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THE RED ARMY'S VICTORY THAT SHAPED WORLD WAR II



## INTRODUCTION

The Halha River flows from south to north near the tip of a flat, grassy finger of Mongolian territory that pokes eastward into Manchuria. In the 1930s Manchuria's Japanese masters regarded the river as an international boundary line: Manchuria to the east, Outer Mongolia—the Mongolian People's Republic (MPR), then a protectorate of the Soviet Union—to the west. Those on the Mongolian side claimed that the border ran some ten miles east of the river, roughly parallel to it, near the tiny hamlet of Nomonhan. While the precise location of the border meant little to the Mongol nomads who had led their herds back and forth across the river for centuries, the Kwantung Army, the elite Japanese force that occupied Manchuria, had a different view.

In April 1939 Major Tsuji Masanobu of the Kwantung Army's operations staff drafted an inflammatory set of "principles" for dealing with the skirmishes that had been troubling the border region since Japan had seized Manchuria in 1931 and created the puppet state of Manchukuo. Tsuji's border principles declared that "if the enemy crosses the frontiers . . . annihilate him without delay. . . . To accomplish our mission, it is permissible to enter Soviet territory, or to trap or lure Soviet troops into Manchukuoan territory. . . . Where boundary lines are not clearly defined, area defense commanders will, upon their own initiative, establish boundaries. . . . In the event of an armed clash, fight until victory is won regardless of relative strengths or of the location of the boundaries. If the enemy violates the borders, friendly units must challenge him courageously . . . without concerning themselves about the consequences, which will be the responsibility of higher headquarters."

In mid-May, the Kwantung Army officer responsible for the Halha River area, Lieutenant General Komatsubara Michitaro, commander of the 23rd Division, was meeting with his division staff to discuss implementation of the new border principles when he received word of an incursion by MPR cavalry across the Halha River near Nomonhan. In keeping with the new orders, the usually cautious Komatsubara reacted sharply. Liked by the bothersome skirmishes and hoping that a rough response would get the Mongols (and Soviets) to back off, Komatsubara

decided on the spot to destroy the invading Outer Mongolian forces.<sup>2</sup> That snap decision and the conflict it ignited would have far-reaching consequences.

General Komatsubara followed up on his decision with action. After a series of indecisive small-unit skirmishes in mid-May, he dispatched a two-thousand-man force under Colonel Yamagata Takemitsu to crush the Mongolian/Soviet "intruders." Yamagata's detachment was built around a 23rd Division infantry battalion, a regimental artillery unit of 75-mm guns and smaller rapid-fire guns, and a two-hundred-man truck-borne reconnaissance unit under Lieutenant Colonel Azuma Yaozo.

Yamagata found that the enemy had constructed a pontoon bridge across the Halha River and taken up positions less than a mile west of Nomonhan. He decided to trap the enemy east of the river and destroy them there. He ordered Azuma's recon unit to push south along the east bank of the river to the bridge, cutting off the enemy's escape route. Yamagata's infantry, with artillery support, would attack frontally, driving the enemy toward the river and the waiting Azuma unit. There the enemy would be trapped between the two Japanese forces and destroyed.

Because of faulty intelligence, Yamagata believed that the bridgehead was held only by MPR border troops and light cavalry. In fact, the Mongolian forces had been reinforced by Soviet infantry, combat engineers, armored cars, and artillery, including a battery of self-propelled 76-mm guns. The combined force totaled about a thousand men.

On the morning of May 28, Yamagata's main force hit the Soviet-Mongolian units near Nomonhan. The attack achieved some initial success, pushing the enemy back toward the bridge. But Yamagata's advance was checked as Soviet artillery and armor came into action. The attackers were soon forced to dig in for protection from Soviet shelling. Meanwhile, Azuma's recon unit was startled as it approached the bridge to find its objective held by Soviet infantry with armored car and artillery support. The Soviet armored cars mounted the high-velocity 45-mm gun of a medium tank. Azuma had no artillery or antitank weapons and was wholly incapable of dislodging the Soviet force. When Yamagata's assault bogged down, Azuma found himself caught between two superior enemy forces.

As the day wore on, the Soviet 149th Infantry Regiment, which had recently been deployed to the area, was trucked to the combat zone and thrown against Azuma. Yamagata, pinned down several miles to the east, was unable to relieve him. The outcome was inevitable: Azuma's unit was annihilated. Only four men managed to escape that night; the rest, including Lieutenant Colonel Azuma, were killed or captured. In the words of Kwantung Army's official history, "remorse ate at the heart of General Komatsubara."<sup>3</sup>

Spurred on by Major Tsuji and other hotheaded staff officers at headquarters, the Kwantung Army command resolved to avenge this defeat with a major ground and air offensive across the Halha River, into indisputably Mongolian territory. The assault force was built around Komatsubara's 23rd Division, reinforced by a regiment from the crack 7th Division, several hundred attack planes, and the Imperial Army's only independent tank brigade. But the Japanese buildup again was detected by their Soviet-MPR foes. Moscow too dispatched powerful reinforcements to the region, designated as First Army Group, under the command of an as-yet-untested leader named Georgy Zhukov. The Japanese offensive in early July was repulsed by Zhukov, with heavy losses on both sides.

Kwantung Army continued to escalate the conflict but was checked each time by ever-more-powerful Soviet forces. Josef Stalin decided to send massive reinforcements to Zhukov's First Army Group, which launched a decisive counteroffensive in August. Intermittent fighting continued into mid-September 1939.

This conflict was no mere border clash. Nearly 100,000 men and a thousand armored vehicles and aircraft engaged in fierce combat for four months. Thirty to fifty thousand were killed or wounded. This small undeclared war is known in Japan as the Nomonhan incident and in Soviet Union and Mongolia as the Battle of Khalkhin Gol. Tsuji and Zhukov would go on to play critical roles in the Second World War and after—Tsuji as a famous and notorious soldier in the Pacific War and a member of parliament in postwar Japan; Zhukov as the architect of victory over Nazi Germany and later Soviet minister of defense.

But even more surprising, this little-known conflict fought in remote inner-Asia helped pave the way for Adolf Hitler's invasion of Poland—and all that followed. Indeed, the height of the fighting at Nomonhan coincided *precisely* with the conclusion of the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact (August 23, 1939), which gave Hitler the green light to invade Poland, triggering the Second World War one week later. This was no coincidence. The Nomonhan conflict is directly linked to the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact and the outbreak of the war in Europe. The nonaggression pact assured Hitler he would not have to fight Britain, France, and Russia, so he felt safe in attacking Poland. The pact (temporarily) kept Russia out of this intracapitalist war in Europe. It also isolated Japan from Germany. This gave Stalin a free hand to deal decisively with Japan at Nomonhan—which is exactly what he did.

Yet the standard histories of the origins of the Second World War make little mention of the Soviet-Japanese conflict and its connection to the events in Europe. This book does not presume a wholesale reinterpretation of those events. It does suggest, however, that a small but important piece, the Nomonhan conflict, has been overlooked or misplaced in most attempts to piece together the jigsaw

puzzle of the origins of the war. This thesis is strongly supported by documents readily available soon after the end of the war, starting with the published volumes of German, British, French, and U.S. diplomatic documents. The *Documents on German Foreign Policy* provided an especially important window onto the secret German-Soviet negotiations leading to the 1939 nonaggression pact, a record that the Soviet government attempted for decades to deny and conceal. The military history section of the U.S. occupation forces in Japan produced approximately two hundred volumes on Japan's military experience in Manchuria, including many that focus specifically on the Nomonhan conflict. These monographs, prepared primarily by former Japanese military officers and then translated into English by the U.S. occupation authorities, provided an early, albeit fragmentary, record of the conflict, showing that it was provoked and escalated by the Japanese. The *Proceedings of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East* documents Moscow's allegations of Japanese aggression at Nomonhan.

Some forty years ago I marshaled evidence from such sources to support a doctoral dissertation arguing a causal link between the Nomonhan conflict, the nonaggression pact, and the outbreak of the war in Europe.<sup>4</sup> I could not then read Japanese. In the absence of reliable official Soviet documents, I augmented my interpretation of Soviet foreign policy by deconstructing Comintern publications of the period. Three years after earning my degree, while on the faculty of the Pennsylvania State University, I was fortunate enough to be awarded a postdoctoral research fellowship by the Japan Foundation that allowed me to spend a year in Tokyo studying Japanese and doing further research on Nomonhan. This led me to write a more fully documented and nuanced version of my Nomonhan thesis, which wound up, however, as an unpublished academic exercise. A few years later I left academe and embarked on a thirty-year career as a specialist in Russian political and military affairs in the Congressional Research Service of the Library of Congress—a splendid institution.

Upon retiring from CRS, I decided to return to my work on Nomonhan. I was encouraged in this by the release in post-Soviet Russia of a growing number of Soviet-era documents that not only confirm but strengthen my interpretation of the influence of the Nomonhan conflict on Soviet foreign and military policy. In addition to the official two-volume set of Soviet Foreign Ministry documents for 1939<sup>5</sup> and such collections of documents as *God Krizisa 1938–1939 (Year of Crisis, 1938–1939)*,<sup>6</sup> *1941 God Dokumenty (The Year 1941, Documents)*,<sup>7</sup> more documents from the archives of the Communist Party, various government ministries, and intelligence services have been released or ferreted out, despite the efforts of the Vladimir Putin regime to check this flow and salvage the reputation of Soviet foreign and defense policy.

The idea of a connection between Nomonhan and the nonaggression pact, however, still has not received adequate attention from scholars. The two published studies in English that focus on Nomonhan treat it as an obscure East Asian military episode, ignoring its connection to the coming of the war in Europe.<sup>8</sup> Many Japanese and Russians have written about this conflict. The Japanese authors, however, show little interest in the complex European diplomacy. And in Putin's Russia, the Hitler-Stalin Pact remains a sensitive, if not downright dangerous, subject for Russian scholars.<sup>9</sup> Most U.S. and European analyses of the origins and outbreak of World War II ignore or briefly gloss over the Soviet-Japanese conflict.<sup>10</sup> Several historical studies contain tantalizing references to a possible connection between the Nomonhan conflict and the German-Soviet pact,<sup>11</sup> but none have developed the idea fully. This book is intended to fill that gap.

The organizational scheme for this book is chronological, but not linear. It has two stories to tell: a military history of the Soviet-Japanese conflict on the Mongolia-Manchuria border, and a diplomatic history of the coming of the war that is Europe-centered and global in scope. To avoid creating an ungainly two-headed monster, the narrative shifts back and forth between the disputed inner-Asian borderland and the political/diplomatic maneuverings of the major powers, highlighting the relationships among these events. The analysis does not stop in September 1939 with the end of the fighting at Nomonhan and the outbreak of the war in Europe. The Soviet-Japanese conflict at Nomonhan influenced decisions in Tokyo and Moscow in 1941—Japan's decision for war with the United States and the Red Army victory in the Battle of Moscow—that helped shape the conduct and the outcome of the war. Appreciating the significance of this seemingly obscure East Asian military episode and placing it in the broader geopolitical context sheds new light on, and provides a more complete understanding of, the Second World War. Nomonhan is, arguably, the most important World War II battle that most people<sup>12</sup> have never heard of.



## CHAPTER 1

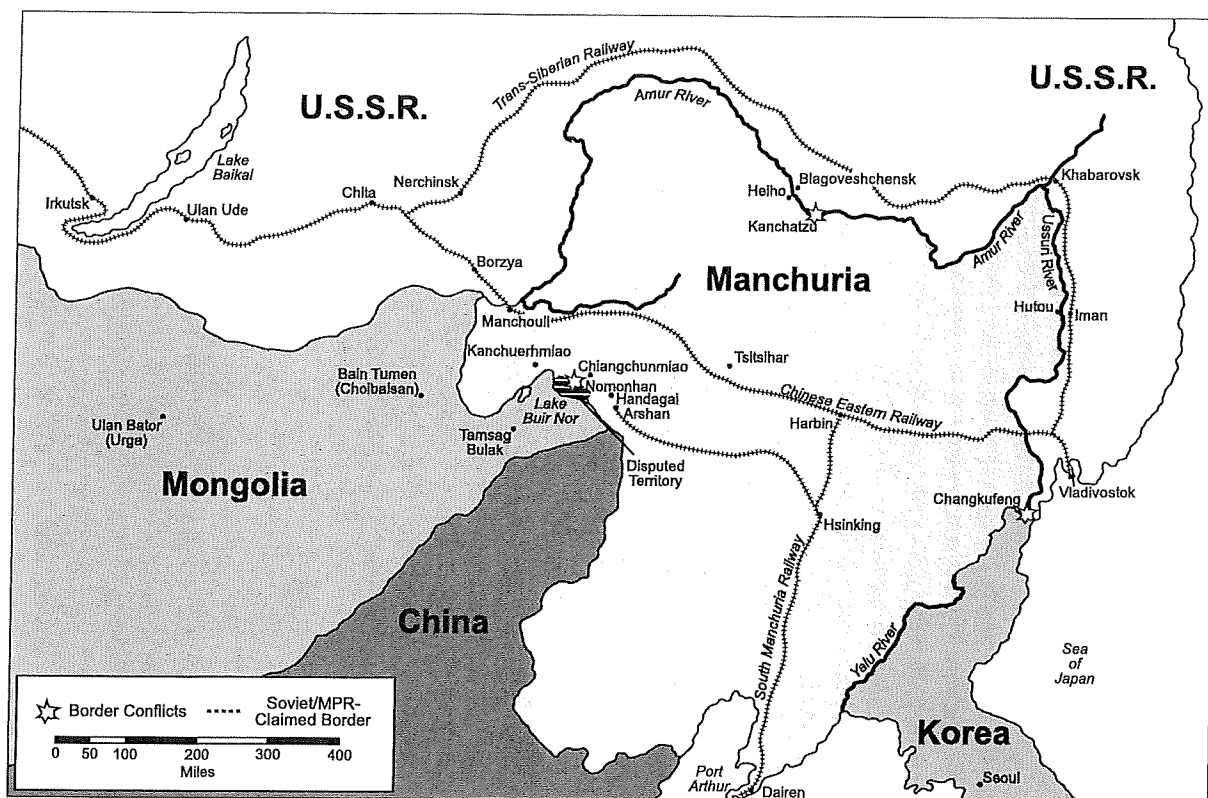
# THE LEGACY OF THE PAST

## War and Revolution

The year 1853 was a momentous one in Japan and Russia. Few could have predicted that events set in motion that year would put the two on a collision course leading to war a half century later. In 1853 American Commodore Matthew Perry's squadron of "Black Ships" steamed imperiously into Tokyo Bay, precipitating the end of Japan's feudal regime and ushering in a rush toward modernization the spectacular success of which would become one of the wonders of the modern world. Also in 1853 Russia invaded the Turkish-controlled Danubian Principalities, triggering the Crimean War, in which an ineptly led Anglo-French force humiliated the Russian army on its own soil. This defeat too spurred modernization. Russia's temporary diplomatic isolation in Europe also led the Tsarist government to redirect its attention toward Asia in order to reassert its great-power status.

Russian expansion into Asia had begun in earnest in the sixteenth century and proceeded eastward through the Eurasian corridor until checked by Manchu China a hundred years later, deflecting Russia northeastward to the sparsely populated North Pacific rimland. By the nineteenth century, however, the Manchu empire had entered into a period of decline and was beset by the seafaring European imperialist powers and by Russian pressure from inner Asia.

Only a few years after its defeat in the Crimean War, Russia forced the Manchu court to sign the Treaties of Aigun (1858) and Peking (1860), whereby China ceded the huge swath of territory north of the Amur and east of the Ussuri Rivers to Russia. Russia then began applying pressure on China's faltering control of Manchuria and Korea, a policy both symbolized and accelerated by the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway. The Tsarist push toward Manchuria and Korea aroused suspicion and hostility not only from Russia's traditional western rivals, but from a new competitor for power in East Asia—Japan.



Map 1. Manchuria and Environs in the 1930s