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## The Unlearned Lesson of Nomonhan

### Introduction

The paper is devoted to the problem: to what degree the lesson of the battle of Nomonhan, the first serious defeat since the establishment of the Imperial Japanese Army, was ignored by its influential circles, and what consequences the negligence entailed for the IJA itself and for Japan as a whole. The subject has many aspects of which the most important will be discussed here.

The battle of Nomonhan was the most serious and the largest of many clashes and skirmishes that took place in the mid and late 1930s on the borders between the Soviet Union and Manchuria as well as between the Mongolian People's Republic and Manchuria. It lasted about four months and engaged dozens of thousand of soldiers and claimed at least a dozen thousand victims on each side. Although the losses of the Red Army and the Kwantung Army were comparable, it was the Soviet side who emerged victorious because, contrary to the Japanese side, it achieved its operational objectives.

The defeat was carefully concealed by Japanese propaganda from the Japanese public who was informed about a great victory but many circles in the Imperial Japanese Army were shocked and the officers, including generals, who were the driving force in pushing the Kwantung Army into the military affair, were quietly and secretly removed from their posts and either retired or moved to other, less prominent posts. A deeper analysis of the reasons for the defeat, however, was not accomplished despite the fact that a special board of inquiry was working on the task. As a result, when Japan opened the war in the Far East, similar, very serious errors were made by its armed forces, which after a half a year of impunity began to bear defeat after defeat.

The paper is divided into five sections. The first of them presents the historical background of the battle of Nomonhan. The second section is devoted to the description of the battle's course and its final outcome. In the third one, the most important reasons for the defeat of the Kwantung Army are discussed. The fourth section presents examples of the cases of making similar errors in the course of

the war in the Far East. Finally, the fifth section presents conclusions that may be useful for understanding the causes of Japan's defeat.

## 1. Historical background

### 1.1. An outline of Japanese-Russian/Soviet relations from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century

The moment the new political oligarchy of Meiji Japan rejected the politics of self-restraint in contacts with the outer world and made military expansion one of the most important objectives, the confrontation with Russia became inevitable due to its interests and influence in northern China and Korea, being the primary targets of Japanese imperial ambitions. The first step in settling affairs between both countries was made on peaceful grounds. The Russo-Japanese treaty of 1875 resolved the problem of the border territories that earlier had no clear state affiliation. This way Kurile Islands (Chishima rettō) became Japanese while Sakhalin became Russian.

Twenty years later, Russia together with Germany opposed Japan gaining too large profits from its victorious war against China. In this way, the interests of Russia and Japan began to cross-overlap in Manchuria and in Korea. As a consequence of Russian refusal to recognize Japanese interests in Korea on February 6, 1904 Japan attacked Port Arthur – the Russian naval base at the Liaotung Peninsula in eastern Manchuria, and after almost nine months of bitter fighting the Japanese Army captured the base on January 2, 1905. After expelling Russian troops from Mukden on March 10, and the Japanese fleet under the command of Admiral Tōgō Heihachirō 東郷平八郎 defeating the Russian Second Far East Squadron off Tsushima on May 28, 1905, Tsarist Russia, despite still having large reserves, decided to enter peace negotiations that were held in Portsmouth and concluded on August 7, 1905. As a result, Japan extended its control over Korea and the Liaotung Peninsula in Manchuria, which from 1898 had been rented by Russia from China. Apart from that, Japan gained the southern half of Sakhalin.

During the First World War Japan and Russia were (at least formally) allies, but after the Bolshevik revolution and outbreak of civil war in Russia, Japan joined with the United States, Great Britain and France in the so called Siberian Intervention supporting the Russian White Army and the Czechoslovak Legion and the Japanese Army stayed on the Russian/Soviet territory longest of all intervening forces, eventually withdrawing only in 1924 while the rest of the intervening forces had been withdrawn much earlier.

After the “resection” of Manchuria from China and establishing in 1932 the supposedly sovereign, but de facto fully controlled by the Kwantung Army puppet state of Manchukuo, instead of a short Korean-Soviet border, the several thou-

sand kilometers long Manchukuoan-Soviet border became the stage for possible confrontation between Japan and the Soviet Union. This stage was even further extended after 1936 with the signing of the Treaty on Friendship and Mutual Help between the Soviet Union and the Mongolian People's Republic.

## 1.2. Birth, deeds and the stance of the Kwantung Army

The Kwantung Army was the main actor in all the events that took place in the area of its stationing, i.e. Manchuria but it was also a kind of a pattern whose example was followed by other subjects. As a consequence, the Kwantung Army's influence on Japanese politics was far above its formal position, size and military power.

It was established in 1919, i.e., during the Japanese Siberian intervention as a result of a deep reorganization of the Kwantung Garrison established immediately after Japan took control of Manchuria from Russia. The main objective (at least officially) of the Kwantung Army remained protection of the South Manchurian Railway that became Japanese property after signing the Portsmouth peace agreement. Within a decade the Kwantung Army became a real "tail wagging its dog", an unruly military band who assumed they knew what was best for Japan and cultivated the worst traditions of *gekokujo*. It became the *de facto* political center whose choices, although not authorized by their superiors beforehand, were almost always approved by the supreme authorities *post factum*.

The Kwantung Army's middle echelon staff officers were the main driving force of the majority of the Army's wrongdoings. The first of them was committed June 4, 1928, when one of the officers placed a bomb within a train wagon, killing the Chinese warlord Zhang Zhuolin (Chang Tso-lin) 張作霖.

Three years later the Kwantung Army's staff officers: Lieutenant Colonel Ishiwara Kanji 石原莞爾中佐 and Colonel Itagaki Seishirō 板垣征四郎大佐 cooked up a plot based on a supposed attack of Chinese rebels on the South Manchurian Railroad near Mukden while in fact, it was Lieutenant Kawamoto Suemori of the Kwantung Army who on August 18, 1931 placed a small explosive charge next to the track and caused a detonation shortly before the passage of the Dairen Express that was supposed to get derailed. In fact the damage was less than the plotters had assumed and the train only swayed but reached its destination. At this stage the Kwantung Army had sufficient excuse to enter Mukden, under the pretence of protecting the Railroad.

Ishiwara and Itagaki, however, who had a more ambitious plan to occupy the whole of Manchuria prepared grounds for intervention of the Kwantung Army on a larger scale. They also provided some disturbances to be blamed on the Chinese, which convinced the Kwantung Army Commander in Chief to send troops for the sake of preventing disturbances supposedly planned by Chinese rebels.

As a result, practically all of Manchuria was put under the control of the Kwantung Army, and the Chinese offered very mild resistance. Soon the whole province was severed from China and it was declared the sovereign state of Manchukuo with its own emblem, anthem and even Emperor. In fact, however, all that was only a facade, since everything was under the Kwantung Army's control.

In the minds of the spiritual leaders of the Kwantung Army it was just an intermediate step and preparation for the ultimate objective, *hokushin* – invasion of the Soviet Far East and Eastern Siberia.

### 1.3. Preliminaries of the Nomonhan incident

#### **The prelude: the Amur River incident – *Kanchazūtō jiken* 乾岔子島事件 (1937)**

This small-scale clash of arms was directly related to natural processes and their consequences for the determination of the borderline since the changing line of the riverbanks entailed shifts of the borderline. Something like that happened at the Amur River near Blagoveshchensk where two small islets in the middle of the river became disputable territory. When two Soviet river gunboats debarked small detachments at the islets, expelling Manchukuoan construction workers, the Kwantung Army's artillery fired at the gunboats sinking one and damaging the other. Upon Japanese protest, the Soviets meekly withdrew, which was interpreted by the Kwantung Army as a manifestation of their weakness. The real reason, however, could be the intention not to distract the Japanese from apparently igniting military conflict with China (see Goldman, 2012).

#### **The first movement: the battle of Lake Khasan – *Chōkohō jiken* 張鼓峰事件 (1938)**

About a year later a fortnight-long (July 29th – August 11th), medium-scale clash of arms between the Red Army and the Japanese Korean Army (*Chōsengun*) occurred on the Soviet-Manchukuoan border on a line of three hills, including the Changkufeng (*Chōkohō*) located west from Lake Khasan. The Japanese Army tried to push out Soviet positions installed at their tops, but after the arrival of Soviet reinforcement the Japanese detachments were pushed back and fighting stopped after a ceasefire agreement was reached at the diplomatic level. The Japanese Army took this reverse as an insult but did not learn the lesson, remaining in the state of unshakable conviction of its own superiority over the Soviets and striving for revenge.

### 1.3. The Devilish instruction

Some historians (for instance Moriyama, p. 47) consider that it was the Chōkohō failure that inspired Major Tsuji Masanobu 辻政信少佐, an ubiquitous, hyperactive, bellicose and possessed by a sense of honor member of the operation section of the Kwantung Army Staff to prepare the instruction “On handling incidents on the Manchukuoan-Soviet border” – “*Manso kokkyō funsō shori yōkō*” 「満ソ国境紛争処理要綱」, later known as the № 1488 instruction, which was presented to the Kwantung Army Commander in Chief, General Ueda Kenkichi 植田謙吉大将, who accepted it as an official document to be observed by all the Kwantung Army division commanders. The instruction obliged them to respond toughly and resolutely to any provocation from the Soviet side. In principle it was in accordance with the principle: “*Okasazu, okasarezu*” 「侵さず侵されず」 (“Don’t invade, don’t let be invaded”), recognized by both sides.

The bombshell was hidden in article 4 of the Instruction, putting the burden of defining the borderline on the shoulders of a local Japanese commander, which was an unheard of solution in the case of such a subtle and dangerous matter which normally would have been the subject of careful and tedious negotiations carried out by experienced diplomats of both involved parties. In this case, everything was turned upside down, giving a clear manifestation of *gekokujō* 下剋上 – questioning and reversing hierarchy.

With the phenomenon firmly established in the Imperial Japanese Army, and to a large extent, in the Japanese state as a whole, the poor division commanders were entitled and, what is worse, obliged to determine borderlines on their own and to defend them by any possible method and with all the might at their disposal. This, of course, made it extremely difficult, if at all possible, to wind down border incidents, but winding such incidents up was more than easy. Something along these lines happened in the case of the Nomonhan incident, blowing a small skirmish up into undeclared and limited, yet local war.

## 2. The cause, the course and the outcome of the battle

The following are basic pieces of information concerning the reasons for the battle’s outbreak, its progress and finally its results in military and political terms<sup>1</sup>. The reasons for the outbreak of the battle were manifold, some of historical, some of political and some of military nature.

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<sup>1</sup> The most comprehensive description of the battle, its causes and consequences is given by Coox, and a reader less interested in minute detail can find a more synthetic picture in Goldman.

The most fundamental reason, however, was connected with the Japanese politics of hostility towards the USSR in which traditional rivalry with Russia blended with fierce anti-communism.

### 2.1. The bone of contention and the ignition of the incident

A strip of land some 70 km long and 20 km wide at the border of Manchukuo and the Mongolian People's Republic was a district-sized territory whose national status was disputable. The Manchukuoan side, unconditionally supported by the Kwantung Army, claimed that the Khalkha River defined the borderline in this area, while the Mongolian side, supported by Soviet authorities, saw the borderline some 20 km further East running along a broken line with Nomonhan station at one of its vertexes. Had not the "devilish instruction" been at work, that might be a stage for some small-scale skirmishes, no more. With the № 1488 instruction, however, the Kwantung Army felt entitled to define the presumably official borderline to be defended with all its might.

The appearance in the disputable piece of land on May 11<sup>th</sup> of a small detachment (some 60 men on horseback) of MPR's cavalry, seeking better pasture for their horses, became the spark that inflamed a pretty large scale military conflict, the direct *casus belli*, though some additional factors were also of importance. When the Manchukuoan cavalry detachment expelled the Mongols across the river, a new more numerable Mongolian detachment crossed it again.

### 2.2. The 1<sup>st</sup> Nomonhan incident – the failure of the operation and the annihilation of Yamagata's task force

At that stage it was still just a small clash between Mongolian and Manchukuoan troops, but putting the № 1488 instruction to work, the Kwantung Army decided to back up their protégé directly. First, a small cavalry detachment under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Azuma Yaozo 東八百蔵中佐 carried on a "punitive operation" between May 13<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>. When it appeared ineffective, General Ueda ordered the commander of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division, Lieutenant General Komatsubara Michitarō 小松原道太郎中将 to arrange a larger task force for the purpose of destroying the Mongolian troops present on the right, the eastern bank of the Khalkha River. The core of the task force was formed by the 64<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment under the command of Colonel Yamagata Takemitsu 山県武光大佐, supplemented with a battalion-strong mounted reconnaissance detachment under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Azuma. On May 27<sup>th</sup> the task force was dispatched to destroy the Mongolian troops on the right bank of the Khalkha River.

It was planned that Yamagata's regiment would play the role of the anvil while Azuma's reconnaissance detachment would be the "hammer", supposedly attacking the Mongolian troops from behind. The plan was brilliant but Japanese command was not aware that the Mongols were not the only "intruders" on the right bank. In fact, the positions there had also been manned by Soviet troops. In consequence, the detachment of Col. Azuma that was supposed to trap the Mongolian troops, on May 28<sup>th</sup> was trapped itself, encircled and eventually destroyed, and its commander was killed in action. As the result the rest of Yamagata's task force was withdrawn, but the Kwantung Army's staff and command did not give up plans for expelling the Soviet-Mongolian troops from the disputable area or destroying them.

Shortly after, on June 5<sup>th</sup> Komdiv<sup>2</sup> Georgy Zhukov arrived in the area, with the task, charged on him by the highest political and military authorities in Moscow, to check on the state of affairs at the spot and to take command if necessary. The latter actually happened since Zhukov blamed the acting commander of the Soviet troops with negligence and not treating the situation seriously enough. Later, he took first offensive measures by letting the soviet aviation attack Japanese supplies at Kanjurumiao and Arxan on June 17<sup>th</sup>. The raids caused considerable damage but also infuriated the Kwantung Army's staff and command who arranged a retaliatory action: an air raid on the Soviet air-base at Tamsag-bulag deep in Mongolian territory. This action was not authorized by the supreme command in Tōkyō and caused controversy between the Kwantung Army and its superiors in Japan.

### **2.3. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Nomonhan incident – Japanese attempts to expel Soviet troops to the left bank of the Khalkha river (the Khalkhin-gol) and destroying them**

Although the Tamsag-bulag raid was an unauthorized step, the Supreme Command gave their blessing for the action of destroying Soviet troops on the right bank of the Khalkha River by the means of land offensive. The plan for this operation was prepared by the fearless, restless and optimistic as always Major Tsuji and his colleagues from the operation section of the Kwantung Army's staff. The task force was to be divided into two parts. One of them, operating on the right bank was supposed to push the Soviet troops to the Khalkha River and the other was supposed to cross the river north of the Bain Tsagan heights and after moving south, wait on the left bank for the remnants of the Soviet troops, running away

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<sup>2</sup> At that time in the Red Army the names of commanding posts were used instead of standard ranks and *komdiv* is an abbreviation of the Soviet post name: *komandir divizii* – division commander.

from the right-bank task force, to destroy them<sup>3</sup>. The plan was brilliant but in reality it did not work too well (like almost all operations planned by Major Tsuji).

### Broken pincers

As for the details of the actual operation, the right-bank detachment under the command of Lieutenant General Yasuoka Masaomi 安岡正臣中将 counting some two and a half thousand men, was composed of the 64<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment from the 23<sup>rd</sup> Division and of the Kwantung Army's 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Brigade, comprising the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Tank Regiment, plus some logistic detachments.

The left-bank unit under the command of Major General Kobayashi Kōichi 小林恒一少将, counting around eight thousand men, consisted of the 71<sup>st</sup> and 72<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiments from the 23<sup>rd</sup> Division, the 26<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment from the 7<sup>th</sup> Division and supporting artillery and logistic units. Due to the lack of suitable material supplies and equipment, the bridge built across the river could bear only light vehicles so no armor could be transferred to the left bank.

Due to suspension of Soviet reconnaissance flights Zhukov was not aware of the Japanese preparations, and when on July 2<sup>nd</sup> Kobayashi's troops crossed the Khalkha River at the beginning they could move south freely, facing no resistance from the Soviet-Mongolian side. When Zhukov eventually learned about Kobayashi's offensive he reacted immediately sending armor units to the Bain Tsagan area to stop the Japanese troops. There was not enough time to bring larger infantry units for support of the armor therefore Soviet troops suffered considerable losses but eventually, after two days of bitter fighting they forced Kobayashi to re-cross the river and return to the right bank on July 5<sup>th</sup>. "The jinn was pushed back into the bottle".

Meanwhile on the right bank the main burden of fighting rested on the shoulders of the two tank regiments. The commander of the 4<sup>th</sup> Tank Regiment, Colonel Tamada Yoshio 玉田美郎大佐 on the night from July 3<sup>rd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> arranged an unprecedented night attack on the Soviet positions causing a lot of damage and destroying a bunch of Soviet positions, but had to withdraw his tanks before dawn to avoid considerable losses, inevitable in the daylight.

His colleague, commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tank Regiment, Colonel Yoshimaru Kiyotake 吉丸清武大佐 was less bold in his action and carried out his attack during the day. As a consequence, many of his tanks after becoming entangled in so-called piano wires, became easy prey for Soviet artillery, and he himself was killed in action.

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<sup>3</sup> This was an explicit violation of the principle "okasazu" since the Japanese troops were not supposed to enter a disputable land but rather a territory that was recognized by Japan and even by the Kwantung Army as a part of the Mongolian People's Republic.



The infantry regiment being late did not participate in the fighting of either tank regiment, contributing to the serious losses of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment. In any case, even the bold action of Colonel Tamada brought about a success at best at the tactical level if not less, and the objective of the operation – pressing the Soviet troops to the river bank was not achieved. Moreover, the Japanese losses in armor were considerable<sup>4</sup>.

### **Let's try together**

After returning to the right bank, Kobayashi's task force joined with Yasuo-ka's detachment and both groups together began the operation of sweeping Soviet troops towards the Khalkha River but despite repeated efforts they swept little due to unexpectedly tough and efficient resistance from the Soviet side. Particularly stubborn and formidable resistance was offered by the 36<sup>th</sup> Rifle Division's 149<sup>th</sup> Rifle Regiment under Major Ivan Mikhailovich Remizov, who was killed in action on July 8<sup>th</sup> and was posthumously granted the title of the Hero of the Soviet Union. His regiment after his death, continuing his tactics and thus prevented Japanese troops from achieving their operational objectives.

After several days in which losses in Japanese armor increased, remnants of the 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Brigade were withdrawn from the battlefield to the rear and Japanese troops were completely deprived of armor support for the rest of the battle. Further attempts to break through Soviet positions, mainly by means of night bayonet charges that lasted until July 14<sup>th</sup>, failed despite some local successes.

### **Let's smash them with a mace**

After a bit more than a week, an attempt was made on the Japanese side to crush the Soviet defense with a less subtle means and namely shelling the Soviet troops with heavy artillery. The shelling lasted from July 23<sup>rd</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> and was not successful since every such attempt was met with counter-shelling by the Soviet artillery that had more numerous guns, ampler supplies of munitions and was better directed. Consequently, Japanese infantrymen cheering on their colleagues from artillery upon arrival, after a while of counter-shelling that hit both artillery and nearby infantry positions, began praying for the possible quick withdrawal of their compatriots in the service of the “god of war”, as artillery happens to be called<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> During that offensive action the Kwantung Army lost about half of the tanks belonging to the tank regiments involved.

<sup>5</sup> See Goldman pp. 127-129.

After July 25<sup>th</sup> the Kwantung Army gave up attempts to sweep the Soviets from the eastern bank of the Khalkha River right away and began preparations for a general offensive planned for a month later. They did not imagine that their enemy planned a general offensive of its own.

#### **2.4. Zhukov's general offensive and the fate of the Japanese 6<sup>th</sup> Army – a contest of matériel with the bare fighting spirit**

While Zhukov began preparations for his offensive, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Division with some enforcements was renamed the 6<sup>th</sup> Army.

In their preparations the Soviets had shown absolute superiority over the Japanese in the field of logistics despite much more difficult geographical conditions. The closest large railway station to the battlefield on the Japanese side was in Hailar some 200 km away, while the Soviets had to transport their additional troops and supplies from their closest railway station at Borzya located about 700 km away. Despite that disparity they managed to collect within less than four weeks an amount of supplies: munitions, fuels, lubricants, food and other materials, unthought-of by Kwantung Army's command and staff:

15,000 tons of artillery ammunition

6,500 tons of airplane ammunition

15,500 tons of fuels and lubricants

7,500 tons of solid fuels

4,000 tons of food supplies

4,000 tons of other materials<sup>6</sup>

Despite the much shorter distance from their main railway stations, the Kwantung Army did not manage to collect even a fourth of that.

Apart from that, and on a large scale, the Soviets used their secret weapon: the "maskirovka", i.e., techniques directed at concealing their own activities and intentions in order to mislead the enemy. To give some examples of this sort of action, the trucks transporting fresh troops and supplies from Borzya moved only during night, and in the daylight Japanese pilots could see only trucks going the opposite direction which was interpreted as a manifestation of Soviet retreat. In another case, close to the area of the Japanese positions, for some two weeks prior to the offensive, the sound of moving tanks and armored cars were broadcast by huge loudspeakers, which caused the Japanese soldiers to get used to such sounds. "Maskirovka" worked perfectly, and on August 20<sup>th</sup> Japanese troops east of the Khalkha River were caught by surprise by the Soviet general offensive.

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<sup>6</sup> The above data are given in many sources but the primary source is Zhukov, pp. 165-166.

The offensive was executed by the body consisting of:  
the 36<sup>th</sup> Motorized Rifle Division comprising the 24<sup>th</sup> Motorized Rifle Regiment and the 149<sup>th</sup> Rifle Regiment  
the 82<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Division comprising the 201<sup>st</sup>, 202<sup>nd</sup> and 203<sup>rd</sup> Rifle Regiments  
the 57<sup>th</sup> Rifle Division comprising the 293<sup>rd</sup>, 127<sup>th</sup> and 89<sup>th</sup> Rifle Regiments  
the 5<sup>th</sup> Tank Brigade, 7<sup>th</sup> Tank-Armor Brigade and 8<sup>th</sup> Tank-Armor Brigade,  
Corps's artillery  
and the 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Divisions of the MPR Army not counting smaller detachments

The Soviet forces were arranged into three assault groups: northern, central and southern of which the first and third were to play the role of pincers catching Japanese forces in a large pocket.

Early morning August 20<sup>th</sup>, a shower of iron and fire fell on the heads of the Japanese soldiers holding positions East of the Khalkha River, causing considerable damage and casualties. This was a preparatory strike by the Soviet aviation and artillery to pave the stage for the correlated land assault performed by the armor and infantry units. Quickly moving forward, two prongs on the south and on the north enveloped Japanese troops present in the disputable area within less than three days. Within the subsequent week all of them were piecemeal enveloped and annihilated.

## 2.5. The ceasefire agreement and a summary of the battle

On August 31<sup>st</sup> there were almost no Japanese troops in the disputable area. The 6<sup>th</sup> Army was practically annihilated, the majority of its soldiers dead, while some, definitely less numerous, taken prisoners. Contrary to the practice of the unruly Kwantung Army, The Soviet troops did not make a single step beyond the borderline they themselves recognized. They took what they considered theirs (or more precisely, Mongolian), and demonstrated disinterest towards anything otherwise.

This opened space for ceasefire talks that lasted two weeks and the agreement was signed on August 15<sup>th</sup> to become effective the next day. This act made the Soviets free to enter into the eastern part of Poland.

After signing the ceasefire agreement both sides exchanged prisoners of war. The Soviet soldiers, not like during the Great Patriotic War, were treated as heroes upon return, but quite a few Japanese soldiers chose to stay in the USSR, fearing consequences for themselves and their families of the shameful surrender instead of dying. The fate of those who returned with such a stain could justify their choice. Even those who were caught while unconscious were often bullied to death (this was particularly true about officers), and their families had to live with the badge of traitor's relatives.

As for the performance of both sides, in the early stage of fighting the Japanese side showed a visible superiority over the Soviet side in training and equipment. It was particularly conspicuous in the case of aviation, since the Soviet planes at that stage were a half-generation obsolete when compared with the Japanese planes, and Soviet pilots were definitely less experienced. When, however, a group of veterans of the Spanish civil war under the ace Yakov Smushkevich arrived, and fairly modern in 1939 low-wing monoplane fighters I-16 with retractable landing gear began to fly in, the air superiority of Japanese planes and pilots was over and a sort of equilibrium was achieved.

Apart from that, the Soviets within the four months of fighting learned a lot, correcting flaws in their technique and tactics while on the Japanese side the night bayonet attack remained the principal trump it had. If, at the early stage it had been quite efficient, in the final stage, when the Soviets had huge quantitative and qualitative superiority in terms of military technique and firepower, it was definitely too little.

What is more the Soviet side were very inventive and the close air support of the ground operations that became a standard later during World War II had been for the first time used exactly in the battle of Khalkhin-gol, and during the August offensive I-16 fighters launched for the first time in military history unguided rockets, which a year later were launched by the famous “Katyushas” during the Great Patriotic War.

The same was true about the command on both sides. On the Japanese side Colonel Tamada Yoshio was perhaps the only sober and really competent commander. The rest of the commanding personnel were at best mediocre. In the initial stage they faced opponents equally competent (or incompetent). Since June, however, at the top of the Soviet command in the area they had Yakov Smushkevich, a very good aviation commander, Grigory Shtern, a logistic magician of genius, and Georgy Zhukov, a ruthless but extremely efficient military leader, a “Soviet Hachimantarō”. Neither General Ueda nor Lieutenant General Komatsubara could compete with that Soviet trio.

### **3. Reasons for the Kwantung Army's defeat**

There are some authors of publications in Japan who claim that in fact the Kwantung Army won the battle of Nomonhan. The claims are based on the supposedly new data showing that the Soviet side suffered greater losses. This may even be true, especially that in the initial stage of the conflict Soviet troops were poorly trained, poorly equipped, and poorly commanded, which obviously could have entailed high losses. In the latter stage, however, it was less and less true, and during the general offensive losses of the Kwantung Army were enormous especially in terms of the relative numbers.

Apart from that, if one compares e.g., losses in armored equipment, those on the Soviet side were some five to six times larger than those on the Japanese side, but... the Soviets used both tanks and armored cars amply from the very beginning till the very end of the three and a half month-long battle, and the Kwantung Army, while using its tank brigade for just a week or so, lost about half of the brigade's tanks and a quarter of all tanks in its disposal.

What is most important, however, is the question of the principal objective of the whole operation. And this objective did not consist of inflicting maximum damage on the enemy but in showing who is the lord of the disputable area. In such terms the Red Army, without any doubt, emerges victorious from the contest.

Having this problem solved, let us analyze the most important reasons for the humiliating defeat of the Kwantung Army.

### 3.1. The long list of sins against the art of war

The list of Japanese sins committed by the Japanese side during the battle is dreadfully long. Following Coox and Iwaki, let's quote them:

- ① Injecting detachments into the battle piecemeal
- ② Putting the burden of commanding platoons and companies on the shoulders of inexperienced officers
- ③ Worshipping spiritualism and relying mainly on it
- ④ Obsession with night attacks
- ⑤ Unacceptability of surrender
- ⑥ Aversion to fighting in defense
- ⑦ Inability of the aviation to support ground operations
- ⑧ Obsolete weapons, insufficient training and lack of tactical studies
- ⑨ Disrespecting logistics, neglecting soldiers' physical conditions and lack of a slightest thought of rotation system
- ⑩ Neglecting information and, consequently, permanently misjudging the situation
- ⑪ Anarchy in the commanding process

The above "sins" are enumerated according the same ordering as in the sources I am citing, but in fact the majority of them are merely superficial manifestations of two fundamental and lethal flaws hidden in depth. Those deeper fundamental flaws are as follows: fighting spirit idolatry, and obsession with individual performance in the battle.

### 3.2. The tyranny of the fighting spirit

Point no. 3 from the above list is one of the two roots of all other sins. From it grow sins nos. 2, 4, 5, 6, 8 & 9. The lethal error of the Japanese military leaders consisted not in paying attention to the fighting spirit, since it is valuable and was ever prized in all armies, but in making of it the only important virtue. As a consequence, everything seen as its manifestations was promoted, like night bayonet attacks, and everything supposedly manifesting its absence was treated with disdain, like surrender or even fighting in defense.

On the other hand, all other factors at least equally important for successfully carrying out war were treated carelessly. Consequently, little attention was paid to studying tactics, improving weaponry or training soldiers in other skills than bayonet fencing. On the broader scale the same cause entailed disrespecting logistics, lack of interest in soldiers' physical condition or influence of their fatigue on their performance during fighting. The same factor caused putting inexperienced young officers into commanding posts since they, freshly brainwashed in military schools exhibited the highest fighting spirit, while their more experienced colleagues, if not morons, already managed to notice that fighting spirit is good but is not the only thing of importance.

The aversion to any sorts of retreat, even if it was the only method to accomplish tactical or operational objectives lead to an increase in losses without achieving any success. What is more, almost equally damaging were the results of avoiding fighting in defense since the field fortifications built by Japanese soldiers were flimsy and therefore did not help much in bleeding an aggressive and better armed enemy to say nothing of stopping him. It was something diametrically opposed to the Soviet art of war in which fighting in defense and step-by-step bleeding the enemy was a cornerstone.

### 3.3. Egomania – individual performance in the focus

It is a common belief, both in Japan and in the rest of the world that the Japanese are highly social and cooperative. In reality the Imperial Japanese Army (and Imperial Japanese Navy to some extent too) was a lair of pathological egotism at all levels. In fact, the holy book and catechism of the Japanese army – *Hagakure* – exhibits equally conspicuously complete disrespect towards human life, and obsession with individual “honor”.

As I have written elsewhere (Stefański 2014: 104-105), the book is a manifesto of necrophilia, but it is as well a manifesto of irrational or even thoughtless spiritualism. It is nothing accidental since the author – Yamamoto Tsunetomo – criticized the 47 *rōnin* for their long and laborious preparations for revenge instead

of killing their master Asano Naganori's bane – Kira Yoshinaka – on the spot and without ponderings. In this respect Yamamoto resembled one of the characters – Widow Anna – from the comedy “Revenge”, written by the excellent 19<sup>th</sup> century Polish writer – Alexander Fredro. This character at a place declares with pride (the translation is mine with special focus on preserving the literary character of the Polish original):

I've spent for decision-making  
Of a minute little fraction,  
Since I seldom toil at thinking,  
But instead I'm swift in action

She sounds like a devote student of Yamamoto, but she is ridiculed in the comedy by rational and sharp-eyed Fredro wielding an equally sharp pen.

This thoughtless obsession with individual performance on the battlefield naturally entailed a crippling of cooperation at all levels: between individual soldiers, between officers of various ranks, and between services. No wonder the detachments were introduced into the battlefield piecemeal – simply nobody was thinking in terms of cooperation. The same is equally true about the lack of efficient support of the ground operations by Japanese aviation and interaction of the army with intelligence. The earlier simply did not know how to cooperate with the latter, and this inability cost dearly.

Last but not least, the same cause bore anarchy in the commanding process. Simply, commanders on various levels communicated with each other poorly, and this combined with the inability of commanders of the same level to cooperate for mutual benefit.

All that, contrary to impressive appearance, caused the Japanese army instead of being a perfectly tuned war machine, to be a rather amorphous jumble of fighting men and detachments able to win a confrontation with a weak and poorly equipped and organized enemy, like Chinese army of the 1930s and 40s but was defeated by a determined and better armed and organized enemy, like the Soviets in the Nomonhan incident or the Americans in the post-Midway part of the Pacific war. Why was it so?

### **3.4. Deeper mechanisms – *gekokujo* and the false image of *bushi* to be followed**

It may sound strange, but several centuries earlier, armies of the *sengoku daimyo* seldom suffered from similar flaws (those who suffered, soon were destroyed). The *daimyo* understood well the importance of logistics, and knew how to command

large armies in a coherent way. They were perfectly aware that expecting from their men efforts above their abilities and condition was counterproductive. They also knew how to use intelligence. If it was tactically desirable they did not hesitate to withdraw or to fight in defense etc. One thing they did not know was how to support ground operations using aviation, but I am quite convinced that had they had the latter, they would have known.

The natural question arises: how did it come about that several centuries later Japanese armed forces did not know what was known in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries? The descriptive answer seems to be rather simple and, to my view, is as follows. The Japanese leaders of post-Tokugawa Japan in the quest of the native roots for their policy, erroneously set the time machine not back to the 16<sup>th</sup> Century but to some time in the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> Century when the ways of waging war were different. In those times most important was individual performance on the battlefield, and the “armies”, a few exceptions notwithstanding, were not perfectly tuned war machines but amorphous jumbles of fighting men.

The natural question arises, what caused this erroneous setting of the time machine. Answering this question is not very simple. Nonetheless I will try to give an answer. And this answer, according to my view, is *gekokujō*. Roots of the modern *gekokujō*, although it may be considered just a deviation associated with the imperialism and militarism of the 1930s and 40s in fact reach much further into the past, and namely to the very foundation of the Meiji era when the officially highest posts of ministers in the cabinet were occupied by high rank aristocrats and former *daimyō* who participated in overthrowing the *bakufu*, but the actual power was in the hands of young radical aristocrats and young, low rank samurai from the western *hans*, mainly Chōshū and Satsuma who formally were ministers’ subordinates.

In the 1930s and 40s this phenomenon became more intense and its manifestations were manifold. The most pronounced of them were connected with the exceptional position of the Army in the structures of the Japanese state and with the internal structures of the Army itself (this sort of phenomena in the Navy seem to be less conspicuous, but not quite absent). The Army despite official subordination to the civilian authorities, i.e., to the Cabinet, was in practice completely independent, partially due to the principle of nominating the Minister of the Army and the Minister of the Navy exclusively from among generals and admirals in active service. This was one of the sources of the birth of the “tail wagging its dog”.

Within the armed forces, in turn, young and middle echelon officers in practice controlled their superiors: generals and admirals, using various methods of intimidation ranging from “waving” slogans about *bushidō* to assassination. Due to their “patriotism”, generating broad public support, those low and middle echelon officers enjoyed practical impunity, except for the cases of particularly striking violation of the official rules like in the case of the February 26 Incident of 1936.



Taking into account the above chain of influence, it were those patriotic officers whose influence was far above their formal position and who in practice mattered most in shaping the internal and international politics of Japan.

If one asks the question what does it have in common with such setting of the time machine, the answer will sound as follows: the definite majority of those officers were not people with broader world-views and at the same time they were highly susceptible to the images of heroes of old presented by Japanese epics. Those heroes were located rather in the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> Century than in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. The consequences were of such a kind that in the beginning of existence of the “modern”<sup>7</sup> Japanese army when its opponents were for one or another reason weak, this worked pretty well. But in the Khalkhin-gol battle the Kwantung Army faced a formidable opponent, not less determined and much better armed, equipped, and commanded. In the contest with such an opponent the greatness of the Kwantung Army crumbled like a house of cards. Fortunately the damage was limited to one division plus some additions and the self-restraint of the Red Army after achieving the principal objective prevented further losses.

It is worth stressing that Nomonhan was a contest of two diametrically opposite ideas of the army: the practically uncontrollable, willful and unruly Kwantung Army clashed with the Red Army fully controlled by civilian authorities (among others with the use of internal security service – NKVD). The fully state-controlled Red Army has shown its indisputable superiority over the independent and uncontrollable Kwantung Army<sup>8</sup>.

### **3.5. The board of inquiry names many drawbacks correctly but little is changed**

One should not blame authorities in the Japanese military for complete lack of interest for the reasons of the defeat. In fact a board of inquiry was arranged to visit the neighborhood of the battlefield (the battlefield itself was already in the hands of the Soviets so it was not accessible) and to learn as much as possible at the location. The conclusions drawn by the board were pretty reasonable, many factors leading to defeat were correctly identified, and the advices given could have prevented repeating such defeats in future.

Unfortunately (for Japan and its armed forces), the conclusions and advice were taken carelessly by military decision-makers who, completely ignoring the

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<sup>7</sup> Quotation marks are added to stress the fact that although from the point of the structure and the recruitment basis the Imperial Japanese Army formed in 1873 was modern, mentally however it became terribly obsolete, with all the consequences.

<sup>8</sup> This aspect is discussed by Goldman.

lesson following the Nomonhan painful and shameful defeat, continued to consider spiritualism – *seishinshugi* as the appropriate corner-stone of the Japanese military doctrine with all its gloomy consequences: lack of strategic thinking, neglectful approach to such “details” as cooperation at various levels or making use of the information acquired by the intelligence, disdaining logistics, disrespect to soldiers’ lives and their physical and mental condition, etc.

#### 4. “Nomonhanisms” during the Pacific War

Successes scored by the Imperial Japanese Navy and Imperial Japanese Army during the Pacific blitzkrieg, i.e., from December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941 to the end of April 1942 seemed to provide evidence in favor of those among Japanese military leaders who made little account of the Nomonhan defeat, treating it as an incidental lapse and not a symptom of a grave illness. In fact, within five months IJA managed to get control on British colonies in Burma and Malaya with Singapore, on Dutch Eastern India and on the US protectorate – Philippines, larger part of New Guinea and several archipelagos in the Western Pacific, to say nothing about seriously debilitating the US Pacific Fleet with the air raid on Pearl Harbor.

Soon, however, after the Americans and British returned to their senses, more and more frequently instead of subsequent triumphs, the Japanese armed forces began to score various defeats, showing that Nomonhan was no accident and that the reasons for the defeat there were still at work.

##### 4.1. Lack of strategic thinking – not so great victory at Pearl Harbor, and poor choices of further targets

The attack on the main Pacific base of the US Navy was presented by Japanese propaganda as an enormous triumph, and was greeted with cheers and flag waving by an overwhelming majority of the Japanese population. And in a way it was, but only at the tactical level. It is true that Japanese airplanes sank or damaged a majority of the battleships stationing at Pearl Harbor. This was a painful loss for the US Navy and a reason illustrating why the Japanese raid caused more than just a scratch. However...

It is often claimed that the most serious flaw of the Japanese air raid consisted in leaving the American carriers untouched, and Vice Admiral Nagumo Chūichi 南雲忠一中将 due to this very reason was criticized for not repeating the attack. It is still not clear why the carriers were absent from the base. Was it just chance or a consequence of a deliberate decision and secret order from the highest command who were aware of the plans of the Japanese attack, and wanted it to cause consid-

erable damage to infuriate the American public, at the same time keeping the most precious ships, i.e. the carriers, safe?<sup>9</sup> Who knows. Apart from everything else, the question remains, would the repeated raid have caught the carriers at Pearl Harbor?

There is, however another aspect of the whole affair. The heavy ships present at Pearl Harbor were important, but even without carriers, there were a number of targets that were not even grazed and apparently were not treated by the Japanese carrier aviation as important. Nothing happened to the Headquarters of the Pacific Fleet, to the nearby submarine base, to the oil tanks and, last but not least, to the navy shipyard. Had serious damage to those targets been inflicted, the Pacific Fleet very likely would have been left without fuel reserves, with a reduced (perhaps seriously) pack of submarines, with reduced Headquarters' personnel, and destroyed equipment indispensable for communication and intelligence operations, and without facilities for repairing ships' damage, which turned out to be crucial in the case of USS *Yorktown* after the battle of the Corral Sea.

That latter battle itself was the first operation of the Japanese armed forces since December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941 that was a failure. Its principal objective consisted in landing troops on the western shore of New Guinea for capturing Port Moresby. While crossing the Corral Sea, however, the Japanese task force was attacked by a group of American ships comprising two large fleet carriers: USS *Lexington* and USS *Yorktown*<sup>10</sup>. The Japanese support group too comprised two large fleet carriers, Pearl Harbor veterans: IJN *Shōkaku* and IJN *Zuikaku* and a small carrier IJN *Shōhō*. The battle between both groups was the first in the history of naval warfare in which blows were exchanged exclusively using carrier planes. The result was as follows. The Americans managed to sink *Shōhō* and seriously damage *Shōkaku*, while losing *Lexington*, plus one tanker (*Neosho*) and one destroyer (*Sims*), and having *Yorktown* gravely damaged. In other words at the tactical level it was roughly a draw in which the Japanese side slightly prevailed. On the strategic level, however, it was definitely an American victory, since the Japanese landing group was withdrawn without debarking troops on the shore of New Guinea. The decision was made out of the fear of suffering too large losses especially in terms of military equipment.

A month later another contest of both navies occurred near<sup>11</sup> Midway Island. American intelligence was again able to determine the target of the next move

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<sup>9</sup> Such a deliberation is not very likely, because rather few naval commanders in the largest navies realized the actual importance of carriers in the modern naval warfare, despite such successes as the Admiral Cunningham 1940 raid on Taranto or complete "victory" over Pearl Harbor of Vice-admiral Yarnell's task force in the 1932 naval maneuver.

<sup>10</sup> The fact that the American task force was awaiting the Japanese group in the area was the result of a perfect job done by the US intelligence that was able to predict the Japanese move partially thanks to breaking the Japanese secret code used by the IJN.

<sup>11</sup> This "near" is meant to show the smallness of the distance while compared with the size of the Pacific Ocean, while in the scale of, say, the range of visibility of each fleet to another those hundreds of miles meant quite far away.

of the Imperial Japanese Navy and to assemble two groups of carriers along with everything they had at hand: USS *Hornet* and USS *Enterprise* plus accompanying ships, forming Task Force 16, and the “miraculously” resurrected, within three days in Pearl Harbor’s navy shipyard (not even scratched during the Japanese raid of December 7<sup>th</sup> half a year earlier), USS *Yorktown* with her escort group forming Task Force 17. It is worth noticing that *Shōkaku* due to heavy damage inflicted on her during the battle of the Corral Sea, and *Zuikaku* due to considerable depletion of her air and technical crews during the same battle, did not participate in the battle of Midway thus reducing superiority in numbers of the Japanese strike force over the American group to 4:3 (the Japanese Navy’s command was convinced it would be 4:2 since a return of the seriously crippled *Yorktown* to the line so quickly was beyond their imagination).

The objective of the American task forces was clear: to protect Midway by inflicting as much damage as possible to the Japanese carrier group. This could hardly be said of the Japanese Strike force, which tossed back and forth between Midway and the American carrier force as the main target.

As is well known, through a combination of American virtues, Japanese error bearing flaws, and pure chance, the final victory was on the American side and the size of that victory exceeded the worst Japanese nightmares and the most optimistic American hopes: all four operational Japanese carriers were sunk, while the American side lost only one (*Yorktown*) of three carriers. In less than 24 hours the strategic situation in the Pacific Ocean had changed diametrically. Without the *Yorktown* in service, even if the American side had won, the victory would certainly have been less overwhelming, and without an untouched Pearl Harbor shipyard, the *Yorktown* would not have returned to the line that quickly.

#### **4.2. Deliberate waste of human resources vs. counterproductive extreme solicitude with respect to His Majesty’s precious toys**

In the initial – blitzkrieg stage of the Pacific War the Allies’ losses were comparable to those on the Japanese side and often higher. In a majority of the operations during the re-conquest of the Pacific archipelagos, however, human losses on the Japanese side were ca 5 to 10 times larger than those on the Allies’ side. The Americans, nonetheless, often considered those losses, much smaller than those on the Japanese side, to still be intolerably high, and in the process of the re-conquest often chose isolating Japanese garrisons on less strategically important islands instead of capturing them.

In the majority of cases, Japanese *nikudan* soldiers fought to the last man, rarely inflicting with their night *banzai* bayonet attacks essential losses on the enemy. There were a few exceptions, and among them the battle of Iwo Jima in march 1945,

in which the defense organized by the garrison's commander – General Kuribayashi Tadamichi, although without a chance for victory, taking into account the strategic situation, was nevertheless more than reasonably efficient from the point of view of obtaining the strategic objective of the moment, i.e., earning additional time for preparing defense of the home islands. Kuribayashi cautioned his subjects not to waste their lives in vain. As a consequence the ratio of the killed in action on the Japanese and American side in this particular battle was slightly lower than 3:1, which was unusually low for this stage of the war.

In contrast to the negligence of soldiers' lives one can show quite a few examples of excessive concern for military equipment particularly very expensive objects like ships. As the result of such concern, on quite few occasions Japanese forces withdrew without achieving or even resolutely trying to achieve the planned objective, allowing success to slip out of their hands. Something like this happened in the case of the abortive invasion of Port Moresby in May 1942 after the battle of the Corral Sea, which was neither won nor lost by the Japanese.

The ending of the battle off Samar on October 25<sup>th</sup>, 1944 may be considered an outstanding example of such an attitude<sup>12</sup>. The objective of the strongest of all participating in the operation, Shō ichigō, Center Force, under Vice Admiral Kurita Takeo 栗田健男中将, was to enter the Sibuyan Sea through the Palawan Strait, cross it, sneak through the San Bernardin Strait north of Samar and after destroying American naval forces, to attack American transports and ground forces that had freshly landed on the eastern shore of Leyte.

Some deviations from the plan appeared already during the passage of the group through the Palawan Strait where it was attacked by American submarines. Those claimed two heavy cruisers: Kurita's flagship IJN *Atago* (sank by USS *Darter*) and IJN *Maya* (sank by USS *Dace*), and forced the third, damaged, sister ship IJN *Takao* to withdraw. After entering the Sibuyan Sea Kurita's group was attacked by American carrier airplanes that inflicted some damage on the new flagship, the super battleship IJN *Yamato* and sank her sister ship IJN *Musashi*.

Kurita's maneuver suggesting retreat after scoring some losses and damage mislead Admiral William Halsey who turned his task force towards the group of Japanese carriers under the command of Vice Admiral Ozawa Jisaburō 小沢治三郎中将 to finish the job begun off Midway and continued during the battle of Marianas. That move seriously jeopardized the success of the whole American operation since Kurita's force turned back and headed towards San Bernardino Strait with the objective to attack the American fleet, to sink it and to do what it was supposed to do according to the plan.

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<sup>12</sup> That is, unless the last paragraph of this subsection contains true information about the actual reason of the decision about the retreat.

Due to Halsey's miscalculation, the most northern part of the close protection group was Rear Admiral Thomas L. Sprague's Task Group's 77.4. This Task Unit 77.4.3 (Taffy III) under Rear Admiral Clifton A. F. Sprague, composed of 3 destroyers, 4 escort destroyers and 6 escort carriers, whose planes did not have efficient anti-ship munitions, except for Mark 15 torpedoes, had to face Kurita's Center Force alone who, despite wounds suffered in the Palawan Straits and Sibuyan Sea, was still a formidable power. Without any prospects for help from friendly fleet, since the group of American battleships under Rear Admiral Jessie Olendorf who in the Surigao Strait defeated the large and strong Japanese Southern Force composed of heavy ships, commanded by Vice Admiral Nishimura Shōji 西村祥治中将, was left with too little armor piercing ammunition to efficiently fight Kurita's Center Force, Sprague's ships accepted the challenge (actually, they had little choice). Since they had little chance for saving their lives anyway they decided to sell them dearly.

The American unit got some support from Nature, as rainsqualls together with smoke screens helped to conceal their ships and made the job of Japanese artillerymen more difficult. Nonetheless the battle became one of the most moving examples of the triumph of brilliant command, combined with human courage and ingenuity in the case of enormous disparity of power, and contrary to all the fuss about *bushidō* and Japanese spiritual superiority, the virtues were demonstrated by the crews of the American ships seemingly doomed in the confrontation with the enemy enjoying immeasurable superiority in terms of arms and armor. The American destroyers and destroyer escorts attacked with torpedoes and guns against the Japanese heavy cruisers from such a short distance that the latter could not reach them with their main caliber artillery, and managed to inflict mortal wounds on the IJN *Chōkai*. Two other heavy cruisers: IJN *Chikuma* and IJN *Suzuya* were sunk with torpedoes by Avengers starting from escort carriers wrapped in smoke screens by the destroyers.

The Japanese losses were painful but the Americans lost carrier escorts USS *St. Lo* and USS *Gambier Bay*, destroyers: USS *Hoel* and USS *Johnson*, and destroyer escort USS *Samuel B. Roberts* (who managed to finish IJN *Chōkai* before), with remaining ships seriously damaged. Kurita's group was still powerful comprising four battleships: IJN *Yamato* (damaged lightly during a day earlier battle of the Sibuyan Sea to be frank), IJN *Nagato*, IJN *Kongō* and IJN *Haruna* accompanied by operational heavy cruisers IJN *Haguro*, IJN *Kumano* and IJN *Tone* plus 2 light cruisers and 11 destroyers, and still having overwhelming superiority over Sprague's heavily crippled unit. Instead of improving tactics of fighting the American light ships and attacking American forces at Leyte, however, Kurita decided to withdraw, this way making all previous, rather heavy losses useless.

This way, paradoxically, it was Kurita's group that had shown that material prevalence does not guarantee victory above a weaker but determined enemy, especially in the case of one with the determination to fight.

On the other hand, Kurita's own confession as an old man may suggest something other than excessive cautiousness (that could be called cowardice by some) as another reason for his decision to retreat. According to this confession, being convinced that the war was lost anyway, and expecting the prompt arrival of the American main forces, he wanted to avoid any further bloodshed of his subordinates (Thomas 2004: 26). If so, and this is quite likely as he forbade shooting at the sinking American carrier escorts to spare lives of American sailors, Kurita would have been an exception among Japanese commanders, not being infected by the absolute disrespect for human life, which followed from the spirit of necrophilic "Hagakure"-based *bushidō*, thus deserving not disdain but admiration for his true courage.

### 4.3. Unjustified optimism – taking wishes for reality

There are numerous examples of unjustified optimism in the thinking of the Japanese Army and Navy commands. In principle, the decision to attack Pearl Harbor was a child of some reckless thinking according to the saying: "things will turn out well". In fact the risk things would not turn out well in the case of directly attacking the United States was probably higher than the risk they would attack Japan for the sake of protecting British and Dutch interests in East Asia.

The Kwantung Army's reaction on the Soviet invasion of Manchuria on August 9<sup>th</sup>, 1945 provides one of the most outstanding examples of this phenomenon. Before discussing this subject, however, I will devote some time to comment on a few aspects of the whole operation to counter some naive opinions on it.

First, the Red Army did not invade Manchuria in response to American nuclear bombs, since preparing such a grandiose operation required lots of time – three months, according to the Soviet leaders' estimate. Second, the Soviet prepared the invasion not against the Western Allies but in response to their request to help ending the war in the East after defeating Germany in Europe<sup>13</sup>. Third, in breaking the nonaggression treaty signed with Japan, they were not more treacherous than the Japanese would have been, had they not been afraid of the Red Army's might they had experienced in the battle of Nomonhan. In fact, two months after signing the treaty, immediately after the Germans invaded the USSR, the Kwantung Army was ordered to prepare plans for invading the Soviet Union too, and the operation was dubbed "Kantokuen", which is an abbreviation of the full name: "Kantō-gun tokushu enshū" – "Special maneuvers of the Kwantung Army". The reason it was not put to work had little to do with the treaty and a lot with the unpleasant

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<sup>13</sup> They promised to enter the war in the East three months after ending the war in Europe.

experience of the confrontation with the Red Army. The decision circles of Japan just waited for the ripening<sup>14</sup> of the situation but this never happened.

The Soviet announcement, on the fourth anniversary of signing the treaty, that it had no intention to extend it, was a clear sign that the Soviet Union might enter the war against Japan. An overwhelming majority of Japanese decision-makers, both military and civilian, however, were convinced that it would not happen before spring 1946. Isolated opinions that the invasion might happen in August or September 1945 were practically ignored.

Meanwhile the Soviets, according to the promise given to the Allies in Potsdam, began building-up their forces next to the Soviet-Manchurian border. This required transporting huge numbers of soldiers, military technique and enormous amounts of war materials<sup>15</sup>. Their mastery in *maskirovka* paid off since the Japanese intelligence, if even detecting some activity across the border, failed completely to determine the scale of that activity.

The Soviet forces, counting altogether more than 1.5 million soldiers, over 27 thousand guns and mortars, over a thousand multiple rocket launchers, about 5.5 thousand tanks and self-propelled guns, and more than 3.5 thousand aircrafts, had been arranged into three fronts: the Trans-Baikal Front designed to attack Manchuria from the west and from the north, the 1<sup>st</sup> Far East Front, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Far East Front were to strike from the east.

Material and numerical superiority on the side of the Red Army was enormous, and yet one has to take into account that it was the Japanese side that was in defense and the terrain was extremely difficult especially for the armor. In consequence the Soviet superiority could have been at least to some degree neutralized, provided the Kwantung Army's Command had prepared a defense plan. Nothing like that happened, and the Soviets succeeded in surprising the Japanese defenders who tried to organize a late resistance to the fierce offensive. In a way the Soviet offensive operation in Manchuria, dubbed August Storm by David Glantz, the renowned expert on Soviet military activities during World War II, was a repetition of Zhukov's general offensive ending the battle of Nomonhan on a much larger scale (Glantz 2003). Japanese troops were encircled and annihilated. The Soviets achieved a majority of objectives within ten days – twenty days ahead of their plan. Despite tough resistance from the Japanese side in some isolated locations, Soviet human losses slightly exceeded 10 thousand men, while compared

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<sup>14</sup> The ripening was supposed to consist in such weakening of the Soviet Union by Germany that the earlier would be forced to wind down its Far East defenses.

<sup>15</sup> When one recalls the data concerning the amount of munitions, fuels, lubricants and food piled-up by the Soviets before their August 20<sup>th</sup>, 1939 general offensive in the surrounding of Nomonhan, in the case of the general invasion of Manchuria one must speak of hundreds of thousands of tons at least due to the much larger scale of the operation.



with the Japanese losses, being seven times larger, can be considered to be a very low price paid for a very spectacular victory.

Very mild Soviet losses followed first of all from the absolutely unjustified optimism of the Kwantung Army's command, who did not consider a Soviet attack in 1945 to be possible, and did not make any serious preparations for defense, which resulted in a generally weak resistance after the invasion. Another cause for the Soviet success lied in the fact that the Japanese abomination to surrender was strongly reduced in comparison to earlier battles fought by the Imperial Japanese Army, and the Red Army captured about 600 thousand Japanese soldiers taking them as POWs used later as labor force in Siberian Gulags<sup>16</sup>. As such, ironically, *hokushinron* – “the conception of the march towards the north” was tested in a way its advocates never considered.

## 5. Conclusions

The Japanese Army, for nearly 70 years since its establishment emerged victorious from all clashes of arms with various opponents. Such a situation is dangerous, since it gives a deceptive feeling of enormous strength if not omnipotence. The Japanese soon began to attribute their incessant victories to their own spiritual superiority. In this way, spiritualism became the backbone of Japanese military doctrine.

After closer inspection, however, it should have been clear to any unbiased researcher that at least an equally important role was played by various weaknesses of their opponents. Such a reflection, however, did not appear and if it occasionally happened, it was completely ignored by the overwhelming majority.

The battle of Khalkhin-gol – the Nomonhan incident should have opened the eyes of Japanese military leaders regarding the frailness of the foundation of Japanese military doctrine since it proved that in confrontation with materially stronger and a reasonably determined opponent the fighting spirit itself was by far not sufficient. The board of inquiry created for the sake of investigating the reasons behind the Nomonhan defeat correctly named the majority of factors responsible for it, and appealed for an essential increase in the amount of equipment and firepower for the Japanese troops. This, however, was mostly ignored by the decision makers in the Army, who continued to consider *seishinshugi* as the corner-stone of the military doctrine. Apparently they treated the defeat as a minor incident and not an indication of any serious flaws in the Army's material and organiza-

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<sup>16</sup> This is considered illegal, as being against the conditions of surrender. Nonetheless Japanese authorities never tried to speak up for them buying that way Soviet acceptance for preserving *kokutai* – the integrity and foundations of the political system of Japan. For the Soviet Union, in turn, who suffered enormous human losses during the war, each pair of hands was too precious to give up such an opportunity.

tional foundation. In consequence, three years later, after half a year-long series of triumphs, the Japanese armed forces began to score defeat after defeat with the well-known final result.

The reasons for ignoring the lesson of Nomonhan may seem to be bizarre but in my view they stemmed from the rampant *gekokujo*. The Japanese armed forces in the 1930s and 40s were “terrorized” by low and middle echelon officers, who had their “empty kerosene can”<sup>17</sup> – *seishinshugi* and *bushido* based on “Hagakure” with which they intimidated their superiors, forcing them to make decisions fitting their will, and if the superiors stubbornly resisted, assassination was pretty often put into work.

On the other hand, due to their positions and duties those officers were not concerned with such “boring” and “trivial” aspects of warfare like logistics or strategy, focusing their minds on the showy aspects like demonstrating fighting spirit, individual performance in the battle etc., and one such minor “slip” like the Nomonhan defeat was not sufficient to change their world view.

In fact, the deep roots of Japan’s defeat went as far back as the middle and late Meiji period, when *gekokujo* began to spring up<sup>18</sup> and the illusion of the invincibility of the Japanese Army and Navy began to substitute sober analysis of their own abilities and their proportion to the considered strategic objectives. Had the Japanese armed forces taken a serious beating from an enemy in the early stage of their expansion, they could have sobered up in time to avoid making insane decisions based on illusions and wishful thinking, that turned out to be extremely costly not only to its prey but also to Japan itself.

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<sup>17</sup> Jane Goodall – a renowned researcher of the primates has observed that one young male chimpanzee she named Mike, discovered “drums of power” in the form of empty kerosene cans. He was the only member of the pack who was not afraid of the loud roaring sound emitted by the cans when rolled while other members perceived it as dreadful. Therefore Mike, by rolling a can, could intimidate even bigger and stronger males and soon became “the boss”. See Goodall, Jane, *Mike the Alpha Male*, [http://www.chimpanzoo.org/african\\_notecards/chapter\\_21.html](http://www.chimpanzoo.org/african_notecards/chapter_21.html).

<sup>18</sup> The system in which formal superiors (e.g. ministers) were animated and controlled by their should be subordinates, and it was the case already in the Meiji Era, was itself a mild form of *gekokujo*.

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## クリストフ・ステファニスキ

### 論文概要

#### ノモンハンの学ばれなかった教訓

1939年5月11日から9月15日にかけて、関東軍と赤軍との衝突の中でも最も大規模な、いわゆるノモンハン事件／戦争がハルハ河周辺で発生した。戦場は日本-満州国の主張する境界線と、ソヴィエト-モンゴルの主張する満州国をモンゴル人民共和国から隔てることになる境界線との間の、国境不明確な千平方キロメートルの帯であった。紛争は、両者数十の騎兵隊員による小規模な戦闘から、いくつかの師団／軍隊による大規模な軍事行動にまで拡大した。

甚大な被害があったにも関わらず、ソヴィエトは日本軍を紛争地域から追い出し優勢を勝ち得、問題の境界線は停戦協定によって確定された。実際、これは1873年の創成以来、大日本帝国陸軍が味わった最初の重大な挫折であり、関東軍によって犯された戦中の罪業リストはかなりの長さ及びぶ。これは、軍の基本方針を見直す機会になりえたのだが、実際はある師団の編成を修正することと赤軍を危険性のある敵とみなすよう慎重になったこと以外は、ほとんど変化が見られず、精神主義がなおも軍の基本方針の拠り所とされた。

その結果、南に拡大の進路を向け数々の著しい成功を収めたのち、大日本帝国陸軍と大日本帝国海軍は、まさにハルハ河での戦闘時と同様の失敗によって、敗北に次ぐ敗北を喫することになり、最終的な敗戦と占領に至ったのである。

**キーワード:** ノンハン事件、関東軍、赤軍、精神主義、満州国、モンゴル人民共和国、大日本帝国陸、大日本帝国海軍

**Keywords:** Nomonhan Incident, Kwantung Army, Red Army, spiritualism, Manchukuo, Mongolian People's Republic, Imperial Japanese Army, Imperial Japanese Navy