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*A critical review of prewar Japanese military intelligence operations in Manchuria.*

## ANTI-SOVIET OPERATIONS OF KWANTUNG ARMY INTELLIGENCE, 1931-39<sup>1</sup>

Richard G. Brown

Japanese military intelligence operations against the Soviet Union in the Far East became of prime importance after Japan took over Manchuria in 1932. Before that she had no great need for intelligence on the Soviet forces in the Far East, inasmuch as she had no common international boundary with the U.S.S.R. on the continent, the Chinese being in control of most of Manchuria. At the time of the Manchurian incident the Japanese nevertheless had potentially strong operational intelligence assets in numerous inhabitants of the Korean and Chinese border areas who were able to cross into Soviet territory with relative ease so long as Soviet security remained generally lax. In addition, there were numerous anti-Communist White Russians in northern Manchuria willing and able to engage in intelligence activities for the Japanese.

The intelligence operations of the principal Japanese agency in Manchuria, the Kwantung Army, included propaganda, sabotage, counterintelligence, and what was to become a major collection effort on the Soviet army and the geography of the area. The means it employed included the dispatch of secret agents into Soviet territory, the interception of radio communications, the interrogation of Soviet deserters and defectors, and the establishment of border observation units.

<sup>1</sup>This article is based on historical data compiled, with the assistance of personnel of the Japanese Kwantung Army, by the Military History Section of Headquarters, Army Forces Far East, and distributed by the Office of Military History, Department of the Army. The principal source is Volume X of the Series *Japanese Special Studies on Manchuria*, issued in June 1955 under the title "Japanese Intelligence Planning Against the USSR."

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From the first the Kwantung Army and the Army General Staff in Tokyo were alert for indications of Soviet reaction to the Manchurian incident, and after Kwantung Army elements moved into the Soviet sphere of influence the surveillance of Soviet actions in the Far East, particularly any military movements, was intensified. Yet Japanese military headquarters felt that the Soviet Union had no intention of intervening in the situation, and so devoted its attention not to immediate countermeasures but to consolidating the Japanese position in Manchuria and developing an extensive intelligence network as Kwantung Army units advanced toward the Soviet border. This intelligence effort was intensified as Soviet border defenses improved: aerial photography during the summer of 1933 revealed extensive fortifications designed to check Japanese military operations against Soviet territory.

#### *Agent Infiltration*

The principal field intelligence units under the Intelligence Section of the Kwantung Army staff were eight Army Special Services Agencies. Of these it was the unit in Harbin which played the major role in the Manchurian operations. The Harbin ASSA used White Russians for espionage missions and these were the best of the agents available. The border area ASSA's occasionally used White Russians, but relied mainly on local Chinese and Koreans. These agents were infiltrated into Soviet territory to carry out espionage. Occasional deserters from the Soviet army were also exploited for information.

The Soviets commenced to bolster border security during 1935. They increased the number of border garrison units, ordered the evacuation of border area inhabitants, and instituted constant patrolling. A Soviet counterespionage network in Manchurian territory, especially in the border area, regularly observed and reported on the movements of Japanese agents. The White Russians, while more reliable and competent than other agents, being most of them ardent anti-Communists, were more easily detected. Many were shot in attempting to cross the border, and the majority did not return, thanks to effective Soviet security. A deadlock in transborder operations resulted.

The standstill in intelligence operations was quite embarrassing to the Kwantung Army's headquarters Intelligence Section, which therefore came increasingly to take over the active direction of the intelligence services in Manchuria, particularly of the ASSA units. Efforts were made to improve techniques of agent infiltration, to take more pains in forging credentials, to pay more attention to dress, baggage, and language, to give better training for missions and reporting. Attention was also given to other means of intelligence collection—communications, publications, and telescopic observation.

#### *Communications Intercepts*

Soviet communications in the Far East relied mainly on wireless; the wire network had failed to keep pace with the mushrooming military and industrial expansion. A very considerable number of Soviet message circuits were thus vulnerable to interception. In order to learn the techniques for breaking codes, the General Staff in Tokyo had sent several technical officers to Poland in 1933 and 1934; the Polish Army General Staff's cryptanalytic work was considered by the Japanese to be among the best in the world. When the first contingent of these officers returned from Poland in 1935, a small unit for studies on radio interception and the breaking of Soviet codes was formed and assigned to the Kwantung Army. Eventually this unit was expanded and became known as the Communication Intelligence Group, operating directly under the supervision of the Kwantung Army intelligence service.

The interception and analysis of Soviet plain-text messages was not undertaken until 1936, when the Soviet Union began to construct the Baikal-Amur Magistral to supplement the Trans-Siberian Railroad. The BAM line was a matter of grave concern to the Japanese General Staff, but the Kwantung Army Intelligence Section had no means of observing the progress of construction on it. The Operations Section therefore took the initiative and asked the Japanese-controlled South Manchurian Railway Company to establish a branch of its Communications Research Department in Harbin. This branch was charged with intercepting plain-text wireless messages concerning construction on the BAM line and with



analysis of the intercepted data with respect to selected subjects. Although this installation supplied data to the intelligence network through the very active Harbin ASSA, the fact that it was conceived and supervised by the Operations Section became an irritant in this Section's relations with the Intelligence Section. The success of the Railway Company's unit led the intelligence service to supplement its code interceptions with clear text intercepts, which were thereafter forwarded on ticker tape to the Harbin ASSA for analysis by its Document Intelligence Division.

#### *Document Analysis*

The importance of available Soviet publications, primarily newspapers published in the Far East, had somewhat belatedly become apparent to the Japanese, and the few publication analysts originally assigned to the Harbin ASSA had been augmented and formed into the Document Intelligence Division. Its staff included a large number of White Russian intellectuals, as well as Japanese competent to interpret and analyze Soviet documents, publications and messages. Periodicals, handbills, newspapers, magazines, books, booklets, pamphlets, and even personal notebooks collected by the various intelligence agencies were sent to the Harbin ASSA for scrutiny. Later, when it became difficult to obtain documents, greater importance was attached to Soviet radio broadcasts, along with the intercepted clear-text wireless messages. But there were still documents obtained by agents, papers carried by the occasional defectors from Soviet territory, and in one instance a windfall of postal communications from a Soviet mail plane which made a forced landing in Manchuria in 1938.

#### *Border Observation*

In the early thirties the military units of the Kwantung Army manned posts for visual observation of Soviet territory; each front-line unit had a few lookout posts equipped with 24-power battery telescopes. After the difficulties in intelligence collection became acute in 1934, the intelligence service undertook to improve and expand this system as an intelligence activity. The observation posts were organized as "Soviet Territory Observation Teams" who were to keep the Soviet side of the border under surveillance day and night,

recording in detail the movement of even a single soldier, horse, or vehicle. The posts were each manned by approximately one squad. They used telescopes of various types ranging up to one of 150 power obtained from the Navy for night use. The front-line Army commands were ordered to make use of any suitable points in their respective sectors for this purpose, and to train and supervise the personnel to make the observations. Nevertheless, up until 1938 these teams were often composed of inferior personnel and occasionally even lacked telescopes. Some of their more important reports were on the arrival and departure of ships in Vladivostok harbor, as observed from posts at Wangchaoshan and Tumentzu, and on the arrival and departure of aircraft at Voroshilov, as seen by posts at Suifenho and Tungning.

#### *Achievements and Failures*

By mid-1939 the Kwantung Army's intelligence agencies had scored considerable progress in improving their operations. In 1935 the communications intelligence Research Unit had succeeded in breaking the simple codes used by the Soviet border forces, and constant study brought later successes against Soviet army codes of three and four letters. Although these codes were not commonly used for important messages, the Research Unit was nevertheless able to learn the organization and disposition of some border garrisons and the location and movements of some air units. It also did traffic analysis, compiling statistics on the origin and volume of Soviet radio messages.

The interception and study of plain-text messages by the South Manchurian Railway's Communications Research Department yielded considerable information about the progress of construction on the BAM line. The Kwantung Army's Research Unit was also able to obtain from plain-text intercepts some valuable indications about particular military situations in Asiatic Russia. Analyzing this data, the Document Intelligence Branch of Kwantung Army intelligence was able to reach conclusions about the disposition of units, changes in units, their commanders, their numerical designations, the arrival of new personnel, and their places of origin, as indicated by messages of safe arrival sent home. Messages in the

clear also supplied many fragmentary details about industrial and economic conditions in Asiatic Russia, and these often contributed to important findings.

The piecemeal data compiled by the Harbin Document Intelligence Division was on many occasions helpful to higher echelons in making estimates of the enemy's strength and disposition. A compilation of file cards on approximately 4,000 Soviet officers in the Far East, for example, contributed significantly to ascertaining the order of battle for Soviet army forces in eastern Asia. An unusual operation undertaken by the Division was the examination of postal matter in the Soviet mail plane which made a forced landing in Manchuria in 1938. The mail had to be secretly opened, sorted, copied, and resealed while diplomatic negotiations for the return of the airplane and its crew were being carried on. The analysis of the material was completed within a month.

The observation teams engaged in telescopic surveillance of Soviet territory produced some information but on the whole were not notably successful. They provided details on Soviet fortification improvements in parts of the border zone and on new military roads, barracks, and warehouses behind the fortifications, and they compiled statistical data on vehicle operations supporting the fortified zone. Efforts of the ASSA's to penetrate Soviet territory with spies were nearly all failures, but their interrogation of fugitives from Soviet territory often uncovered important information.

A test of the Kwantung Army's intelligence services was afforded in 1939 by the development of the Nomonhan incident, which began in May as a series of clashes between Soviet and Japanese forces guarding the border between Outer Mongolia and Manchuria. By June it had become a major engagement of divisional magnitude and in August a failure for the Japanese. This operation disclosed several serious defects of organization and technique in Kwantung Army intelligence, in spite of its significant improvement since 1931. In general, it showed itself still not sufficiently modernized and systematized to be effective. It also showed marked differences of system and procedure among its several components.

*Deficiencies at Nomonhan*

The chief defects of the Kwantung Army's headquarters Intelligence Section arose from its having assumed over a period of years complete control of all the ASSA's. Its own functioning had consequently become extremely complex and its real aims were often lost from sight. Properly a policy planning staff, the Section had been transformed into an operating agency, and the detail arising from its domination of the ASSA's constantly obstructed it. As the discharge of its normal responsibilities became careless under these stresses the headquarters Operations Section lost confidence in it and tended to make its own estimates, arbitrary and independent, drawn from scanty information and often from untested sources. The Intelligence Section was unable to halt this trend, and it became more pronounced with the passage of time.

This headquarters involvement with the ASSA's was aggravated by an organizational weakness in the coordination of these units which prevented them from being utilized systematically. The ASSA's had failed to systematize liaison and cooperation among themselves. The Harbin ASSA, which had the greatest experience and capacity in Soviet intelligence and a staff more comprehensive and diversified than any of the others, was kept on an equal footing with the other seven, so that the benefit of its knowledge and expert guidance was not imparted to them. With all eight operating independently under the direct control of the Intelligence Section, the administrative burden became too great during the Nomonhan incident.

A serious procedural defect in the handling of information was illustrated by an incident which produced a minor crisis in relations between the Intelligence and Operations Sections. The Harbin ASSA had obtained through a contact in the office of the Soviet consul general there a file purporting to be extracts from message traffic between Moscow and Khabarovsk. Initially this correspondence seemed authentic and important, but developments after the outbreak of the Nomonhan incident convinced the Intelligence Section that it was false and deceptive. The Operations Section, however, which had obtained a copy of it from the Harbin ASSA,

assumed that it had been acquired by interception and decipherment, and reproduced it under highest security classification. The Intelligence Section failed to report the deceptive nature of this correspondence to the Operations Section, which therefore tended to be misled by it in some phases of the Nomonhan operations.

It was not until the last stages of this engagement, as the Kwantung Army was concentrating its strength for an attack, that the communications intelligence Research Unit achieved some moderate success in learning the disposition of Soviet and Mongolian troops in the Far East; and even this limited accomplishment was made from the vantage point of Changchun—almost 500 miles from the scene of battle. The Kwantung Army's inadequacies in the communications intelligence field were strikingly apparent in its failure to have a signal detail in the front-line areas for the collection of battlefield information transmitted by wireless in either code or plain text, for the Soviet army often transmitted in clear text in situations demanding speed, and the increase in the number of coded communications for combat purposes would have facilitated the solution of the Soviet code. Communications facilities in the vastness of Outer Mongolia, the locale of this conflict, were so patently poor that a significant increase in radio traffic was to have been expected at the outbreak of hostilities. Japanese interception equipment was not developed sufficiently, however, nor were operators adequately trained to tap this source of intelligence. Another communications deficiency was the lack of a network for the exclusive use of the intelligence services; the secret missions that did get into Soviet territory were often therefore isolated.

A committee of officers from Kwantung Army headquarters and the General Staff in Tokyo later reviewed the Kwantung Army's performance during the Nomonhan incident and found a number of weaknesses. Chief among these was the fact that the operations staff officer had insufficient confidence in the estimates of the enemy situation made by the intelligence staff officer, and as result was inclined to form his own estimates on an inadequate intelligence foundation, sometimes even basing his decisions exclusively on the peace-

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time situation. Another was the preoccupation of intelligence officers with peacetime intelligence problems to such an extent that they failed to develop a war mobilization plan and thus were unable to exploit enemy activity during the Nomonhan hostilities. A third was the fact that improvements in techniques were insufficiently taken advantage of, and that there was a great need for systematizing operations and procedures. The committee recommended that major improvements be made in the peacetime operation of the intelligence services and in preparing them for wartime activity, so that intelligence estimates, as well as other intelligence products would enjoy the full confidence of operations officers and be accorded full weight.