

To understand the origins and basic nature of the tactics used at Changkufeng and Nomonhan, it is necessary to consider the historical crucible in which the Japanese military was forged and tested. Meiji Japan (1868-1912) was a spectacularly ambitious nation. Programs of rapid and total modernization did away with the samurai class, introduced public education, reformed the military after European forms, and set Japan on the path to becoming a full-fledged industrial nation. The end of centuries of self-imposed isolation (the *sakoku*, or closed country, policy) also brought the newly reorganized state into the international spotlight; after all, that policy was broken not by internal Japanese will, but by Commodore Perry's show of force. One crucial consequence of this rude beginning was the imposition of unequal treaties onto Japan, in the same form as those which had turned China into a "quasi-colony" of the Western empires in the mid-1800s. These treaties, which ceded major parts of Chinese sovereignty to the European powers and the United States, hastened the fall of the Qing Dynasty into disorganization and disaster. Japan's leaders had watched this transformation with great interest, and they were resolved to protect their reborn nation from the same humiliation. China's steady dismemberment at the hands of the West provided a "powerful incentive" for Japan to aim high and move rapidly to secure its place as an equal among the great powers of the world.⁴

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." Incorporating the models of French and Prussian armies, as well as the assistance of advisors from those two states, the Meiji government crafted a new conscript army to replace the inefficient and dated samurai warrior structure. Armed with rifles and bayonets, this peasant army was quickly and efficiently brought up to Western standards,

⁴ Louise Young, *Japan's Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 23.

and it would not be long before it proved its worth. The rapid change in Japan did not occur without generating friction, and the samurai class, especially, was punished by the changes in land ownership and military structure being put in place. Tensions came to a head in 1877 with the Satsuma Rebellion led by the famous samurai Saigō Takamori, but their complete defeat by the national army brought the samurai era to its final end, opening the doors for further growth of the new conscripted military.

The end of the samurai as a class, however, did not mean the end of *bushidō*, the Japanese way of the warrior. This ancient manner of battle, cultivated by the lore of samurai, emphasized spiritual strength and individual prowess in combat. Works such as the *Hagakure*, written during the Tokugawa period, came to symbolize this spirit of war, encouraging Japan's warriors to cast off their fear of dying and fight only with bravery. It begins with the assertion that "the way of the samurai is found in death."⁵ The power of this fearsome tradition was not lost upon the Meiji reformers, and it was deeply integrated into the Meiji armed forces alongside the new ideas of the European advisors. Admonitions were specifically issued to soldiers reminding them of the way of the warrior and marking them as heirs to that tradition.⁶ Hand-to-hand combat with bayonets and maneuvers designed to bring Japanese soldiers into a situation where their blades could be used formed the backbone of their battlefield arts.

Japan's new army would have its first real war before the turn of the century. With the issue of unequal treaties at last resolved in 1894, border determination and regional security became the major concerns of the Meiji statesmen.⁷ Japan, as an island nation, had few troubles defining its main borders at that time; however, issues arose over some of the northern islands, which were disputed with Russia. A treaty in 1875 securing the Kurile Islands in exchange for

⁵ Yamamoto Tsunetomo, *Hagakure*, trans. William Scott Wilson (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1992), 17.

⁶ Edward J. Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army: Its Rise and Fall, 1853-1945* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 2009), 48.

⁷ R.H.P. Mason and J.G. Caiger, *A History of Japan* (Rutland, Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 1997), 264.

Sakhalin cleared this hurdle, and also confirmed Hokkaidō as Japanese territory. Japan's remaining regional concerns, then, were China and Korea. Though neither posed an active threat to Japan, the expansion of imperialism in the 1880s meant that foreign territorial ambitions could potentially extend well into those two East Asian states. The most succinct statement of this problem came from one of the German military advisors to Japan, Major Jacob Meckel. In his words, Korea was "a dagger pointed at the heart of Japan; but what made Korea of strategic concern was not merely its proximity to Japan but its inability to defend itself against outsiders."⁸ If a foreign power were to assert itself in Korea (or China), it would represent an enormous national security threat to Japan. This was an issue that would have to be handled, either by securing Korea from foreign interference or by Japan claiming it directly.

An opportunity was created in 1875, when a Japanese warship was dispatched to the Korean Kanghwa Island, and the resulting incident allowed the Japanese government, through a series of diplomatic maneuvers, to enforce the Treaty of Kanghwa, which officially separated Korea from the Qing tributary system and opened it to Japanese influence. This move was not well-received by China, especially when Japan quickly moved troops onto the peninsula. The result was the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, in which Japan's new conscript army soundly and completely defeated the Qing forces on land and sea in virtually every encounter.⁹ The resolution of this conflict gave Japan its first true colonial possession in the form of Taiwan.

Having proven itself in war, Japan ascended a rung on the international relations ladder, but not far enough to prevent the "triple intervention," when Russia, Germany, and France blocked them from securing concessions on the Asian mainland as a consequence of the 1894

⁸ Peter Duus, *The Abacus and the Sword: The Japanese Penetration of Korea, 1895-1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 49-50.

⁹ Mason and Caiger, *A History of Japan*, 266-267.

war, leaving Japan “very resentful.”¹⁰ This move was the first leading to Japan’s next major war, and its first against a modern imperial power. Korea, now “nominally independent” and free of Chinese influence, turned into an ideological battlefield. Elements in favor of progressive reform in Korea turned to Japan for political guidance (even as Japan began its economic exploitation of Korea), while conservative elements, now deprived of support from China, made entreaties to an interested Imperial Russia as a potential savior. Russia had been pursuing an aggressive policy of expansion in northeastern Asia throughout the late 1800s, including the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway in the 1890s, and by 1900 they were the dominant power in northeastern China, the region known as Manchuria. When Russia attempted to use the Korean invitation to expand their control, Japan sharply checked them; negotiations quickly gave way to war.

The Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 was a turning point in the history of the Japanese empire, and the Russian as well. Through a series of hard-fought, bloody military actions, the Japanese ultimately gained ascendancy over the Russians, defeating them at sea, capturing the stronghold at Port Arthur, and ultimately securing victory at Mukden in central Manchuria.¹¹ These battles saw the maturation of Japanese military tactics, including the first examples of the ‘human bullet’ attack, where charging soldiers would carry explosives to be detonated, along with themselves, once they reached the target.¹² This would become central to their tactics at Changkufeng and Nomonhan. In his introduction to the war recollections of one of the soldiers who fought, Meiji statesman Ōkuma Shigenobu hails this development: “The soldiers vie with each other to offer themselves on the altar of their country; the spirit of self-sacrifice prevails to a

¹⁰ Micheal T. Kikuoka, *The Changkufeng Incident: A Study in Soviet-Japanese Conflict, 1938* (New York: University Press of America, 1988), 17.

¹¹ Mason and Caiger, *A History of Japan*, 268.

¹² For a harrowing, first-hand account of ‘human bullet’ attacks and the culture of war on the Japanese side during the Russo-Japanese War, see Sakurai Tadayoshi, *Human Bullets*, trans. Masujiro Honda and Alice M. Bacon (Tokyo: Teibi, 1907).

marked degree. This is the true characteristic of the race of Yamato. [...] Even the lowest of soldiers fought in battle-fields with unflinching courage, and faced death as if it were going home. [...] Their display of the true spirit of the Japanese Samurai is radically different from the behavior of men who appear on the fighting line with only the prospect of decorations and money before their eyes [the Russian army].”¹³

The defeat of Russia at last brought Japan into the international community of Great Powers, with the de facto recognition of Japan’s “natural sphere of influence in northeast Asia” and the expansion of its empire to include Korea (made a protectorate after the war and ultimately annexed in 1910).¹⁴ At last, the resources of Manchuria were opened to Japanese expansion. In Russia, public discontent over defeat in the war, as well as a dramatic loss in international prestige, fanned the flames of the quickening revolution. Russia’s military, reborn in the Soviet Union, would not forget the ignominy of their defeat in 1905 – and Japan knew it. These two powers would meet on the battlefields of northeast Asia again before the century was half-past.

Section II: Building Manchuria

Japanese military planners had aspired to have a foothold in Manchuria as early as the 1880s, when the strategic issue of Korea first began to be considered. After all, if securing Korea was necessary to protect Japan, then it would also be essential to take the Liaodong Peninsula in order to secure Korea. When this region was seized as part of the end of the Russo-Japanese War, it enabled Japan to begin extending their empire into Manchuria at last. Japan did not have full reign over Manchuria, however; the area was still nominally under the control of China, and

¹³ Ōkuma Shigenobu, Introduction to *Human Bullets* by Sakurai Tadayoshi, trans. Masujiro Honda and Alice M. Bacon (Tokyo: Teibi, 1907), x-xi.

¹⁴ Mason and Caiger, *A History of Japan*, 269

Russia had obtained its territories there on the basis of leases. These leases were all transferred to Japan as part of the peace, including rights to the Liaodong Peninsula (referred to as the Kwantung Leased Territory), the southern branch of Russia's Chinese Eastern Railway (CER), and the railway zone, a corridor that followed the track and included all towns along it.¹⁵ Japan began to expand its influence in the area with a combination of diplomacy and bribery in China after 1905. These efforts were given a great boost by World War I; the aversion of European eyes from Asia enabled the Japanese to force an extension of their rights in the northeast from China as part of the Twenty-One Demands, and Japan's earlier alliance with Britain allowed it to seize German holdings on the Shandong Peninsula during the course of the war. Piece by piece, Japan expanded its empire, and their endeavors on the continent would soon create major strategic problems which would demand tactical solutions.

The wide territories Japan now commanded in northeast Asia needed both control and security. For this purpose, the Japanese government established the new post of governor-general in 1905-06, which cooperated with the Mantetsu railway corporation to govern the area.¹⁶ A significant military presence was also built-up in the region, since it was thought not only generally essential to the defense of Korea and, by extension, Japan itself, but specifically because the Imperial Japanese Army feared a revenge attack in the wake of Russo-Japanese War. This garrison force, which would ultimately become known as the Kwantung Army, would be the major actor in the events of the region, and the key to the conflicts to come.

The Kwantung garrison was, from its beginning, an active and ambitious force in Manchuria. It had a number of important roles to play in the region. By 1907, there was already a

¹⁵ Young, *Japan's Total Empire*, 24-25.

¹⁶ For more information on Mantetsu and its role in the Japanese imperial and military developments in northeast Asia, see Louise Young, *Japan's Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

significant and growing Japanese civilian population in Manchuria of around 38,000, and by 1910 62,000 Japanese had migrated to the area.¹⁷ Bandits, demobilized Chinese soldiers resentful of the Japanese, and other “lawless elements” threatened this population, especially in the railway corridors and borders, where they could easily escape from the narrow area controlled by Japan. Defense of this civilian population was one of the Kwantung garrison’s first roles. The Japanese High Command’s major concern was far graver than bandits, however. Expectations of a Russian revenge attack loomed, and by 1907 the Russians were clearly identified as Japan’s “primary hypothetical enemy” in the first Imperial National Defense Policy.¹⁸ In order to protect against this threat, a sizeable force was needed, especially because planners called for an offensive policy in the event of war – an early conceptualization of the modern idea of ‘pre-emptive warfare.’ The force that resulted from this strategy was reorganized in 1919 as the Kwantung Army, an administrative grouping including at its inception one core division and six independent battalions of railway guards.¹⁹

Yet none of these facts make the Kwantung Army stand out in any way. What made this force such an exceptional one was its willingness to meddle directly in local affairs, often with serious bloodshed, without the supervision or approval of the officials in Tokyo or even those in the higher echelons of the army, a type of “extracurricular zealotry” that became a major problem for the Japanese government.²⁰ Though often justified on the basis of security concerns, many of these operations were directed toward ending Chinese control of Manchuria. They were largely carried out by junior officers, “cocky and conceited because of their youth and supposed powers of execution,” who questioned the slow pace taken by their seniors and insisted on

¹⁷ Alvin D. Coox, *Nomonhan: Japan Against Russia, 1939* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), 3.

¹⁸ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 3.

¹⁹ Alvin D. Coox, “The Kwantung Army Dimension,” in *The Japanese Informal Empire in China, 1895-1937*, ed. Peter Duus et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 400.

²⁰ Coox, “Kwantung Army,” 400-401.

immediate action to achieve what they thought should be the goals of Japan.²¹ Furthermore, many of them shared a belief that “the War Ministry and General Staff in Tokyo did not fully realize the dangers posed by the Soviet Union” to Japanese interests.²² One of the first definitive acts of this brand was the assassination of the warlord Zhang Zuolin, whose death was hoped to provide an opportunity for Japan to claim all of Manchuria and secure it against the Soviets, but whose son successfully succeeded him. The next event would not be so inconsequential, however. The Mukden Incident, also known as the Manchurian Incident, of 1931 was better planned, more thoroughly organized within the army, and came at a time of heightened military sympathy in Japan. After staging an attack by Chinese soldiers on a Japanese railway, the Kwantung Army forces responsible immediately launched an invasion of a nearby Chinese barracks, overrunning it with minimal resistance. The operation snowballed from there, quickly leading to the occupation of the city of Mukden on the next day and the continuation of military operations against Chinese forces in northeast Asia. Presenting them with a series of *faits accomplis*, within five months the entire Japanese High Command had been dragged, with some resistance, into the “conquest of all Manchuria” by the Kwantung Army.²³ The home government, though not approving of the action, was unwilling to give up this territory; however, it would not be internationally acceptable to simply annex it. In order to resolve this issue, the Kwantung Army plotters made agreements with powerful Chinese figures in the region, created a false grassroots movement for Manchurian independence, and promptly declared an independent state known as Manchukuo, under a façade of leadership by the last Qing emperor, Pu Yi.²⁴ The

²¹ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 19.

²² Drea, *Nomonhan*, 12.

²³ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 40.

²⁴ Young, *Japan's Total Empire*, 40.

Japanese promptly recognized and allied itself with this puppet government, securing effective direct control of the entire Manchurian region.

Manchukuo quickly took on the role of a “lifeline” which would provide the Japanese nation with everything it desired – most importantly, land and mineral resources.²⁵ The promise of a new frontier and an escape from old ways brought an entire generation of civic planners, architects, engineers, policymakers, and scholars to the region, where they dreamed of creating a new kind of empire that would resolve the tensions between China and Japan.²⁶ In 1936, to follow this trial wave, the Japanese government launched a colonization program aimed at sending one million farm families to Manchukuo to develop the land over the course of twenty years, ultimately sending 300,000 by 1945.²⁷ Propaganda programs were launched at home, exhorting young Japanese people to travel to this new frontier and further open Japan’s lifeline. Manchukuo and its resources were to become the industrial heart of Japan, an essential and inseparable part of its empire in Asia.

To achieve this grand vision, Kwantung Army officers determined themselves to be “the best kind of civilizers and empire builders,” and so took the lead in the government and development of the area together with the business support of Mantetsu.²⁸ They launched an authoritarian consolidation of Japan’s economic situation in the region, aiming to shut out any foreign powers before they could develop a presence. In order to fully carry out this policy and develop the puppet state to meet Japanese needs, security concerns in the region had to be addressed – after all, the state was born out of the chaos of warlord rule in China, and had hardly

²⁵ Young, *Japan’s Total Empire*, 88.

²⁶ Young, *Japan’s Total Empire*, 241.

²⁷ Young, *Japan’s Total Empire*, 307.

²⁸ Coox, “Kwantung Army,” 409.

escaped it. Kwantung Army staff identified three “actual or potential threats” to nation-building: domestic Manchurian bandits, Nationalist China, and Soviet Russia.²⁹

The first of these was of more concern than one might expect. The railway corridors were easy targets for attack prior to 1931, and their security was not suddenly improved by the assumption of Japanese control over the region. “Professional brigands,” smugglers, Nationalists, Communists, former soldiers, and desperate farmers were all represented in this class of enemy, which totaled as many as 360,000 men by autumn of 1932. To resolve this threat, the Japanese led the organization of the Manchukuoan Army, a colonial force initially drawn from the unreliable reserves of the former Manchurian warlords and the brigands themselves. Training by the Japanese officers, however, soon made them into an effective fighting corps, which operated in significant numbers alongside Kwantung Army units to suppress raids and eliminate bandit groups, whose numbers were reduced to only about 7,300 by 1938.³⁰

Of greater concern was China. Ostensibly to guarantee the security of Manchukuo, Kwantung Army forces launched a number of offensives south in continuation of the operations which began with the Manchurian Incident. Their first major strike was into Jehol province in opposition to about 240,000 Chinese soldiers in early 1933. By April, Japanese troops passed the Great Wall and extended operations into North China, asserting continued “provocation” and raiding by Chinese units. In order to avoid the overrun of Beijing, local commanders signed a truce with the Japanese, guaranteeing the demilitarization of 13,000 square kilometers between Manchuria and Beijing in exchange for Japanese withdrawal behind the Great Wall; a Japanese-friendly police force would secure the buffer zone.³¹ Similar operations continued until the outbreak of full-scale war between Japan and China in 1937. These early conflicts were mainly

²⁹ Coox, “Kwantung Army,” 412.

³⁰ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 67.

³¹ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 67-68.

aimed at guaranteeing security on the southern flank in the event of a Soviet invasion of Manchukuo; the fractured forces of the Chinese mainland could scarcely mount an effective resistance against the Japanese, let alone threaten Manchukuo on their own.³²

The so-called “Northern Problem” with the Soviet Union was the greatest of the Kwantung Army’s concerns. Conscious of an essentially passive policy by the Soviet government on Japanese actions in the region, the Kwantung Army sought to avoid any unnecessary provocations as part of the Manchurian Incident in 1931. Russian railway lines were crossed carefully and without damage, and the area between Harbin and Changchun, an influential part of the Russian-owned Chinese Eastern Railway (CER), was completely avoided. Despite these efforts, the Soviets were still unnerved by Japanese actions, and moved much of their rolling stock away from the area while building troop strength along the border. Any consideration of action by Russian forces to assist the Chinese Nationalists, however, was quickly quashed by Stalin himself.³³ In any case, Soviet troop strength in the region was paltry, only about 55,000 men with a few tanks and planes. This weakness soon proved too risky when Japanese operations began to push past their accepted ‘natural sphere of influence’ and into the Soviet-dominated parts of northeastern China, specifically with the move on Qiqihar in November of 1931. By 1932 the Kwantung Army had swept past Hailar and was approaching the border of Outer Mongolia, and at the end of that year the Soviet Union commenced the reinforcement of the border region “in earnest”; by 1933 the Red Army had eight rifle divisions, a full cavalry division and a full cavalry brigade, 200 combat aircraft, and 250 armored vehicles arrayed against Japan.³⁴ Along with this force building, the Soviets began to construct defensive emplacements and fortifications, including wooden barricades and ferroconcrete pillboxes near

³² Drea *Nomonhan*, 13.

³³ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 74.

³⁴ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 76.

the Amur River, as well as an additional fortification line protecting the Trans-Siberian rail lines. By 1933 construction crews had begun the development of air fields, roads, and bridges in all areas with an additional 150 aircraft and 100 armored vehicles in support.³⁵ All of these efforts, however, were basically defensive; they did not place the Soviet forces in any position to launch an attack against Manchukuo. What Japanese planners expected instead was a coordinated campaign of psychological warfare and guerilla support, *possibly* culminating in the establishment of an offensive policy once Stalin's First Five-Year Plan had concluded at home – placing the start of Soviet aggression around 1936.³⁶ Kwantung Army strategists began to consider the possibility of a “preventative war,” and ultranationalist hawks in influential government positions, such as Japanese War Minister Araki Sadao, made a number of statements suggesting Japan's intent to wage war against Russia a second time.³⁷ Regardless of their defensive intentions, the Soviets had created a security problem for Manchukuo, and so the IJA began to rattle its sabers, intensifying the situation.

The Soviet Union could not ignore such aggressive overtures, and so military build-up continued directly alongside ongoing efforts at diplomacy, creating a “vicious circle” of reinforcement.³⁸ In 1934 Soviet aircraft strength along the border was increased to 500, including a number of high-capacity bombers which could reach Tokyo and Osaka in around six hours with a load of over 5,000 pounds of bombs, and this strength was nearly doubled by 1935, reaching an estimated 950 planes.³⁹ All other units increased at a similar pace, with the Japanese estimating that by the conclusion of 1935 a total of 240,000 Soviet soldiers were “eyeball to

³⁵ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 76-77.

³⁶ Japanese intelligence officers did not seem to evince any particular interest in the purges within the Red Army as being likely to slow Soviet efforts.

³⁷ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 77.

³⁸ Drea, *Nomonhan*, 13.

³⁹ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 78.

eyeball” with Japanese forces across the border.⁴⁰ The situation came to a sudden halt in the middle of that year, however, with two crucial developments. First, the Soviet Union concluded the sale of the CER – their key security concern in Manchuria proper – to the Japanese, for 170 million Manchukuoan yen, a process which had begun in 1931. This sale eased tensions considerably, as some members of the Kwantung Army had suggested that purchase was unnecessary and had planned to simply seize the railway as a part of creating Manchukuo.⁴¹ Such a move could have potentially set off a major military confrontation, and so the peaceable transfer of the railway was good news for Soviet-Japanese relations in the region. The second development was Hitler’s announcement in March 1935 of his intent to rearm Germany. This move divided Soviet attention and was also certain to delay their efforts at troop build-up since they would now need to protect their Western front as well. Despite the positive contributions of the First Five-Year Plan to their military preparedness, it would be quite some time before they could effectively plan to wage simultaneous, independent operations against both Germany and Japan. 1936 would pass quietly without an offensive on either side of the Amur, as both sides continued to strengthen their positions for what was becoming an inevitable confrontation.

Nevertheless, the Kwantung Army could not wait around complacently in the face of such a build-up at their backdoor. Defensive preparations had begun on their side as soon as the offensive maneuvers of 1931 and 1932 had settled down, particularly with the expansion of the internal railways. The Japanese had long considered Manchuria’s railways the key elements of its defense; total control of them was essential to allowing quick troop movement to any area of the broad Manchurian frontier, and by the end of 1935 the track length had increased by 2,600

⁴⁰ Drea, *Nomonhan*, 1.

⁴¹ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 75.

kilometers to a total of 8,700.⁴² New road networks, military warehouses, and heavy industrial plants also supplemented the Kwantung war machine. These developments, however, could not erase what Japanese intelligence planners were increasingly becoming aware of via espionage operations: the Soviet forces greatly outnumbered their own. In 1935, the Kwantung Army had a military manpower of only 164,100 people, almost 76,000 less than the Red Army in the area. They had only about 20% of the Soviets' strength in airpower and tanks, and no organized cavalry divisions to speak of.⁴³ Officers looked to the homeland for more armaments and equipment, but Japan could hardly compete with Soviet Russia, where "the Russians devoted themselves preponderantly 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 one Japanese intelligence expert.⁴⁴

Since the Soviets seemed to have a stronger hand, even with new troubles brewing in Germany, the Japanese solution was to bluff. This approach manifested in a systematic campaign of underestimation of their enemies capabilities in spite of continuing intelligence to the contrary. Major General Honma Masaharu, who would become the chief of the Army Intelligence Bureau in 1937, told the Japanese press that the Stalinist purges of army leaders had pushed the Russian army to very near "disintegration and destruction."⁴⁵ This disbelief was bolstered by a long-standing contempt among Japanese military men for Russian capabilities, based on the battles of the Russo-Japanese War as well as the 1918 Siberian Intervention against the Bolsheviks. For the most part, Japanese soldiers equated modern Russian forces with the badly equipped and largely untrained Chinese soldiers that they had fought out of Manchukuo and who had been Japan's

⁴² Coox, *Nomonhan*, 82.

⁴³ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 84.

⁴⁴ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 85.

⁴⁵ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 85. Although the Red Army's command structure had, indeed, been crippled by the purges, it still maintained a tremendous force of arms and was hardly a non-threat, especially arrayed along the border.

most frequent opponent since the first World War. Those few voices who spoke out against this point of view, such as Giga Tetsuji and Tanaka Ryūkichi, were effectively ignored.⁴⁶

Privately, the Japanese were well aware of their numerical inferiority and shortage of equipment, but it was not considered to be an issue. Plans were made to win by encirclement against a force three times greater than what the Kwantung Army could muster in the theater, revealing how seriously even internal plans underestimated the capability of individual Soviet soldiers and their officers. At the core of such an operation would be the traditional combat tactics of the Kwantung Army and indeed of the entire Imperial Japanese Army – envelopment of enemy forces based on superior speed and battlefield movements, detouring of enemy reinforcements, and finally victory secured through traditional, bloody hand-to-hand combat against an isolated foe.⁴⁷ The 1928 Field Service Regulations, still in issue for the Kwantung Army at that time, had removed every reference to “surrender,” “retreat,” and “defense,” erasing them as sanctioned maneuvers.⁴⁸ Additionally, “no Japanese field army had higher morale or motivation” than the Kwantung Army, which was always ready for hostilities from the north.⁴⁹ It was not, then, that Japanese intelligence had no appreciation for Soviet numbers, but simply that they believed that their fearlessness, superior *esprit de corps*, and close combat could enable them to smash the Soviet “hordes” in spite of the total number of troops in theater. This was not necessarily an unreasoned plan either, since additional Soviet reinforcements could arrive from the west in a matter of months which would quickly devastate any chance of a Japanese victory through a slow offensive. Only a rapid series of decisive, enveloping strikes could push deeply enough into Soviet territory to bring the situation to the best the Japanese could hope for – an

⁴⁶ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 86.

⁴⁷ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 87.

⁴⁸ Edward J. Drea, *In Service of the Emperor: Essays on the Imperial Japanese Army* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 13.

⁴⁹ Coox, “Kwantung Army, 423.”

endurance-based fight with an unclear resolution down the line, with the goal of securing ground in Siberia to draw combat away from Manchukuo. It was a risky strategy to make war plans from, but the Kwantung Army was no stranger to chance.

Section III: Battle of Lake Khasan/Chōkohō Jiken (Changkufeng Incident)

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 weak 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 undemarcated in the north, northwest, and northeast.⁵⁰ For example, on the eastern frontier only thirty-five physical border markers had originally existed for a 632 kilometer border, and twelve of those had disappeared.⁵¹ Consequently, the reality of borders came in the form of military power, as both sides launched programs of fortification, reinforcement, and espionage. Japanese sources report that between 1932 and 1934, 152 small scale disputes occurred, often in the form of Russian 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.⁵² 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 unfinished military

⁵⁰ Kikuoka, *Changkufeng*, 30.

⁵¹ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 92.

⁵² Coox, *Nomonhan*, 92.

preparations on both sides) narrowly carried the day, averting a major conflict.⁵³ That same year, the Japanese government announced a “Five-Year Plan For the Production of War Materials” in direct response to the developments in the region.⁵⁴ The unstable peace between the two states was only further shaken as time went on and border negotiations failed to reach any agreement.

Matters would at last erupt into war in 1938 as part of the Chōkohō Jiken/Battle of Lake Khasan, centered over a hill called Changkufeng. This “small war,” as Alvin Coox has called it, did not directly involve the Kwantung Army, but rather a neighboring force, the IJA’s Korea Army, the Japanese garrison force of colonial Korean. Chōkohō was a significant step up in seriousness from any of conflicts that had marked the border conflicts, involving not only significant numbers of troops but also armor and air support as part of its operations.⁵⁵ The battlefield was a salient of Manchuria at the junction of the borders of northeastern Korea, southeast Manchukuo, and the Soviet Maritime Province. Like all of the frontier, it was poorly demarcated, but Changkufeng was an important high ground for the defense of the local region.⁵⁶ This area, despite being more a part of Manchukuo than of Korea, was guarded by the Japanese garrison at Hunchun, part of the Korea Army. Nevertheless, the Kwantung Army was intimately involved in the proceedings of the fighting, and the Chōkohō Incident offered them a variety of lessons through fire in terms of the implications of modern armor, artillery, and fundamental Soviet capability. It also offered some erroneous conclusions, most importantly that Soviet troops were dramatically inferior to the Japanese and so could not possibly succeed in a ‘real

⁵³ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 112-114.

⁵⁴ Kikuoka, *Changkufeng*, 5.

⁵⁵ Alvin Coox, *The Anatomy of a Small War: The Soviet Japanese Struggle for Changkufeng/Khasan* (London: Greenwood Press, 1977).

⁵⁶ Changkufeng’s importance was almost exclusively local. Shigemitsu Mamoru, ambassador to Japan at the time of the incident, would later comment that in spite of the judgment of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, “neither the Japanese government nor the Army General Staff [would have] planned a war of aggression over a spot of so little strategic value,” quoted in Kikuoka, *Changkufeng*, 8.

fight' without the strictures of limited war. Consequently, it is essential that this prelude to the larger battle at Nomonhan be examined.

The conflict began when the Kwantung Army intercepted a Soviet radio communication on July 6, 1938. A Soviet commanding officer instructed the forces headquartered at Khabarovsk to “secure previously unoccupied high ground west of Lake Khasan” with the deployment of at least one platoon and construction of entrenchments and entanglements beginning as soon as possible.⁵⁷ Terrain advantages from control of this area would offer the Russians a commanding view of the Korean port of Najin. The Kwantung Army intelligence branch wired the 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’ posture on the matter.⁵⁸ About one week later, an additional forty mounted soldiers arrived at Changkufeng and began an expansion of the outpost, preparing gun emplacements, observation points, and communications facilities, all supported by a logistical network established across Lake Khasan; their disposition made it clear that the Soviets intended a “stay of indefinite duration.”⁵⁹ The Japanese 19th Division, commanded by Lieutenant General Suetaka Kamezō of the Korea Army, moved immediately to reinforce the insufficient border guard in the area, but did not launch operations against the Soviets, awaiting further instructions from High Command. The Kwantung Army, sensing a hint of restraint in the hearts of the Korea Army leaders, quickly moved to provide what one Korea Army officer referred to as a “boot in the ass” – a harshly phrased warning that if the garrison forces did not act, the Kwantung Army would be left with no

⁵⁷ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 121.

⁵⁸ The Second Sino-Japanese War would begin in earnest the following day, starting from the July 7 Marco Polo Bridge Incident.

⁵⁹ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 122.

choice but to handle matters in the region on their own, further detracting from the already low prestige of the Korea Army.⁶⁰ Stirred by this intra-service rivalry and anxious to avoid appearing meek, 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 accepted Soviet territory.⁶¹ However, this minor border crossing incident near an insignificant hill would escalate suddenly, well beyond what either side anticipated.

The battles at Changkufeng would be a textbook example of a limited war. The Japanese 19th Division was an excellent fighting force, well trained and disciplined, and their commander, Suetaka, was eager for a fight – it was a perfect situation to unleash him. The battle plan called for the use of only the 19th Division operating without tank or air support in a single-minded effort to resume control of Changkufeng. Not a single Japanese boot would cross into accepted Soviet territory.⁶² If the Soviets were to bring their full regional might to bear on this diminutive opponent, they would certainly crush it with ease, but the IJA was confident that they would not expand the conflict in the face of a significant potential turnaround via a Japanese commitment of the Kwantung Army to the area. 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 artillery shells consumed in the prolonged fighting,” an ironic statement considering the outcome.⁶³

The situation quickly began to escalate. 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 with one dead man left behind. The Japanese saw in this an ambush set against them in their own

⁶⁰ Coox *Nomonhan*, 122.

⁶¹ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 124.

⁶² Coox, *Small War*, 28.

⁶³ Kikuoka, 82.

territory; the Soviets saw a Japanese incursion by thirty meters across their border. Official protests lodged by Japan's ambassador to the Soviet Union, Shigemitsu Mamoru, were met with a cold Soviet resolve to retain their position, and the death of a Japanese soldier compounded the growing anger of the 19th Division. By July 18, Soviet strength near Changkufeng totaled around 130 men along with several heavy guns, and the Japanese forces in the region were told to make one more effort at negotiation. 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.⁶⁴ Simultaneously, the Japanese Foreign Office released a statement indicating that "responsibility for all possible complications... shall be laid on the Soviet government."⁶⁵ The Japanese envoy was held for several days with no response, until they were released, blindfolded, on July 26, as trespassers into Soviet territory.⁶⁶

An additional Soviet intrusion on July 29 – even by their own border reckoning – near Shachaofeng, 1.6 kilometers north of Changkufeng, demanded a Japanese response.⁶⁷ A platoon was dispatched to immediately evict the Soviets. The Japanese were, according to reports, fired on first, but continued to advance until they received casualties, at which point they opened fire and engaged the enemy. The five or six Soviets were outnumbered but had available a light machine gun, with which they could check the Japanese offensive. However, a break in fire allowed a Japanese charge to succeed, and in close combat they killed eight Soviet soldiers. Soviet horsemen moved from near Lake Khasan to counterattack, but were stopped by light mortar fire from the platoon. The conflict quickly escalated as Japanese reinforcements arrived to

⁶⁴ New York Times, 19 July 1938 (A.M edition), 12, quoted in Coox, *Small War*, 39.

⁶⁵ "Moscow Rejects Tokyo Protest on 'Invasion'; Rebuff Angers Press, but Clash Is Unlikely," *New York Times*, July 17, 1938, 21.

⁶⁶ Coox, *Small War*, 40.

⁶⁷ Kikuoka, 112.

face Soviet forces now streaming in from the northwest, and one Japanese squad moved against the fortifications on Changkufeng, which had opened up with machine gun fire. A Soviet counterattack that same day was supported with tanks, and artillery fire began to fall from behind the hill, prompting further Japanese reinforcement.⁶⁸ The battle was on, but the Japanese resolved to finish it with a single hammer blow to drive back the enemy and discourage them from risking the border ever again.

The next Japanese move would demonstrate an operational tactic that came to define their preferred engagement style: the close-combat night attack, where Japanese forces would move quickly under the cover of darkness, breach the enemy defenses without firing a shot, then engage in a pitched close-quarters battle within the enemy fortification. On July 30, daytime troop movements were restricted, and plans were made for a major night attack under the leadership of Sato Kotoku. The Soviet positions had all been rapidly reinforced, and the Japanese estimated that they had at least a battalion and a half in the area as well as twenty tanks, artillery, and three hundred soldiers now emplaced on Changkufeng itself.⁶⁹ To strike a decisive blow against the Soviets, the high ground would have to be taken to support the earlier Japanese operations in Shachaofeng. The 1st Battalion, lead by Sato, would attack from the south, unsupported by artillery fire, which would be reserved until the offensives at daybreak. In any case, only two heavy guns were in position, since “fire power was considered of secondary importance in close combat and because there were shortages of artillery.”⁷⁰ Japanese soldiers were instructed to charge without firing, in order to quickly enter 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

⁶⁸ Coox, *Small War*, 90-92.

⁶⁹ Coox, *Small War*, 129-131.

⁷⁰ Coox, *Small War*, 130.

for the first time after they die.”⁷¹ This invocation of the ‘way of the warrior’ to justify a costly offensive would not be the last.

The attack launched smoothly under the cover of darkness, opening two breaches in the Soviet lines before being detected by guard dogs and revealed by flares at 12:10 AM. The Changkufeng defenders, taken by surprise, were unable to immediately place accurate fire on the Japanese offensive group, which was forbidden to return fire and betray its position. At 2:15 AM the wires were cleared and bayonets were fixed in preparation for the main thrust toward the Soviet emplacements. By 2:30 the Soviets had organized their defensive fire into a cacophony of rifles, light and heavy machine gun fire, grenades, tank cannon, and emplacement guns, but still the Japanese did not fire a single shot, using only sword and bayonet.⁷² The realization that an additional line of entanglement was ahead, however, slowed the Japanese advance as withering machine gun fire pinned them down; a “do or die” forced clearing team, not unlike those used extensively at Port Arthur in the Russo-Japanese War, breached the wire while sustaining heavy casualties. Confusion had set in among the Japanese troops by this point, and the multiple prongs of the assault were in disarray, some having been pinned down by Soviet tank fire, and others pelted with grenades and machine gun bullets.⁷³ A Japanese regimental report on the attack released the next day would disdainfully note that the Soviets “relied exclusively on fire power; there was no instance of a brave enemy charge employing cold steel.”⁷⁴ Ironically, only twenty meters from the Russian positions, the Japanese were praying for a firepower miracle of their own as they began to attempt to snipe Soviet gunners and grenadiers. At last, machine gun fire opened up from the Japanese side after a charge into position by the machine gun company,

⁷¹ Coox, *Small War*, 132-133.

⁷² Coox, *Small War*, 143-144.

⁷³ Coox, *Small War*, 145.

⁷⁴ *75th Infantry Regiment sentō shōhō [battle report]*, attachment 3, 1 July 1938, 3, quoted in Coox, *Small War*, 147.

disabling one of the Soviet tanks with a volley of armor-piercing rounds – all of the AP rounds they had been equipped with.⁷⁵ Finally able to push over the crest of Changkufeng, the Japanese heard Russian calls of “hurrah” from positions below them on the other side of the hill. Though they expected a charge, this was actually the signal for a Soviet retreat, and the encouraged Japanese charged down the slope, cutting down Soviet soldiers with sword and bayonet. At 5:15 AM a green star-shell flare was launched and the Japanese flag was hoisted over Changkufeng’s heights.⁷⁶

Similar Japanese offensives succeeded elsewhere at dawn, securing Hill 52, which was essential to the defense of Changkufeng. Here the Japanese encountered serious resistance from Soviet tanks, which were handled by the on-the-spot formation of antitank teams, who charged the Soviet tanks when they were delayed by terrain and placed mines on or near them. The most publicized case spoke of a private who was repeatedly thrown off his target before at last boarding it and detonating his charge on the spot as a “human bullet,” a close resonance with the efforts of such do-or-die teams in the Russo-Japanese War.⁷⁷ The offensive against Shachaofeng would succeed as well, pushing the Soviets into a general retreat from the area.

The Japanese claimed at least 300 Soviet casualties across all engagement points (68 were admitted on the Soviet side), at a cost of 45 Japanese killed and 133 wounded, including a disproportionately large number of officers who led the bayonet charges. Despite the success of the battle, this was a major problem: units had quickly lost control and cohesion after the heroic deaths of their leaders, preventing the continuation of effective charges, and one Japanese staff officer recommended that after Changkufeng “night attacks should not be conducted too often

⁷⁵ Coox, *Small War*, 149.

⁷⁶ Coox, *Small War*, 152.

⁷⁷ Coox, *Small War*, 158-159.

because of the loss-of-leaders problem.”⁷⁸ Nevertheless, the Japanese were not impressed by the Soviet defense of the hills, especially since the Soviets suffered very few officer casualties as many were observed fleeing when the fighting progressed. Soviet soldiers’ retreat as soon as they came under heavy fire was also criticized, suggesting that running in the face of a barrage “must be only natural for a foe who relies exclusively on firepower.”⁷⁹ The Soviets, however, had not yet exposed their truly heavy firepower. The Japanese, now assuming control of the Soviet fortifications, had only to dig in and wait for a diplomatic end to the conflict, having settled the matter in “one blow” – or so they believed.⁸⁰

The response of the Red Army to the Japanese seizure of Changkufeng was delayed. No immediate counterattack was launched; instead, additional Russian ground forces were gradually moved to the area, and for the first time the Soviet Air Force would bring itself to bear against the Japanese from August 1 forward. Striking in large flights, around 120-150 Soviet aircraft attacked the Japanese forces, bombing and strafing ground troops and raiding already limited artillery units. Although the Soviet bombs were often poorly placed and many fell harmlessly into Lake Khasan or on the lower area surrounding Changkufeng, the Japanese found their antiaircraft (AA) capabilities woefully lacking. Inaccurate AA fire enabled the Russian bombers and fighters to fly low, where they could engage their targets with more ease, but the dismal aim of the Russian pilots denied the Japanese army an opportunity to learn how essential air power would be in the battles to come.⁸¹ The greater concern at Changkufeng was “why are there no Japanese aircraft here to fight them away?” The answer to this rested in the idea of waging a limited war. The IJA believed that, especially on account of the ineffectiveness of the

⁷⁸ Coox, *Small War*, 169.

⁷⁹ *75th Infantry Regiment sentō shōhō [battle report]*, 1 July 1938, 52, quoted in Coox, *Small War*, 171.

⁸⁰ Coox, *Small War*, 185.

⁸¹ Coox, *Small War*, 187-188.

Soviet air attacks, it would be better not to risk an expansion of the local war by bringing their fledgling air units into battle. The other side of this is that Japan's air force in the region was numerically weaker than the Soviet side and "every squadron had to be hoarded."⁸² Tactical air power would remain a poorly understood element of Japanese military engagements until after Changkufeng.

The remainder of the Chōkohō Incident would be resolved on the ground. On August 2, the Soviets launched their counterattack, under the leadership of Marshal Blyukher. The Japanese had reinforced units at Changkufeng, Shachaofeng, and Hill 52 in preparation for the Russian advance, and their forces successfully repulsed several daytime advances and also a night attack, all supported by Soviet artillery, armor, and aircraft bombardment.⁸³ The Japanese defenders also gained a significant advantage after the skirmishes in the form of captured antitank weapons and ammunition, which were not organic to Japanese infantry units and which provided a much needed punch to take out enemy armor.⁸⁴ The pattern of Soviet attack, Japanese repulsion, Soviet retreat and regrouping repeated over the next few days; due to their superior firepower and aerial cover, the Russian forces could escape and build strength relatively easily, under the cover of the enormous amount of ordnance at their disposal. Suetaka continued to move Japanese forces into the region, and by August 3 he had committed the entire division under his command to the defense. Soon, however, unrest began to grow among his men, constantly under siege by 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, was a poor fit for the Japanese military ethic,

⁸² Coox, *Small War*, 196.

⁸³ Coox, *Small War*, 207-209.

⁸⁴ Coox, *Small War*, 209.

which stressed the attack and the glory of death in battle – not the ignominy of being smitten by an artillery shell fired without retribution.

A coordinated Soviet offensive on August 5 did little to boost their spirits. Hitting with the full might of combined arms, including tanks, bombers, artillery, and mounted & foot infantry, the Soviets attacked the Japanese at all three major defensive points simultaneously, inflicting rising casualties – the Soviet guns had, at last, zeroed their fire in on the fortifications, which were smashed in several locations.⁸⁵ Ammunition and supplies were beginning to run low as well, especially with the continual bombardment of supply lines. At Shachaofeng, one officer recounted repulsing the attack of forty tanks with only twenty antitank shells; only the difficult terrain prevented the loss of his sector.⁸⁶ By evening on August 6 Changkufeng was in danger of being overrun; hand-to-hand fighting had taken place only fifty meters from the last fortifications, and the Soviets continued to reinforce their units. Heavy fighting continued throughout the following days, and the steady push of Soviet tanks and infantry enabled them to seriously threaten the crest by August 9 and begin to strike heavily against the Japanese forces on the hillside, already in danger of being crushed. On August 10, however, the diplomatic process at last brought about a ceasefire, which was put into place on the battlefield by noon the day after. The terms made the fighting nearly meaningless. The Japanese, in the end, had to abandon their hard-defended hills and fall back across the Tumen River. The Soviet flag fluttered over the heights of Changkufeng.⁸⁷

The Chōkohō Incident had within it several important lessons for the Imperial Japanese Army, few of them well-understood at the time. At last, they had faced the Russian army again, the enemy they had been planning to fight since the conclusion of the Russo-Japanese War. That

⁸⁵ Coox, *Small War*, 230-231.

⁸⁶ Coox, *Small War*, 236.

⁸⁷ Coox, *Small War*, 247.

enemy had, through extensive troop strength, artillery, armor, and air support, given the Japanese a bloody nose, but they were hardly impressed by their capacity as soldiers: “Although mechanization of the Red Army had attained high levels with respect to quantity, their weaknesses in technique and quality were laid bare,” quipped one report.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, many IJA officers realized clearly that their equipment was not up to par; Russian grenades, sniper rifles, and artillery had all inflicted severe damage on Japanese troops, and antitank and antiaircraft operations were both difficult due to a shortage of capable weaponry. On the slopes of Changkufeng, Shachaofeng, and Hill 52, however, the *bushidō* spirit carried the day, at least as far as the ceasefire, and the effort was considered a victory. One Japanese soldier is quoted as saying that “whereas we relied on muscle power, the enemy used engines. This rendered our fighting particularly hard, but we had full confidence in our spiritual strength.”⁸⁹ At the command level, few reports were prepared on this incident, and they were hardly comprehensive; an internal report on “the future perspective in relation to the Changkufeng Incident” was only ten pages long.⁹⁰ The overwhelming understanding of the incident was that the Japanese had only come close to losing at any point because they had been so severely restricted in terms of movement, air power, and artillery deployed, fighting what the Japanese Ministry of Defense’s modern (1969) military history classifies as a purely “defensive operation.”⁹¹ With their full forces arrayed, the Soviets would not be able to even consider breaking the Japanese lines, so any future conflicts would be best resolved with far more

⁸⁸ *Jinchū bidan [Moving tale from the front]*, 367-378, quoted in Coox, *Small War*, 359.

⁸⁹ Coox, *Small War*, 359.

⁹⁰ Masayoshi Makino, “Chōkohō jiken shourai ni kan suru ken,” August 20, 1938 (JACAR C01003380000).

⁹¹ Japanese National Institute for Defense Studies, *Kantōgun: Bōeichō Bōei Kenshūjo Senshishitsu cho*, book 27 of *Senshi sōsho* (Tōkyō: Asagumo Shinbunsha, 1969), 427.

aggressive rules of engagement.⁹² It would take another, more serious border conflict to disabuse them of that notion.

Section IV: Battle of Khalkin Gol/Nomonhan Jiken (Nomonhan Incident)

Only a year after Changkufeng, the Japanese and Soviet armies would again meet in a major conflict, but the consequences at Nomonhan would be far more severe for the Japanese. The Nomonhan Incident would be remembered as “the baptism of modern military conflict” for the Imperial Japanese Army, featuring “direct, fierce fighting” with a diversity of types of military engagement.⁹³ As a consequence, it would showcase the utter failure of Japanese tactics and equipment against a Red Army force led by none other than Georgi Zhukov. The stage of this new drama was western Manchuria, a flat zone of grasslands and deserts connected to the ‘border’ of the Mongolian People’s Republic (MPR), a Soviet satellite. In reality, there was only a disputed natural border at the Halha River, also known as Khalkin Gol, and the rest of the region was effectively undemarcated. When Manchukuo was hastily established, 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.⁹⁴ By 1938, however, the Japanese and Manchukuoan governments had clarified their position, and internally asserted that the Halha River was the boundary of Manchukuo – cutting into the area claimed by the MPR by about twenty miles. Despite its unspectacular terrain, this area had major strategic value; if the Japanese were able to control 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 perfect position to attack the Trans-Siberian Railway in the

⁹² Drea, *Nomonhan*, 14.

⁹³ *Kantōgun*, 427.

⁹⁴ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 143.

event of war between Japan and the Soviet Union. Luckily for the Japanese, elements inside the MPR were maneuvering to just such an end, hoping to restore the pre-Soviet leadership structure as part of a Japanese protectorate.⁹⁵ The Kwantung Army, never one to miss an opportunity, fortified the western regions of Manchukuo, and in response the MPR began a build-up along the border of their own. From 1935 to April 1939, 108 “shooting incidents” occurred in the disputed area, including some involving armor, aircraft, and artillery as well as the usual variety of infantry skirmishes.⁹⁶

However, these incidents were largely between the forces of the MPR, the Kwantung Army, and the Manchukuoan Army, without the direct involvement of the Soviet Union. Despite Stalin’s clear announcement in 1936 that the Soviet government would support the MPR against Japanese aggression (accompanying a ten-year mutual defense agreement), “few besides IJA intelligence officials detected the significance of recent changes in Russian military doctrine [regarding supporting the MPR].”⁹⁷ This close-mindedness reflected the same attitude of dismissal that the Japanese had shown in all of their prior conflicts with the Soviet Union in the region. To make matters worse, the pro-Japanese faction within the MPR was discovered in mid-1937, when it attempted to make a move and take advantage of Japanese mobilization for the Second Sino-Japanese War. They were summarily rounded up and purged by the Mongolian government with the full assistance of Soviet troops.⁹⁸ In spite of this setback, the basic conflict remained, and Soviet fear of pro-Japanese sentiment in Outer Mongolia, the area closest to the Halha, persisted. Tensions continued to grow in the years to follow, and by 1939 the intensity of the border conflict was moving past the earlier disturbances between Manchukuoan and

⁹⁵ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 148-149.

⁹⁶ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 149-159.

⁹⁷ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 160.

⁹⁸ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 163.

Mongolian border patrols. Engagements in February and March involved as many as forty men per side, all incidentally centered around a small town called Nomonhan, about ten miles from the Halha on the Manchukuoan side.⁹⁹ As the combat there began to grow in intensity, Japanese staff officers noted their frustration in even attempting to locate the tiny town on their theater maps; surely, it seemed, the issue would be resolved without escalation.¹⁰⁰ Their hopes would not be borne out, as a vicious cycle of reinforcement would send this conflict spiraling toward all-out war. In the ensuing conflict, Soviet forces would conclusively show the weaknesses of Japanese tactics through their punishing artillery capabilities, huge quantities of armor, and willingness to commit troops to battle in large numbers in order to guarantee victory.

On the eve of the outbreak of major hostilities, the main Kwantung Army force in the region was the 23rd Division, commanded by the capable but untested Lieutenant General Komatsubara Michitarō, with a total strength of about 13,000 men. The 23rd Division was “green,” with a significant number of one-year volunteers, cadets, and reservists in leadership positions; very few military academy graduates held major command positions.¹⁰¹ Their equipment and arsenal was in even worse shape than their officer corps: they had a single tankette (very light tank) company, one transport truck unit, and some cavalry – hardly a sufficient loadout for operations on the steppes on Mongolia, a far cry from the hills of Changkufeng. Armor and artillery would clearly dominate on this battlefield, and the 23rd Division was woefully incapable in that sector as well, equipped with only the Type 38 75mm artillery gun, a relic from 1907, and a small number of tankettes and armored cars. The antitank capabilities of the infantry were equally poor; the reconnaissance regiment had no antitank weapons whatsoever, and even the engineer companies had only explosive charges. Heavy

⁹⁹ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 172.

¹⁰⁰ Drea, *Nomonhan*, 15.

¹⁰¹ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 175-176.

weapons included only 64 total artillery pieces, including the 1907 antiques and seventeen 37mm anti-tank guns, and on average each unit had fewer light and heavy machine guns than any other division of the Kwantung Army.¹⁰² In short, this was not the elite force expected to be facing a disputed border with significant Soviet strength available on the other side. Here again the Japanese underestimation of their enemy shows itself – the 23rd Division was a perfectly suitable fighting force for effectively handling Mongolian cavalry and light infantry forces, but they were not prepared for a major encounter with a modernized Red Army, yet that was the task they were given. The other aspect, of course, is that the Kwantung Army was busy with interior operations at the time, and more than two-thirds of available divisions were already deployed to China. Already fighting a major war, IJA command could not afford to provide more men or supplies to the Manchukuoan western border, despite its enormous significance in the event of a Soviet offensive. This combination of overstretch and underestimation would have dramatic consequences when a small border skirmish again spiraled out of control, providing at last a thorough test for nearly twenty years of “Japanese tactical innovation, alterations in force structure, and doctrinal development designed specifically to fight the Soviets.”¹⁰³

The early days of the Nomonhan Incident are unclear at best due to contesting stories on both sides; however, some general facts can be assembled. On May 4, 1939, a Mongolian cavalry force of around thirty to fifty horsemen, part of the lightly equipped army of the MPR, moved toward the Balshagal Heights near Nomonhan and began to establish an outpost. From the Japanese perspective (with the border at the Halha), this was an intrusion; from the MPR perspective, this was within their boundary. Some Japanese reports suggest a fortified base was being constructed, while the MPR and Soviet story is that the cavalry unit was only grazing its

¹⁰² Coox, *Nomonhan*, 178-179.

¹⁰³ Drea, *Service of the Emperor*, 1.

horses along the eastern bank of the river. In any case, a firefight soon broke out between a Manchukuoan Army border patrol-in-force 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 (who counterattacked whom is disputed), and the horsemen were most likely driven back across the river a second time.¹⁰⁴

Events quickly snowballed due to the strictures of Kwantung Army Operations Order 1488, which encapsulated the new ideal for resolving border disputes along the boundaries of Manchukuo. The plan was based, just as earlier thinking at Changkufeng had been, on the idea of victory through ‘one blow’; in the event of a disturbance, Kwantung Army forces would “nip [enemy] ambitions in the bud by completely destroying them,” and to that end they were authorized to cross any poorly defined borders and “establish boundaries on their own initiative.”¹⁰⁵ Order 1488 was not a *carte blanche* for carrying out aggressive action, however. “Unnecessary ground movements” were “forbidden,” and only “unavoidable action” was to be taken to the ends of a “definite mission.” Nevertheless, local 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.”¹⁰⁶ As leader of the 23rd Division, Komatsubara reacted quickly and heavily to the May 10-11 incidents with the authority granted to him under this directive, drawing up a plan to commit his reconnaissance regiment, two infantry companies, and all available Manchukuoan Army forces, supported by all available trucks in the region (including those commandeered from locals), against the Mongolian cavalry forces. He also requested that reconnaissance aircraft and fighters be attached to his command from the Kwantung Army, and was in fact granted both

¹⁰⁴ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 189-191.

¹⁰⁵ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 186.

¹⁰⁶ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 186-187.

fighters and light bombers numbering twenty eight planes. Light tanks being field tested in the region were also placed under his control.¹⁰⁷ This was a tremendous excess of force to handle, at most, three hundred Mongolian horsemen, including reinforcements from an MPR outpost at Tamsag, but it was the precise implementation of the spirit of Operations Order 1488. Here was an example of a Japanese overestimation, but at its base was the same belief in the ‘one blow’ philosophy and in enemy unwillingness to expand operations that had made Changkufeng a near disaster. Order 1488, rather than preventing escalation as it was ostensibly intended, would instead set off the most devastating battle of the entire border conflict.

On May 15 a small, mobile Japanese force, along with a flight of light bombers, engaged the Mongolian forces, driving them across the Halha and also dropping bombs well into territory recognized as part of the MPR even by Japanese standards.¹⁰⁸ Komatsubara hoped that the mere appearance of his forces “would frighten away the trespassers.”¹⁰⁹ Only two days after this ‘punitive action,’ however, MPR forces reappeared on the eastern side of the river, a bold move which Komatsubara undoubtedly interpreted as a provocation. Mustering a new force of more than 1,600 Japanese soldiers and 450 Manchukuoan troops, 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 the attack.¹¹⁰ In the mean time, the air war over the Halha was intensifying following the earlier bombing runs, and as many as seventeen enemy aircraft were destroyed by the fighters attached to the 23rd Division, who were taking a very aggressive stance in the air and had taken no losses in the combat.¹¹¹ With the significant reconnaissance information available from these overflights, Komatsubara and his

¹⁰⁷ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 193-194.

¹⁰⁸ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 197-199.

¹⁰⁹ Drea, *Service of the Emperor*, 2.

¹¹⁰ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 202-203.

¹¹¹ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 202-203.

staff drew up plans for a major attack against the MPR forces. Forces would move by night to encircle the enemy, then attack in a double envelopment assault which would cut off all possible escape routes and lead to the complete destruction of MPR forces east of the Halha. Rapid mop-up operations would follow on the other bank, after which Japanese forces would withdraw to their side. There was “no concern” in the planning for an enemy stand or counterattack; the focus was entirely on preventing their inevitable escape. The Japanese, after all, did not think highly of the MPR horsemen, whom they had already forced back several times with only minor fighting. Even the presence of Soviet forces, confirmed by aerial reconnaissance, was hardly considered, since their “purge-ridden” leadership was unlikely to be able to take the initiative.¹¹² It was a certain victory in the minds of the Japanese, especially when such small numbers were involved.

The assault began to go wrong almost at once. On the morning of May 28, after moving all night, the Japanese cavalry reconnaissance force of about 220 men which was to cut off the retreat was annihilated. Their destruction is a telling example of the tactical errors that would plague the Japanese throughout the Nomonhan conflict. Led by Azuma Yaozo, the recon force of horsemen, light tanks, and trucks proceeded in a rapid drive through the left side of the MPR defenses about eleven miles from Nomonhan; they encountered no resistance until about 6:00 AM, when four 120mm artillery pieces began to fire on the force from the elevated western shore of the Halha; shortly thereafter enemy counterattacks against Azuma’s position began, pressed by around 120 infantry and 10 armored vehicles. Near 10:00, Azuma came under attack from the flanks and rear by a well-equipped enemy force, and he was forced to make a fall back behind a nearby slope in the land to avoid indirect fire, which had grown to include mortars and antitank guns as well as the howitzers. The Japanese recon unit had no organic artillery to speak of, and there was none available to call in to quiet the enemy guns, which harshly limited their

¹¹² Coox, *Nomonhan*, 205-206.

tactical possibilities. Hoping for a breakthrough from the main force, which Azuma believed was fighting nearby, the recon unit chose to stand rather than retreat. Digging defensive positions with their helmets, since they were not equipped with entrenching tools, Azuma's forces held on desperately.¹¹³ By the night, despite suffering several casualties and losses of equipment and receiving only meager reinforcements, the Japanese began to make plans for a decisive counterattack in the darkness. Soviet units in the area anticipated this, however, and 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 available soldiers, who drove the Russians back when they were only fifty meters from the Japanese position. The cost was high – Azuma lost both of his company commanders (they led the charge), crippling his leadership structure. The Soviets were not finished however, and although a second offensive was again driven back at 3:00 AM, their artillery restarted its bombardment at first light, and with its support about 650 Soviet infantry with several tanks enveloped and slowly pressed Azuma's unit, which had dwindled to less than 100 men. Ammunition and supplies were devastated by artillery fire. By 3:00 P.M., Soviet troops were again within fifty meters in the front, left, and right sectors of the recon force, which now began to launch suicidal 'human bullet' attacks against Soviet tanks with gasoline cans and demolition charges. After 6:00 P.M., Azuma called on the last 19 survivors to join him, and they charged out of the trench; they were instantly cut down by Soviet gunfire.¹¹⁴ It turned out that several units had tried to reach Azuma throughout the day, but all had been smashed by Soviet artillery and tank-supported infantry counteroffensives. Additionally, the main detachment of the task force had failed to break through and rout the enemy, due in large part to the long range of Soviet artillery and tank guns compared to the

¹¹³ Drea, *Nomonhan*, 28.

¹¹⁴ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 206-212.

heavy machine guns which made up the bulk of Japanese firepower in the detachment.¹¹⁵ When reinforcements were critically needed to ensure the success of the main offensive, all other units had already been deployed in flanking maneuvers as part of the battle plan. By May 30, the task force was ordered to disengage, asserting success on the basis that the “enemy’s limited intentions on the right side of the Halha were smashed and the foe’s fighting spirit was eroded, causing him to remain on the left bank [for] now.”¹¹⁶ Despite this setback, the Kwantung Army was optimistic that they could “drop the matter.”¹¹⁷

Several lessons were quickly learned in the aftermath. Insufficient teamwork, poor unit cohesion, and weak “spiritual inculcation” were cited as causing major problems for the infantry offensive. Units clearly needed to be reorganized, as combining, almost at random, trucks, tankettes, cavalry, and infantry created units that could only move as quickly as their slowest member, and which could not produce the kind of unified offensive demanded by steppe warfare against a fortified enemy. “No thought had been given” to the chance that Soviet artillery and armor would be available to support the MPR horsemen, and Azuma’s force in particular lacked any antitank weapons whatsoever, despite ultimately facing 30-40 tracked armored vehicles.¹¹⁸ Japanese artillery support was virtually nonexistent, in large part because only ineffectual equipment was available, but Komatsubara nevertheless received serious criticism from within the Kwantung Army for his failure to attach heavy weapons to Azuma’s unit.¹¹⁹ Attacks from the air had been powerful, but uncoordinated; the Japanese had not developed a philosophy of close air support, and fighters and bombers operated on their own. On a unit level, several officers had been lost early in the combat as well, exemplified by Azuma’s early charge which cost him two

¹¹⁵ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 234.

¹¹⁶ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 239.

¹¹⁷ Drea, *Nomonhan*, 4.

¹¹⁸ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 245.

¹¹⁹ John Colvin, *Nomonhan* (London: Quartet, 1999), 79.

company commanders. At the base of all of these issues was the Japanese intelligence failure regarding Soviet intervention. When Komatsubara was making the plans for the task force assault, he had virtually no information available to him other than knowledge that a Soviet mechanized battalion with around 100 attached aircraft was near the MPR forces. To make matters worse, no one expected or believed that the Soviets would become heavily involved in the fighting at Nomonhan, a gross underestimation of the Soviet commitment to sustaining its Mongolian satellite.¹²⁰ In short, the 23rd Division had certainly failed to learn from Changkufeng in the east, and was making all of the same mistakes in the west. These new lessons, however, were not applied in time for the next major action one month later.

In the intervening time, both sides began to muster reinforcements. The Soviet Union made a major change in the command of the forces arrayed in support of the MPR, as well: on June 5, Deputy Commander Georgi Zhukov arrived at Tamsag, the headquarters of the 57th Corps, the mechanized group which 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 Soviet martial might. Assuming command, he 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 He requested major reinforcements, and received during June 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. These forces began to assemble along the border as

¹²⁰ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 246.

¹²¹ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 252.

soon as they arrived, and throughout the month several severe ground attacks against Manchukuoan Army units were reported in the region, ending any illusions in the Kwantung Army that the issue had been resolved.¹²² On the Japanese side, the Kwantung Army formed a new, powerful task force from the core of the elite 7th Division, including a motorized infantry regiment, two antitank gun batteries, two regimental gun batteries, a truck company, two tank regiments, a field artillery regiment, an antiaircraft battery, an engineer regiment, a transport regiment, and medical and signal elements, all 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.¹²³ The 23rd Division was also reinforced directly with antiaircraft and antitank guns as well as additional infantry companies. The battle plan again involved a crushing blow against the enemy, "a butcher's axe used to dice a chicken," followed by a "temporary" crossing of the Halha to ensure the enemy's destruction rather than retreat. This would be a "short war" fought to a "quick and decisive conclusion," the ideal for the Japanese strategists involved in the planning.¹²⁴ Woefully inaccurate intelligence estimates placed the Soviet-MPR force at around 1,000 men, ten field guns, ten AA guns, and some armored vehicles.¹²⁵ Not all were unconcerned, however. On the day that the main formation of the 23rd Division left for the front to carry out the second offensive, Colonel Chikazawa, chief of the ordnance bureau, shot himself in the head. He was well-known for being appalled by the "awful equipment" being given to the troops,

¹²² Coox, *Nomonhan*, 252, 255.

¹²³ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 260-261.

¹²⁴ Drea, *Nomonhan*, 29.

¹²⁵ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 262.

equipment that he was powerless to improve.¹²⁶ The next clash between the IJA and the Red Army would prove the veracity of his concerns.

Spearhead elements of the attack force arrived on June 22 and quickly became involved in local skirmishes with the enemy, which was now identifiable as “definitely and entirely Russian,” rather than a mix of Russian and Mongolian forces.¹²⁷ On the 25th, the attack order was issued, and troop concentration completed on the 29th. On July 2-3 a daring river-crossing operation was launched across a single hastily-emplaced bridge under the cover of night as well as a thunderstorm, which quickly seized the local high ground from unprepared Soviet defenders. However, the Japanese encountered a defense-in-depth distinct from earlier operations; breaking through a single line only brought them face-to-face with another set of fortifications, greatly reducing the potential of the hand-to-hand engagement favored by their tactical doctrine.¹²⁸ A heavy counterattack came around 9:00AM on July 3, blunting the Japanese offensive and forcing them to take defensive positions on a battlefield that suddenly became “black with enemy armor.”¹²⁹ The defense was successful for a short time, and 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.¹³⁰ However, Zhukov was not about to lose the vital heights, and immediately mobilized the 11th Tank Brigade, the 3rd Battalion, and all available MPR elements against the Japanese forces struggling to gain a foothold across the Halha. One Japanese officer reported counting as many as 500 enemy armored vehicles appearing on the horizon, and he estimated that as many as 1,000 in total may have come to strike the exposed task force, which had only limited artillery support with which

¹²⁶ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 263-264.

¹²⁷ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 285. Both the Manchukuoan Army and the MPR cavalry

¹²⁸ Drea, *Nomonhan*, 39.

¹²⁹ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 300.

¹³⁰ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 301-302.

to resist. Without antitank rifles and with only a few gun batteries, the Japanese turned to filling cider bottles with gasoline, which would ignite when shattered against the hot armor shell of the Soviet tanks. Their armor consumed by flame, the Soviet tankers would flee out the hatches, where they were met with a hail of rifle fire or flashing blades.¹³¹ It was a crude but effective strategy which destroyed several enemy tanks, but the overall effect was insignificant – when their single bridge over the Halha came under attack from enemy aircraft and long-range artillery, Japanese officers decided to make a movement back across the bridge by night, before they were trapped and annihilated by enemy armor. After a disorganized retreat in which several Japanese units were lost to pressing Soviet tank and artillery fire, Japanese engineers blew up the bridge they had constructed across the Halha to prevent pursuing Soviet tanks from striking their rear. It was the first bridge of their own construction to be demolished by the Imperial Japanese Army.¹³²

The Japanese would never again try to cross the Halha River, where the assault of the task force had been crushed by Soviet armor.¹³³ Although Japanese attacks and Russian counterattacks continued into mid-July, no actions achieved any decisive results. At last, Komatsubara ordered a pull-back in preparation for staking everything on a general offensive. Soviet forces maintained heavy pressure during the build-up, launching artillery attacks continuously, probing with armor, and constructing fortifications while reinforcing all front-line units as they moved across the secured Halha River and towards the Japanese positions.¹³⁴ Every hour guaranteed that the Japanese offensive would be that much more difficult, especially considering that they had received no reinforcements and would be deploying essentially the

¹³¹ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 309-311.

¹³² Coox, *Nomonhan*, 338.

¹³³ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 348.

¹³⁴ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 523.

same force as had been used on the July 2-3 operations. The plan was straightforward and optimistic: after two hours of bombardment by artillery, infantry rifle units would push to the riverbank with the support of the air force. The second phase would be a cleanup operation securing the main bridgehead of the Soviet forces then quieting the remaining artillery.¹³⁵ The plan was an elegant, classic offensive, but it was completely disconnected from the reality of the battlefield situation. Japanese forces would have minimal armored vehicles and few tanks to match the enemy. Although their artillery had been reinforced by units scavenged from the training school at Hailar, it was still unable to approach the Soviet volume of fire.¹³⁶ Additionally, no changes had been made in terms of antitank capabilities, which were now based almost entirely on gasoline-filled cider bottles made on the field and used as Molotov cocktails.

The attack began on the morning of July 23. After an additional hour of bombardment when observers reported insufficient destructive effects against the enemy fortifications, the Japanese artillery soon turned to attacking the Soviet guns to provide suppression for the advancing infantry. However, their guns could not reach the more powerful weapons of their enemy, which were able to fire unrestrained for the entire offensive.¹³⁷ The ground attack was bogged down after enjoying some early successes, particularly once Soviet armor entered the fray, and artillery pounded Japanese forces almost constantly at every point. The few precious Japanese tanks used in the offensive were quickly left as “smoldering wrecks” after several overconfident drives put them into heavy Soviet fire without infantry support.¹³⁸ After two days and two nights of attacks, they still had not made it to the river, or even reclaimed the ground lost

¹³⁵ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 526.

¹³⁶ Drea, *Nomonhan*, 53.

¹³⁷ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 529.

¹³⁸ Drea, *Service of the Emperor*, 2.

in early July.¹³⁹ By the 25th, the offensive was effectively over, after failing to achieve any of its goals. Soviet artillery and effective combined arms were directly to blame, but the failure of the action was already ensured in the tactical planning phase, which had dramatically underestimated the challenge of pushing the enemy back across the Halha after allowing more than ten days for fortification and defensive build-up on their part. So long as the Japanese were forced to fight on the defensive, they were unable to make use of their prized offensive tactics, which slashed their chances of success dramatically.¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, with more than half of their doubled ten-day load depleted and unable to replenish their stocks, the ammunition situation for Japanese field guns was a “main reason for calling off the offensive.”¹⁴¹ A Kwantung Army document reported that from July 23-25, the Type 38 field guns alone fired 4068 high-explosive shells and 6569 shrapnel shells, a total rate of fire of more than two shells per minute, continuously – but even this volume of fire was nothing in comparison to the Soviet guns.¹⁴² One IJA officer noted after the battle that “underdog tactics may be fine for infantrymen, but not for artillery.”¹⁴³

Following the defeat, combat transitioned into “a war of attrition,” and Japanese forces began to dig in, constantly under indirect fire in an area with few natural obstacles.¹⁴⁴ Their fieldworks were limited by low supplies, and logistical difficulties magnified this problem, since barriers, building materials, and essential antitank supplies and weaponry were all in very short supply.¹⁴⁵ On top of this, morale was continually depressed by the falling of artillery; soldiers commonly had to defecate in their positions and could not cook due to the smoke from fire

¹³⁹ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 542.

¹⁴⁰ Drea, *Nomonhan*, 57.

¹⁴¹ Drea, *Nomonhan*, 53. Komatsubara also recorded in his diary at the time of the change to the defensive that he had never before “pulled back his infantry in favor of artillery barrages,” quoted in Colvin, *Nomonhan*, 127.

¹⁴² Kwantung Army Chief of Staff, “Nomonhan houmen dainijuuanshidan no shishou oyobi shamoudan ni kan suru ken,” July 29, 1939 (JACAR C01003493100), 1.

¹⁴³ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 546.

¹⁴⁴ Drea, *Nomonhan*, 7.

¹⁴⁵ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 570.

revealing their location to the Soviet guns.¹⁴⁶ It was the perfect opportunity for a general Soviet counterattack on a battered, 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 dramatic career. He devised an attack to be launched no later than August 20, with the goal of completely evicting all Japanese forces from the area originally claimed by Soviet demarcations of the Mongolian border. To guarantee success against the overconfident Kwantung Army, who was only slightly reinforcing their endangered task force, Zhukov maximized his available troops, obtaining from the Soviet interior two rifle divisions and a rifle regiment, a tank brigade, an airborne brigade, an artillery regiment, an antiaircraft regiment, and several tank companies, as well as additional attack aircraft. To supply such an enormous force, Zhukov organized a massive truck force with at least 4,000 vehicles driving daily to provide adequate supplies. In comparison, in their internal documents the IJA considered 200 trucks to be “many” – perhaps helping to explain their continuous trouble with supplies throughout the incident.¹⁴⁷ These Soviet movements were visible in a number of circumstances to Japanese intelligence, including via aerial reconnaissance, but no countermoves were made, perhaps on account of too much “wishful thinking” by the commanders who were unprepared for the Russian tidal wave that was about to wash over their positions.¹⁴⁸ The total mass of forces prepared by the Soviets included 57,000 men, 498 tanks, and 346 armored cars, all striking together across a thirty kilometer front.¹⁴⁹ Compared with the first battles of the incident, which had involved hundreds of men at most, the escalation that had taken place is staggering.

¹⁴⁶ Drea, *Nomonhan*, 61.

¹⁴⁷ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 580.

¹⁴⁸ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 586-587.

¹⁴⁹ Drea, *Nomonhan*, 9.

Zhukov's offensive came as scheduled in the early morning of August 20, beginning with an enormous wave of artillery fire at 5:45 AM, which knocked out the few Japanese antiaircraft batteries, revealed targets for the Soviet air force, and collapsed many fortifications, "burying their occupants in sand, dirt, and debris."¹⁵⁰ As the artillery fell, more than 150 bombers and their fighter escorts struck at 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 en masse, in several places pushing directly through the hard-hit Japanese forces to the border claimed by the MPR. Japanese artillery was completely unavailable for as many as ninety minutes after the attack began, and even then was often able to fire only in short barrages due to the swift redirection of Russian suppressing fire.¹⁵¹ This was the same pattern that had been repeated again and again in the brief war, but Zhukov's offensive was the most severe instance of it that the Japanese would face, combining superior fire support with encirclement by armor and fast infantry movement which devastated the Japanese positions and showcased their dramatic tactical weaknesses.

Despite their advantages and early successes, however, the Soviet forces did not immediately break through at all points. In the central region, Japanese defenders held steady initially, and a force of 600 Japanese held the Fui Heights for three days, until the commitment of extra Russian armor, flamethrower tanks, and artillery concluded the stalemate.¹⁵² Isolated Japanese positions would be "cleaned up" by Soviet artillery, accurately massed against the position and firing continuously to create what observers called a "pillar of fire."¹⁵³ The seemingly endless flow of enemy reinforcements and fire support was disheartening, and

¹⁵⁰ Drea, *Nomonhan*, 72.

¹⁵¹ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 663.

¹⁵² Drea, *Nomonhan* 86.

¹⁵³ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 757.

Japanese morale began to sag.¹⁵⁴ After four days of desperate clinging, the Kwantung Army was at last organized sufficiently to launch a counterattack, but planning was “slipshod” and the preparations were made “almost overnight,” since the Japanese had never considered having to face an attack of the magnitude now battering their lines. Japanese soldiers ate and drank what would be, for many, their last meal, then refilled their cider bottles with gasoline to be used against Soviet tanks.¹⁵⁵ The forces marked to spearhead the counterattack, few of them at full strength and with largely dysfunctional support, openly questioned their chances of success. But when headquarters was consulted, they were only assured that “the offensive could be pushed through ‘because we were Japanese soldiers.’”¹⁵⁶

On August 24 the effort was set underway in the worst of conditions for Japanese tactics: a direct attack in daylight without scouting or softening by artillery fire. Predictably, the assault was a disaster, with the disorganized units smashing themselves against the Russian lines in what Coox compares to the charge of the Light Brigade.¹⁵⁷ Crushed by tanks, indirect fire, and even their own light bombers, who had not been properly alerted of the offensive, the Japanese forces engaged the strong, supported Soviet lines with little result. Techniques which had once been effective, such as firebombs and light antitank mines, had been quickly rendered meaningless by the development of wire tank netting and the use of improved medium tanks by the Soviet army, which proved highly resistant to these methods of attack.¹⁵⁸ These changes multiplied the already pronounced lack of Japanese antitank capabilities, making Soviet armor virtually unstoppable and allowing it to slowly squeeze the Japanese forces, which could do little but hope for artillery or air support that rarely came. Ammunition shortages limited the effectiveness of the antitank

¹⁵⁴ Drea, *Nomonhan*, 76.

¹⁵⁵ Colvin, *Nomonhan*, 138.

¹⁵⁶ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 707.

¹⁵⁷ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 708.

¹⁵⁸ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 740.

weapons they did have; in the entire period from August 21 to 31, Japanese heavy machine guns fired only 168,900 rounds of armor-piercing ammunition, representing a little more than six hours of continuous fire.¹⁵⁹ Sniper fire disabled many of these guns and turned back even Japanese night attacks, remaining accurate by moonlight thanks to the quality of Soviet rifle optics.¹⁶⁰ Three days of counterattacks resulted only in meaningless – and heavy – losses for the Japanese, as the Russians continued their hammer 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.¹⁶¹

Though hard fighting continued into September, the Japanese were never able to come close to recapturing their lines, and at last diplomacy led to a cease-fire on September 16 – a truce that could only be understood as a “devastating defeat” for the Kwantung Army.¹⁶² The Japanese government could hardly countenance opening an all-out war with the Soviet Union, and that was the course that the Kwantung Army was now set on in the aftermath of Zhukov’s offensive. The Soviets, for their part, had new ambitions in Europe to carry out, namely the division of Poland, and had little interest in going further near Nomonhan; they had achieved their goals and upheld the defense pact with the Mongolian People’s Republic. Though met with fury and frustration by many Japanese officers in Manchukuo, who still hoped to launch a retaliatory strike, the cease-fire came with flawless timing for the Red Army, who would launch their invasion of Poland on the very next day.

¹⁵⁹ Kwantung Army Chief of Staff, “Nomonhan jiken no idanyaku nenryou no shoumou ni kan suru,” September 14, 1939 (JACAR C01003516000), 2.

¹⁶⁰ Colvin, *Nomonhan*, 143.

¹⁶¹ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 841.

¹⁶² Kikuoka, *Changkufeng*, 7.

The final balance sheet for Nomonhan was grave, showing how dangerously close the battle came to moving far beyond its 'limited war' ideals. Though the numbers are inconsistent from source to source, Japanese internal records admit that "at least" 18,000 casualties (dead, missing, or wounded) were sustained, possibly over 20,000, from a total manpower participation of 75,738, for a casualty rate of about 25 percent. Komatsubara's 23rd Division, which bore the brunt of the early fighting, suffered an over 76 percent loss rate, at least 30 percent of which was from death. Some regiments were more than 70 percent destroyed, with one, the 71st Infantry, sustaining a 93.5 percent casualty rate. The average casualty rate among ground troops (70.6 percent for infantry) was the highest ever experienced by the Imperial Japanese Army up to that point, eclipsing the 14.4 percent loss of infantry in the Russo-Japanese War, the 28 percent rate at Mukden, and the 24.7 percent rate at Changkufeng.¹⁶³ Also striking is the incidence of officer loss: 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, leaving many units shattered and without a proper command structure throughout the conflict.¹⁶⁴

The medical records indicating causes of death or wounding are also telling. In contrast to the experience of 1905, in which 60.5 percent of casualties were caused by small arms in the assault on Port Arthur, at Nomonhan only 35.9 percent of the wounds and 37.3 percent of deaths were attributable to enemy rifles. More than 50 percent of both categories came instead from the relentless barrages of Soviet artillery. Hand grenades also inflicted 3.7 percent of wounds sustained by Japanese ground forces, but the reports indicate that no wounds ever resulted from hand-to-hand combat with the Russians.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ Drea, *Nomonhan*, 99.

¹⁶⁴ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 915-916.

¹⁶⁵ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 918.

Soviet admissions of casualties only totaled 9,284, but Zhukov's willingness to spend his soldiers' blood was well-known after Nomonhan.¹⁶⁶ Furthermore, Japanese estimates from the observations of the 13th Field Artillery alone match this number, and consequently most sources have placed it under heavy speculation.¹⁶⁷ Fortunately, recent research by Russian scholars has finally delivered numbers from within Soviet archives. These sources report that from an "average monthly strength" of 69,101 men there were 23,899 total Soviet casualties, including 7,974 irrecoverable losses (dead or missing in action), revealing the enormous expenditure in manpower made by the Red Army to overcome the Japanese, in spite of their advantages in weapons and support.¹⁶⁸ Their total casualty rates are stunning, as well: 11.5 percent irrecoverable losses and 23.1 percent sick and wounded, even higher than the IJA. Unlike the Japanese, however, their officers fared better, on average, than their common soldiers: 30.2 percent of Soviet commanders and 29.3 percent of non-commissioned officers were killed or wounded during the conflict.¹⁶⁹ Regarding types of wounds, 44.2 percent came from bullets, and 48.2 percent from artillery, mines, or grenades; in a testament to Japanese skill with "cold steel," only 0.8 percent of those who met it escaped only wounded.¹⁷⁰ Intriguingly, Soviet archives suggest that "61,000 Japanese were killed, wounded, or captured" with "about 25,000" of those killed – this is only about 10,000 less than the entire Japanese force involved in the conflict,

¹⁶⁶ Colvin, *Nomonhan*, 169.

¹⁶⁷ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 919.

¹⁶⁸ G.F. Krivosheev et al., *Soviet Casualties and Combat Losses in the Twentieth Century*, ed. G.F. Krivosheev and trans. Christine Barnard (London: Greenhill Books, 1997), 53. "Average monthly strength" is interesting, since at first glance this number would seem to be smaller than the manpower participation of Japanese forces cited above (75,738), despite all evidence showing that they were outnumbered! This number is an average of the forces from June, July, August, and September 1939, meaning that it is lower than the largest amount of forces in theater at any time (certainly August-September). Additionally, the 75,738 figure for the Japanese includes those forces which were rotated back to the mainland – in other words, it is the total number who saw combat at Nomonhan, not the figure of total strength in theater at any one time. Such figures are not available for the Soviets, leaving the numbers issue not entirely clarified. Note, also, that Soviet percentage figures are calculated from this average as well.

¹⁶⁹ Krivosheev, *Soviet Casualties*, 57.

¹⁷⁰ Krivosheev, *Soviet Casualties*, 54.

raising questions about the accuracy of Soviet record-keeping.¹⁷¹ 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 a wealth of new information on what war with a modern, well-equipped army was like; after all, 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. Indeed, the official Japanese military history of the conflict cites it as the IJA’s “first exposure to modern, combined arms warfare.”¹⁷² On this desolate patch of land, the future battles of World War II were given a full dress rehearsal, yet most of the world failed to watch. The lessons for the Japanese were unmistakable. Losses of men and especially officers had been disastrous to the combat capability of individual units, which were often recommitted piecemeal to the battlefield where they became fodder for the same enemies that had broken them previously. The denial of the legitimacy of retreat as a means of concluding a battle, combined with the lack of any concept of a ‘tactical withdrawal,’ led to either meaningless death on the battlefield or shameful suicide after the court martial that was sure to come for cowardice. Furthermore, Japanese technology and weaponry had been shown inferior; they were unable to seriously match the Red Army in any category on the ground, from rifles and grenades up to tanks and artillery, prompting a major investigation into the armament of the entire Kwantung Army by the Chief of Staff.¹⁷³ Though many battle experiences do suggest that the individual Japanese soldier was a more bold, tenacious, and aggressive fighter than his Russian counterpart, and that his ‘spiritual superiority’ did provide a

¹⁷¹ Krivosheev, *Soviet Casualties*, 52.

¹⁷² Drea, *Service of the Emperor*, 1.

¹⁷³ Kwantung Army Chief of Staff, “Kantōgun heibi kenkyū chōsa hōkoku no ken,” December 7, 1939 (JACAR C01002745300).

measurable difference in hand-to-hand combat effectiveness, these assets were forcibly countered by a high volume of automatic fire, Russian defense capabilities, and fire support. This experience would be repeated in the Pacific War and never reconsidered as a tactic by the Japanese; the kamikaze ‘special attack squadrons’ of 1944-45 can find as part of their lineage the do-or-die anti-tank attack squads at Nomonhan. 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.”¹⁷⁴ Regardless of whether this ideology was basically an effort to disguise and disregard inferior industrial capabilities, its result was to lead to a reliance on dated tactics that committed ineffectually armed forces against a superior enemy and hoped for the best. Persistent underestimation of the enemy and denial of the technological reality of the battlefield were the main causes of the defeat at Nomonhan, and would remain the cause of IJA defeat until the very end of their efforts. Significantly, the defeat at Nomonhan would end Japanese ambitions northward. They would look instead to Southeastern Asia and, fatefully, the West.

Conclusion: Tactical Failure and Strategic Underestimation

The narratives of Japanese defeat at Changkufeng and Nomonhan share a number of fundamental similarities despite their pronounced differences in terrain and scope of committed forces. In both cases, the Imperial Japanese Army faced an enemy that they considered inferior and incapable in comparison to themselves, yet despite suffering serious losses and being presented with tactical situations that they were incapable of effectively handling, they failed to evince any willingness to adjust their doctrine or reconsider their new, modern enemy. Even when serious studies of the defeat were conducted as early as September of 1939, the many accurate observations and recommendations within went virtually unheeded throughout the Asia-

¹⁷⁴ Coox, *Nomonhan*, 1082.

Pacific War.¹⁷⁵ The Imperial Japanese Army, and the praised Kwantung Army in particular, proved itself to be an “anachronism,” which persisted as vigorously as it did on the field of battle only due to the raw temerity of individual Japanese soldiers and officers.¹⁷⁶

A well-understood component of modern warfare since World War I was the use of artillery to deliver sustained indirect fire against enemy positions, both to soften up defenses in preparation for an attack and also to cover a retreat. However, by 1938 new advances in shell size, muzzle velocity, and accuracy had increased both the range and deadliness of artillery. These features, combined with large gun emplacements, enabled an army to deliver a heavy barrage to a very focused area, greatly enhancing the success rate for the subsequent infantry assault. While the Red Army brought an enormous number of heavy guns to the battlefield, the Japanese always felt bereft of fire support. Their guns, few in number, of lower caliber, and often of aging design, could not provide a volume of fire comparable to their Soviet counterparts, and commonly Japanese fire could not even reach the Soviet emplacements to suppress them during an attack. This proved to be a major shortcoming in the border wars, which were composed significantly of static defense rather than mobile battle. Even when the Japanese were able to rout their enemy in open combat, Soviet artillery was consistently able to cover the retreat and prevent effective pursuit operations, especially on the open steppes surrounding Nomonhan. The Kwantung Army did not provide substantially increased numbers of modern artillery even once this became apparent; as a 1965 Japanese military study simply concluded, “Japanese tacticians had not kept pace with changing weapons technology.”¹⁷⁷ This failure enabled the Soviets to

¹⁷⁵ For detailed information and translations from the “Nomonhan Research Report,” see Drea, *Service of the Emperor*, 4-12.

¹⁷⁶ Drea, *Nomonhan*, 90.

¹⁷⁷ Drea, *Service of the Emperor*, 3.

control the flow of battle via indirect fire and helped to overcome even the most well-fortified Japanese positions on the hills of Manchuria and Mongolia.

Tanks and tankettes in serious numbers were new additions to the battlefield on all sides in 1938-39, but while the Red Army rushed to put as many at the front as logistically possible, the Japanese never deployed more than a few small, ineffectual groups. Even then, Japanese tankettes operated largely on their own, where they were vulnerable due to their light armor, poor visibility, and relatively weak armament – the same problems that had plagued tank operations in World War I. In contrast, the Soviet Union effectively implemented a modern combined arms doctrine which saw tanks used alongside infantry, where they could be supported and defended against attack while using their armor and weaponry to break enemy hard points and clear fortifications and positions. Fighting on the defensive against such forces required significant antitank capabilities in the form of heavy machine guns (against tankettes) or mobile guns, preferably integrated with infantry units, enabling them to knock out tanks before they could reach the lines. Japanese ‘human bullet’ attacks, in place of these weapons, cost dearly in terms of human life and thus battlefield potential. Furthermore, as the developments of August 1939 demonstrated, weapons like firebombs and light mines could be countered with advances in armor and defensive systems – advances to which the Japanese army was unable to respond in time to turn the course. The willing official acceptance of the firebomb, originally made from discarded cider bottles, as a primary method of antitank warfare embodies the IJA’s failure to effectively respond to the new threat of armor on the battlefield.

All of these flaws manifested alongside infantry operations, but in that realm, too, the Kwantung Army confronted a number of issues it was unwilling to correct. Although the fearless do-or-die attitude of many Japanese officers and soldiers had enabled the great successes of the

Russo-Japanese War, the battlefield and arsenals of 1938-39 were even less forgiving to hand-to-hand fighters than those of 1904-05, and the dramatic numbers of Japanese officers who perished in sword charges and melee combat greatly undermined the combat effectiveness of their units, demanding a reconsideration of how close combat should be carried out. Exacerbating this issue were the deficiencies in the armament of the individual Japanese soldier. While the Russians were able to pelt the Japanese with a seemingly endless number of stick grenades, Japanese soldiers complained of the difficulty of use of their own grenades and their limited availability. Furthermore, Russian snipers became feared for their precise fire, which added to the drain on the Japanese officer pool. At the very heart of the issue was the entire Japanese attitude towards the enemy on the battlefield – the continuous theme of underestimation. IJA officers persisted in forlorn hope defenses and attacks long after it was clear that the effort would fail, often for little gain. Just as advised in the IJA manuals for division commanders, even when on the defensive the Japanese persisted in desperately seeking an opportunity to “deliver the enemy a decisive blow by attacking.”¹⁷⁸ In contrast, though despised for their cowardice by the Japanese, Soviet forces were far more willing to retreat and reorganize (often under the cover of artillery), preserving both officer and front-line strength in the process. This fact, combined with the generally larger numbers of soldiers deployed in individual offensives on the Soviet side at both Nomonhan and Changkufeng, meant that the Red Army had a decisive advantage in troop strength – even if there was any truth to the Japanese claims of martial superiority.

In short, the Imperial Japanese Army was still fixated on facing its opponent from more than thirty years before, those Russians who had defended Port Arthur and fallen to the ‘human bullet’ tactics of the Japanese and who showed themselves inferior, man for man, to the Meiji conscripts. The enemy of 1905, however, was not the same as the modern Red Army, equipped

¹⁷⁸ Drea, *Nomonhan*, 18.

with masses of tanks, trucks, and artillery, and led by commanders such as Georgi Zhukov who were willing to pay the price in blood necessary to overcome the IJA's do-or-die tactics. Though this change was apparent to some keen Japanese intelligence and command officers, a culture of continuous underestimation of the enemy was developed in place of any serious self-reflection or military evaluation of the Korea Army or Kwantung Army's unit structure, antitank/antiaircraft weaponry, or artillery fire support capabilities, all of which proved to be decisive weaknesses in its tactical operations on the battlefields of northeastern China. As early as 1938, it should have been apparent that in spite of official insistence that these deficiencies could be overcome by the men on the battlefield solely "because [they] were Japanese soldiers," the IJA was unable to defeat a large, modern army in even a limited war without making serious changes. The refusal to accept this lesson would persist until it became a moot point in 1945.

Epilogue: Another "August Storm"

The battles of 1938-39 were not the last conflicts between the Soviets and the Japanese. Though overshadowed by the American deployment of the atomic bomb, the Soviet invasion of Manchuria in August of 1945 demonstrated decisively how little had changed in the tactical doctrine of the IJA, even after more than half a decade of battle against modern armies. By 1945 the Kwantung Army was a shadow of its former self: due to concerns on the Pacific fronts in 1944-1945, sixteen divisions had been transferred from Manchuria in little over a year, a major bleeding of strength.¹⁷⁹ In mid-September of 1944, the Imperial General Headquarters officially changed the status of the Kwantung Army from an offensive force – the status it had held since its creation – to a defensive one.¹⁸⁰ On the eve of the attack, Soviet intelligence estimated that the

¹⁷⁹ Edward Drea, "Missing Intentions: Japanese Intelligence and the Soviet Invasion of Manchuria, 1945," *Military Affairs* 48.2 (1984), 67.

¹⁸⁰ Drea, "Missing Intentions," 67.

Kwantung Army was now made up of only slightly more than a million men: 993,000 Japanese and 214,000 auxiliary (Manchukuoan) forces. Furthermore, of these men, the majority lacked quality. The units that had been transferred out were the veteran soldiers, and the remaining forces were made up largely of reservists, draftees, and the remnants of smaller units that had been merged together.¹⁸¹ This was not the bold Kwantung Army of the past operations, and it was little prepared to resist the ‘Soviet bear’ crashing down from the north.

To make matters worse, much of the materiel strength of the Kwantung Army was depleted. For over one million men, they had only 1,155 tanks, 5,360 gun and artillery pieces, and 1,800 aircraft. These few resources were also poorly distributed to face an invasion. Most divisions still lacked artillery and antitank weapons in any numbers, both essential tools in repelling the heavily armored Soviet forces. The Kwantung Army units came up short by the standards of military technology just as they had before, despite continuous efforts at innovation. Their newest tanks, armed with only 57mm cannons and machine guns, were no match for the Soviet T-34 battle tanks, which not only had larger weaponry but also heavier armor, capable of withstanding multiple hits. Furthermore, all divisions lacked essential supplies and equipment for maintaining both the infantry and armored forces. 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.¹⁸²

By contrast, 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 included 1,058,982 men on front line duty and 518,743

¹⁸¹ David Glantz, *August Storm: The Soviet 1945 Strategic Offensive in Manchuria* (Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute, 1983), Ch 3. This source is electronic and not paginated, so citations are by chapter.

¹⁸² Glantz, “Strategic Offensive,” Ch. 3.

rear service forces for a total 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. Combined, they made an offensive front 5,130 kilometers long aimed at the heart of Japanese-occupied Manchuria.¹⁸³ Furthermore, unlike the relatively ragtag troops that the Kwantung Army was forced to rely on, many of these 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, because of their previous success in combat in Germany's fortified Königsberg area. As another example, in the Grand Khingan Mountains region of western Manchuria, the Soviet 53rd Army and 6th Guards Tank Army were deployed after their experiences in the Carpathian Mountains.¹⁸⁴ The Soviet forces were not only substantially better equipped and armed than their Kwantung Army counterparts, but most were also veterans of serious combat on similar terrain. Additionally, by 1945 the Soviet Union had fully completed the restructuring of its armed forces after its weakness to 'blitzkrieg' attacks had been demonstrated, and “nowhere was this more evident than in Manchuria.”¹⁸⁵ The new forces were designed as combined arms regiments, meaning that they often included infantry, artillery, armored, and anti-aircraft forces all at once. In short, it was not a question of whether or not the Soviets would be victorious, but of how quickly they could succeed and how far they could drive.¹⁸⁶

On August 9 this storm finally rolled into Manchuria, encountering an unprepared Kwantung Army. The attack, launched under the “influence of a strong rain,” came as a complete surprise to the units who immediately received it.¹⁸⁷ In addition to their previously discussed

¹⁸³ Glantz, “Strategic Offensive,” Ch. 4.

¹⁸⁴ Hasegawa Tsuyoshi, *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 85.

¹⁸⁵ Glantz, “Strategic Offensive,” Ch. 4.

¹⁸⁶ David Glantz, *Soviet Operational and Tactical Combat in Manchuria, 1945: ‘August Storm’* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2003), 312.

¹⁸⁷ Nakayama Takashi, *Kantōgun* (Tōkyō : Kōdansha, 2000), 248.

military inferiority, the Japanese forces in Manchuria also suffered from severe tactical intelligence problems, tied to their chronic underestimation of the enemy. Although the Japanese Imperial Headquarters managed to correctly predict that the Soviet Union would be prepared to enter the war against Japan in August of 1945, this was not assigned particular significance. They did not anticipate that an attack would be launched immediately, banking on the terms of the Neutrality Pact, which had been cancelled in April but was still within a one year “grace period” lasting until 1946.¹⁸⁸ Japanese intelligence used the extremely unreliable method of counting train cars moving through cities with Japanese consulates to estimate the amount of troops that were being moved to the Manchurian front. Even as close to the attack as August 3, an official analysis by the Imperial General Headquarters Army Department was still relying on this method to predict Soviet operational readiness, and the report indicated that only 40-50 Soviet divisions were in place at the time of the attack, compared to the 55 to 60 believed necessary for an invasion.¹⁸⁹ Presented with this information after the war's end, a Soviet general merely snickered – there had been 80 divisions in place at the time of the invasion.¹⁹⁰ Russian intelligence had also made mistakes, but on the side of overestimation: the mass of artillery and manpower they deployed was more than necessary to crush the Kwantung Army.¹⁹¹ As Edward Drea summarily phrased it, “the Japanese were unprepared strategically, operationally, or tactically for the massive Soviet blow that fell on August 9, 1945.”¹⁹²

Soviet forces swept through Manchuria in the first days of the attack, effectively deploying their new tactics. In the north, Japanese colonists found themselves defenseless as the

¹⁸⁸ Drea, “Missing Intentions,” 68.

¹⁸⁹ Imperial General Headquarters Army Department, “Beieisosantōkaidan, eikokusenkyokuyusonotainichi sensōjyunbishinchokutōnibanfujōseikansatsubeieichoukeitaichikyōdōseimeinisekisurukansatsu,” August 3, 1945 (JACAR A03032243200), 11.

¹⁹⁰ Drea, “Missing Intentions,” 69.

¹⁹¹ Nakayama, *Kantōgun*, 247-248.

¹⁹² Drea, “Missing Intentions,” 70.

Kwantung Army rapidly retreated to its most fortified areas. Although 2,761 deaths are reported as having occurred in battle, 4,395 evacuating colonists chose to commit suicide rather than struggle through what seemed like impossible conditions, and an additional 1,894 committed suicide in battle. Only sixty-three percent of settlers would ever return to Japan.¹⁹³ Military units fared no better despite a quick retreat from the border areas. Without accurate intelligence available, Japanese units consistently found themselves surrounded by the fast-moving Soviet offensive, and their planned defensive points were often overrun before they could even be occupied. Within a week, “the Soviets had 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 “savagely” against overwhelming odds, just as had many civilian settlers.¹⁹⁴ Their efforts meant little in the face of significant Soviet advantages, and they were swept away by the force of the ‘August Storm.’

In the space of six years of continuous war since the conclusion of Nomonhan, the Imperial Japanese Army had consistently failed to innovate in its tactics, always relying on faith and self-delusion to overcome to growing might of their enemies. Regardless of the unmistakable folly of their greater strategy, this element alone goes far in explaining how this once seemingly invincible force was crushed, again and again, by the eternally adapting nature of war. Any army facing a changing battlefield would do well to heed those lessons which were left unlearned on the hills near Changkufeng and the steppes of Nomonhan.

¹⁹³ Young, *Japan's Total Empire*, 410-411.

¹⁹⁴ Drea, “Missing Intentions,” 70.

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