

Nomonhan, 1939: The Red Army's Victory that Shaped World War II

by **Stuart D. Goldman**

(Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2012), 226 pages

Reviewed by Rotem Kowner

Professor of Japanese History and Culture, University of Haifa

The relations between Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan are among the most intriguing phenomena of War World II. It is evident that these two allies shared and coordinated very little of their war effort, so much so that a classic book on this theme referred to their partnership as the “Hollow Diplomatic Alliance.” It is tempting to contemplate what the fate of the war and the entire world would have been had this alliance been more significant. Imagine the course of the war had Japan joined Germany in its attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941 (Operation Barbarossa) and opened a second front in Siberia. It seems reasonable to suggest that in such a case, the Soviets could not have mobilized sufficient troops to defend their German front and would have collapsed altogether. Experts currently acknowledge that the Soviets’ margin of victory on that front was minimal. Moreover, had Japan taken on the Soviet Union in 1941, it would have probably revoked or postponed its attack on Pearl Harbor. Thus, the United States would have likely remained neutral in the conflict. These scenarios are obviously a matter of speculation but they leave little doubt that had they been realized, German would be spoken throughout modern-day Europe and the Continent would have been totally *Judenrein*.

Mercifully, the Japanese did not take on the Soviet Union, allowing it to concentrate its war effort on a single front. Instead, within less than half a year, they targeted the American naval base in Pearl Harbor and the Western colonies in Southeast Asia. Eventually, however, neither Germany nor Japan succeeded in vanquishing their foes and both lost the war at tremendous human cost. In hindsight, one wonders why Japan did not opt to take on the Soviet Union. Were its leaders blind to the promising prospects of a second front against their Russian archenemy? In *Nomonhan, 1939: The Red Army's Victory that Shaped World War II*, author Stewart Goldman comes up with an answer. The Japanese decision not to militarily engage the Soviet Union, he states, was the outcome of a fiasco that took place two years earlier during a decisive engagement against Soviet forces in a place called Nomonhan.

For those unfamiliar with the name, Nomonhan was a small, remote village in the vicinity of the river Khalkhyn Gol near the border between Mongolia and Northeast China (or Manchuria, known then as the puppet state of Manchukuo). Far from any railroad and without clear border posts, it became the scene of

frequent border skirmishes between the Japanese Imperial Army and the Soviet Red Army after the former's conquest of Manchuria in late 1931. However, the conflict that erupted there in May 1939 was far greater than any previous skirmish. Known in present-day Russia as the Battle of Khalkhyn Gol and in Japan as the Nomonhan Incident, it was, in fact, nothing if not a small-scale war. It all began as a minor incident in which a small Mongolian cavalry unit entered the disputed border area and encountered a Manchukuoan cavalry unit that quickly drove them back. Soon, however, the patrons of those units, the Soviets, on the one hand, and the Japanese, on the other, joined in and began to build up their forces.

By early June, the Red Army had dispatched a new Corps commander, the forty-two-year old Georgii Zhukov. Later considered one of the greatest generals of World War II, he was still fairly anonymous at the time, but his military genius would soon be revealed. Zhukov concentrated initially on logistical preparations but so did the Japanese. Far from the eyes of the media, the two belligerents amassed more than 100,000 soldiers, nearly a thousand armored vehicles, and a similar number of advanced airplanes. Large-scale fighting broke out in early July and continued until the last day of August. Although this limited war did not alter the border and even the deployment of the two forces to any substantial extent, the Soviets were its indisputable victors. By efficiently using a superior tank force, Zhukov was able to encircle the main Japanese force and deliver it a final blow. The Japanese surprise was complete. Not only did they endure 18,000 casualties (half of them fatalities) but the Soviet forces fought very differently from their Tsarist equivalents during the war against Japan in 1904–05.

The details of the war at Nomonhan were relatively unknown to Western historians in the past but this is no longer the case. In 1985, the book by American historian Alvin D. Coox (1924–1999), *Nomonhan: Japan against Russia, 1939*, offered a description of the conflict in extreme detail. This *tour de force* of military history was the culmination of more than three decades of meticulous research, based, among other things, on interviews with no less than 204 Japanese combatants, ranging from corporals to generals, who had survived the battle. Coox's 1276-page tome (originally published in two volumes) was exhaustive and quite instantly became the standard work on this theme. It was also translated into Japanese in 1989. This does not mean that it was faultless. In terms of both research and detail, its author was heavily inclined toward the Japanese side; he had little to say about the repercussions of the conflict, and especially about its impact on Soviet and Japanese decisions in the following two dramatic years. Finally, this work's size and thoroughness may leave students and lay readers feeling overwhelmed. Nonetheless, in the shadow of such a spectacular historiography, the first question that arises when one reads Goldman's new book concerns its novelty, to say nothing of its added value.

Clearly, the two books do not pretend to compare in scale and detail. On the other hand, *Nomonhan, 1939* trumps its forerunner in three ways. First, it was published twenty-seven years later, and thus can refer to not only to the entire corpus of literature on World War II that has been published since that time but also to the Soviet sources that only became accessible after the collapse of the USSR. Second, it offers a greater overview and analysis of the conflict's repercussions. And third, its slim scale and dearth of details on the fighting itself make it more accessible reading. It is on these points that *Nomonhan, 1939* should be judged.

All in all, the outcome is equivocal. Goldman, in my view, only partially succeeds in fulfilling his mission as chronicler of the events at Nomonhan. Consider the issue of sources: A short examination of the relatively brief bibliographical list offered by the author reveals that it does not include Soviet archival sources, the absence of which so marred Coox's book. In fact, Goldman uses only two published documents that appeared in Russia after 1991 and altogether refers to no more than twenty-one bibliographical items in any language that were published after 1985 (the year Coox's book was published). As such, the vast majority of Goldman's bibliography is dated, suggesting that at least in terms of basic research he did not do much beyond the work already done for his doctoral dissertation on this topic during the 1960s.

As for the greater historical scope Goldman offers, notably the argument that the decisive Soviet victory at Nomonhan was a major factor in shaping the global geopolitical alignments during World War II, I remain unconvinced. While Coox referred to the global impact of the war in a surprisingly brief manner (Vol. II, pp. 1078–79) and focused instead on its narrow military implications, much of what Goldman has to say about it remains unsubstantiated, if not speculative. It is obvious that a Japanese onslaught on the Soviet Union in June 1941 could have been a decisive blow to Stalin's effort to save the collapsing front in Europe, but was it the fiasco in Nomonhan that caused the Japanese to refrain from such a move? At least as appealing is the thesis that by September 1939, a takeover of the Western colonies in Southeast Asia first offered Japan far brighter prospects. After all, a day after the guns went silent in Nomonhan, Nazi Germany began its invasion of Poland, and two days later Britain and France declared war on Germany. Soon after, the colonial powers and rulers of Southeast Asia were either vanquished (France and the Netherlands), under siege (Britain), or remained isolationist (the United States).

It is, therefore, difficult to assess which event—the war at Nomonhan or the outbreak of the war in Europe—was more crucial for Japanese decision makers. Their final decision for a southern advance—an attack in Southeast Asia and a head-on collision with the United States Navy—rather than for a northern

advance—an attack on the Soviet Union in Siberia—was not instantaneous and was not based on a single factor. During the two and a half years before it was finally executed, it depended not only on external events (e.g., an American embargo on oil that could be obtained easily in Southeast Asia; Hitler's racism and his secrecy regarding Operation Barbarossa; and the paucity of heavy tanks with which to confront the Soviet armor) but also on internal politics, especially the inter-service rivalry and power struggle between the army and the navy.

Regrettably, Goldman does not provide new sources or even refer to old ones to shed light on the Japanese choice and prove his hypothesis. Similarly puzzling is his assertion that the German–Soviet Non-aggression Pact (“The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact”) on August 23, 1939, which coincided with the last stages of the fighting at Nomonhan “assured Hitler he would have to fight Britain, France, *and* Russia, so he felt safe in attacking Poland” (p. 3). These circumstantial relations between the fighting at Nomonhan and the outbreak of World War II deserve further corroboration—certainly more than the few obscure secondary sources cited by Goldman. Hence, one remains skeptical regarding whether the fighting at Nomonhan shortly before the end of the conflict played such an important role in Stalin's willingness to sign the pact and regarding the extent to which the conclusion of the pact played a role in Hitler's decision to attack Poland. It seems no less plausible that Stalin exploited the pact to signal to Tokyo not to expand the conflict since he was now able to mobilize more troops to East Asia. This speculation, too, requires verification.

Despite these shortcomings, Goldman should be commended for producing a well-written and well-balanced book. *Nomonhan, 1939* not only depicts this Russo–Japanese conflict in a lucid and vivid manner, but also offers a greater contextualization of it than has any previous account. For these merits, it is highly recommended reading for anyone who is interested in the prewar Russo–Japanese rivalry and its global impact, and most notably for students and scholars who are looking for a succinct and reliable account of the dramatic events in Nomonhan.