

The Last Battle of World War II

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Introduction

This article is devoted to the Soviet Armed Forces' role in defeating the Japanese Kwantung Army in August-September 1945. In my opinion, few people in the West know about the Manchurian military operation that ended World War II. I also took part in that operation; this is why I will combine historical facts with my own recollections.

This article analyzes the balance of forces on the Far Eastern theater of the war in August 1945 and the efficiency of the Red Army's Manchurian operation. The article features a discussion with some Western historians with regards to the need to involve the U.S.S.R. in the war against Japan. It also deals with hostilities on Chinese territory and Soviet-Allied cooperation. And, finally, the article offers some brief conclusions stemming from the results of World War II.

On September 2, 1945, Japan signed a full and unconditional surrender aboard the battleship USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay. This marked the end of World War II, which had lasted almost exactly six years and claimed more

than 50 million human lives. The Red Army helped end the war together with Allied forces.

The Red Army defeated the million-strong Kwantung Army, the enemy's largest Asia-Pacific military formation, which had 1,215 tanks, 6,640 artillery systems, 1,907 warplanes and 26 ships (*The Japan Times*, 15.08.1984.). The Japanese had set up long-term and multi-echelon reinforced concrete fortifications along the Soviet-Chinese border. Those fortifications were linked by underground tunnels and had enough food and water for several months of incessant fighting.

The Kwantung Army, which was commanded by General Otozo Yamada, comprised the First Front, the Third Front and the Seventeenth Front, as well as the detached Fourth Field Army. The Kwantung Army had 42 regular infantry divisions and seven cavalry divisions, as well as another 23 infantry brigades, two cavalry brigades and two tank brigades, one Kamikaze brigade, six detached regiments, the Second and Fifth Air Armies and the Sungari naval flotilla.

Moreover, General Yamada commanded the 250,000-strong army group of the Manchoukuo puppet state together with cavalry units of Prince Teh Wang (Tonlop), the Japanese-appointed ruler of Inner Mongolia.



Soviet Command signing a formal document of Japan's unconditional surrender aboard the battleship USS Missouri on September 2, 1945
(Photo RIA Novosti)

The Manchurian operation

Soviet forces conducted the Manchurian strategic offensive operation in the Far East from August 9 to September 2, 1945. It is forever emblazoned in the history of World War II as a brilliant example of military art and as one of the war's most outstanding episodes. That operation took place

USS Missouri on board of which a formal document of Japan's surrender was signed

(Photo RIA Novosti)

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along a 5,000-km front and to a depth of 200 to 800 km. Hostilities were conducted over rugged terrain that included deserts, plains, mountains, forests, marshes and the taiga.

The Red Army had to cross such great rivers as the Amur, the Argun and the Sungari. Its units also crossed the Greater Khingan mountain range (altitude, up to 1,500 meters above sea level). That theater of war had the

same area as Germany, Italy and Japan all together.

The Red Army killed about 84,000 enemy officers and men and took nearly 700,000 prisoner. Soviet losses totaled no more than 12,000 officers and men, or less than 1 per cent of all the troops involved. Neither the Wehrmacht, nor Great Britain and the United States had achieved similar successes in any theater of operation of World War II.

Different visions

True, some Western researchers, including modern U.S. historians E. Action, Paul Dull, Ronald Spector and political commentator of Japan's Kokubo military magazine O.Toshima, explained such outstanding successes by the complete demoralization of the Japanese Imperial Army after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and by its end as a formidable milita-



ry force. U.S. President Harry Truman said the same in 1947 (*Bulletin of History*, 1949. No. 143. p. 30).

Moreover, they claim that the Soviet Union's participation in the final stages of World War II was not necessary because the U.S. Armed Forces and those of their Allies could have coped with imperialist Japan on their own. So, how can one reply to these statements?

One could portray those statements as relics of the bipolar Cold War confrontation between the capitalist system and the socialist system. At that time, each side did its best to distort any achievements and to portray them in the worst manner in historical science and the mass media. We must now discard old-time ideological stereotypes and rely on authentic historical facts instead. This is the only possible method.

As is known, U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Sir Winston Spencer Churchill repeatedly asked Supreme Commander-in-Chief Joseph Stalin (during the 1943 Tehran conference and at the Yalta conference in 1945) to provide military help against Japan. The new U.S. President Harry Truman also asked Stalin about this at the 1945 Potsdam conference. The Soviet leader confirmed that the Red Army would attack the Kwantung Army exactly three months after the surrender of Nazi Germany. Indeed, Soviet forces crossed the line of contact with the Japanese Army in the early hours of August 9.

Military historians know why Washington insisted that the U.S.S.R. had to enter the war against Japan. In August 1945, the Japanese Armed Forces had almost 7,000,000 troops, 10,000 planes and 500 warships in Asia and the Pacific. The Allies had only 1,800,000 officers and men and 5,000 planes. If the Soviet Union had not joined the war, then the most combat-ready Kwantung Army would have concentrated its main elements on

Japanese territory against invading U.S. forces.

In that case, the war would have lasted for at least another year or two, rather than only one month. Consequently, U.S. casualties would have exceeded one million. (For more details, see Ronald Spector's book *Eagle Against the Sun* pp. 552-553; W. Churchill *The Second World War* Vol. 6. p. 333)

Pentagon leaders believed that the Japanese Emperor and the General Staff could leave for Manchuria and resist U.S. forces there with the help of bacteriological weapons. This, too, would have inflicted tremendous losses on the U.S. Truman's generals told him bluntly about this possibility. In his memorandum to President Truman, U.S. Secretary of War Henry Stimson wrote:

Once started in an actual invasion, we shall, in my opinion, have to go through with an even more bitter finish than in Germany. We shall

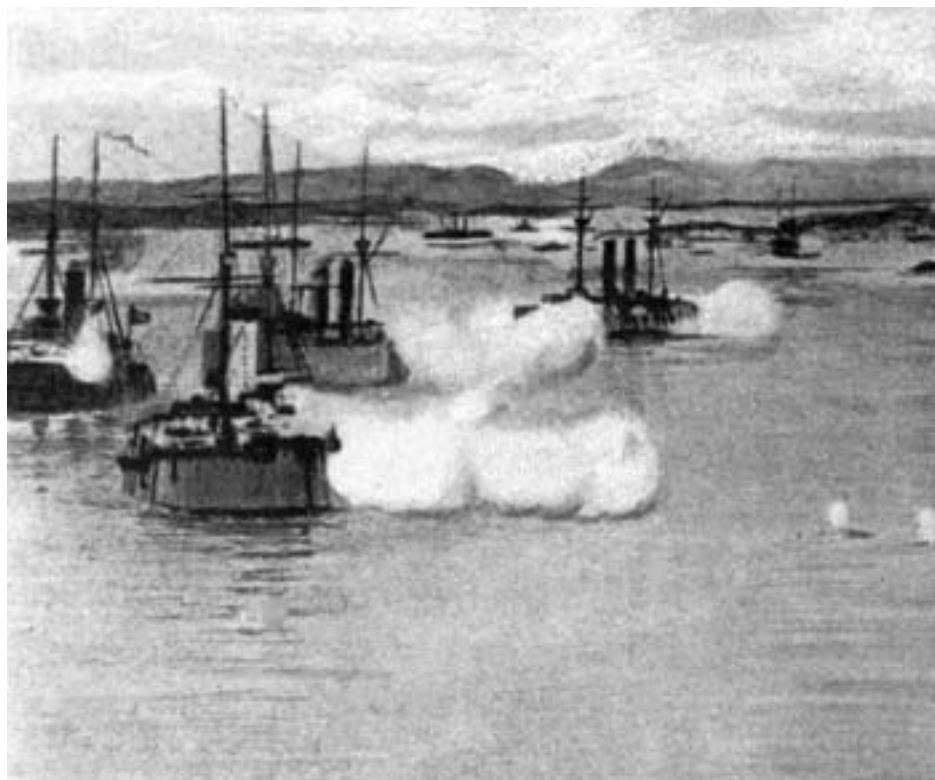
incur the losses incident to such a war and we shall have to leave the Japanese islands.

(J. Ehrman, *Grand Strategy. October 1944-August 1945.* Moscow 1985. pp. 271-272)

It is a fact of history that President Truman first did not think that it would be expedient to involve the U.S.S.R. in the war. Nevertheless, U.S. generals convinced him to change his mind. General Douglas MacArthur, who commanded Allied forces in the south-west Pacific, wrote to the President that U.S. forces should not land in Japan, until the Russian Army launched combat operations in Manchuria. (Vyacheslav Zimonin. *Final Victory of World War Two.* Moscow 2005. p. 24)

The Russian view

It should also be mentioned here that the Kremlin was also interested in defeating the Kwantung Army, liberating China's northeastern regions



(Manchuria) and North Korea. It also wanted to deprive Tokyo of its military and economic bases in Asia – a bridgehead for attacking the U.S.S.R. and Mongolia – and to help Chinese patriots eliminate the Japanese invaders from their homeland.

These goals were fueled by the Kremlin's desire to take revenge for Russia's ignominious defeat in the 1904-1905 war against Japan and to retrieve the lost South Sakhalin and the Kurile archipelago.

At the turn of the 20th century, Japan received all-out U.S., British and French support and attacked Russian forces in Manchuria, on China's Kwantung Peninsula and Korea. It sank its ships off Chemulpo seaport, seized Port Arthur, and defeated our troops at Shaho, Mukden and Liao-Yang. It demolished a Russian naval squadron in the Tsushima Strait, practically depriving Russia of its Navy and forced upon the country a humiliating peace under which Russia lost not only its influence on China and Korea, but also some of its traditional territories.

Obviously, the Russian defeat was 'helped' a good deal by the revolution of 1905, which undermined the country's relatively small economic potential and prevented it from continuing to defend its national interests in the Far East. Still we must face the facts: Soviet leaders had every reason to declare war on imperial Japan. The people always remembered the heroic feat of the Varyag cruiser, which went to the bottom in Chemulpo Bay rather than surrender to the Japanese, and the wonderful waltzes 'The Hills of Manchuria' and 'The Amur Waves', which were composed during that time and served as reminders of the event, and many other emotion-filled developments of the Russo-Japanese war.

My own experience

In August 1945, I served with the attacking Fifth Army of the First Far Eastern Front; and I recall vividly that almost every officer and soldier was bent on eradicating the disgrace of 1905.

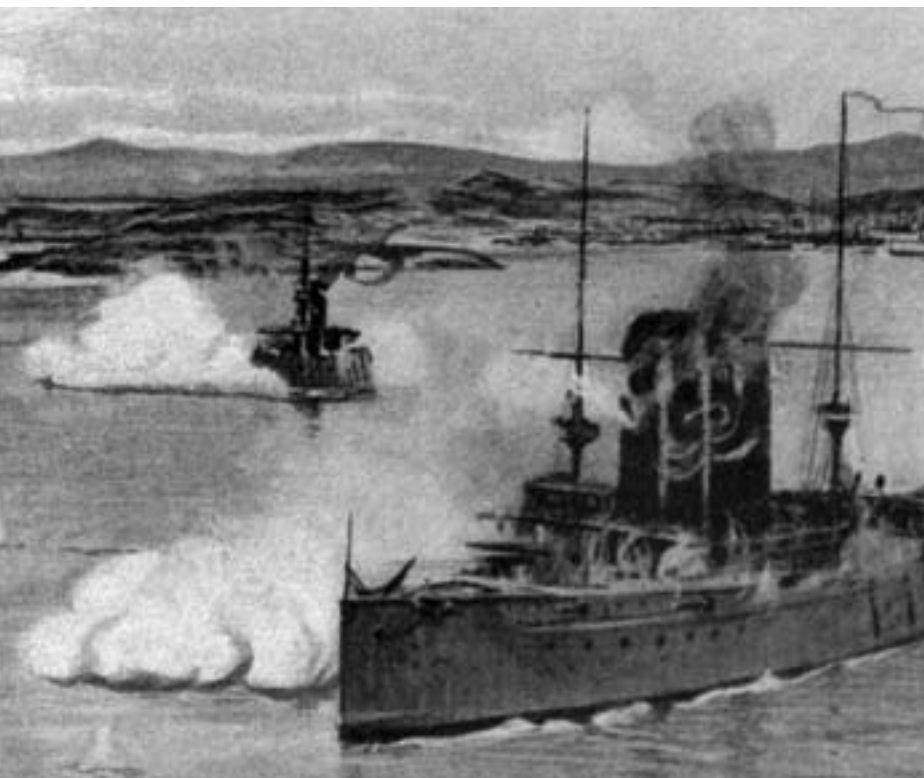
At that time, I was a major and senior assistant to the Fifth Army's intelligence officer. The Fifth Army, which helped seize Königsberg in April 1945, was subsequently transferred to the First Far Eastern Front. I also took part in preparing the Manchurian operation and trained advanced rifle battalions that were ordered to seize long-term Japanese fortifications in August 1945.

Seventeen powerful fortified districts had been built near Soviet and Mongolian borders by that time, including eight fortified districts on the Soviet Primorye (Maritime) Territory's border. They measured 800 km in length and 50-100 km in depth. I was ordered to supervise combat operations in the Mudanjiang sector. After that, I took part in assisting the Eighty-Fourth Cavalry Division that was surrounded northeast of Ninang. And I commanded a task force responsible for controlling Japanese POW camps later on.

I have never doubted the fact that the Kwantung Army had to be defeated, no matter what, and that the Soviet Far East must no longer face any military threats. World War II had to end as soon as possible; and the U.S.S.R. was supposed to get former Russian territories back.

It turns out that my personal opinions fully coincided with the Soviet political and military leadership's tasks and goals because the Kremlin tried hard to ensure the safety of Far Eastern borders. As all of us know, the Soviet Union fought a terrible Great Patriotic War against Nazi Germany from June 22, 1941 and until May 9, 1945.

As Japanese intentions were not absolutely clear, Moscow had to deploy up to forty full-strength army divisions and 29 air force divisions, as well as



**Russo-Japanese war (1904-1905);
Cruiser 'Varyag' and gunboat
'Koreets' during the Battle
of Chemulpo**

(Photo RIA Novosti)



A coastal defense ship of the Amur Flotilla launching an assault group

(Photo RIA Novosti)

six air-defense divisions, that were sorely needed on the Soviet-German Front, against the Kwantung Army. These units would have tipped the scales during the battles of Moscow, Stalingrad and Kursk. Unfortunately, the U.S.S.R. was forced to keep about 15 to 30 per cent of its military formations in the Far East because it feared a possible Japanese attack.

Some foreign researchers, including Ronald Spector (*Eagle Against the Sun*, N. Y. 1985) and Paul Dull (*A Battle History of the Imperial Japanese Navy*, Annapolis, 1979), claim that the Japanese had behaved rather quietly along the Chinese-Soviet border, and that they had no intention of attacking the U.S.S.R. But this is not so. The Kwantung Army's elements staged numerous armed provocations against

our soldiers, violated Soviet land and maritime borders.

Japanese planes violated Soviet air space on over 1,000 occasions between 1941 and 1945. Japan stopped our merchant ships 178 times, sinking 18 of them. The Soviet merchant marine's losses totaled 637 million rubles between 1941 and 1944.

The Atomic bombs

What effect did the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki produce on the Kwantung Army? The atomic bombs were dropped on August 6 and 9, respectively. Prominent Japanese historian Tokushiro Hattori, who also fought in that war, wrote that on August 10 the Emperor's General Headquarters ordered General Otozo Yamada, Commander of the Kwan-

tung Army, to 'concentrate the main effort against the Soviet Union and to rout the enemy' (Tokushiro Hattori. *The Japanese Army in Action in the Pacific*. Translated from English. Moscow, 1964. p. 80.)

Neither the Japanese Army, nor the people of Japan knew back then that a terrible force had been unleashed against them. Nor did they have any idea of a nuclear blast's casualty-producing factors, such as residual radiation and radioactive contamination of adjacent areas.

Most Japanese learned about the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki only after the war ended. Field Marshal Shunroku Hata, Commander of the Second General Army, wrote, that although Hiroshima had suffered

substantial damage, its scale did not exceed that in other cities after massive air raids. (S. Woodburn Kirby *War Against Japan*. Vol. 1-5. L. 1957-1970. Vol. 5. pp. 207-208,434.)

Incidentally, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had a similar opinion. He wrote that it would be wrong to believe that the atomic bomb had sealed the fate of Japan. (W. Churchill. *The Second World War*. Vol. 6. p. 552.)

On August 14, Tokyo decided to accept the July 26, 1945 Potsdam Declaration and to sign an act of unconditional surrender. The Japanese side notified the governments of the United States, the Soviet Union and Great Britain about this. However, the Kwantung Army was not ordered to stop resisting. But Emperor Hirohito's officers and men were forced to lay down their weapons and to raise the white flag only after August 20 because of the Soviet Army's rapid advance that was supported by the Air Force and the Navy.

Add to this all-out artillery bombardment and the landing of paratrooper units in the Japanese rear. The Japanese had no alternative because the

Kwantung Army simply disintegrated into isolated pockets. On August 17, Marshal Alexander Vasilevsky sent a tough-worded telegram to General Yamada, ordering him to stop resistance. Yamada accepted this ultimatum because of the Red Army's inexorable onslaught. On August 19, 1945, the Kwantung Army's high command ordered an unconditional surrender.

I myself saw that some fortified districts near Grodekovo and the Verbyud Mountain continued stubborn resistance even when they were fully encircled after September 2. It is common knowledge that some armed Japanese soldiers continued to hide in the South East Asian jungles even thirty and fifty years after Japan's defeat. Some of them committed seppuku. However, Japanese POWs told us that their military personnel did not commit mass suicide.

In Retrospective

It should be emphasized that the Manchurian strategic offensive operation highlighted the Red Army's enhanced potential by the end of the war, as

well as the outstanding military skills of its commanders. Suffice it to mention the rapid transfer of 400,000 troops, over 7,000 artillery pieces and 1,100 planes from the West to the East in 136,000 railroad carriages.

The Japanese intelligence service, which had many secret agents in the Far East, simply did not notice this transfer. Its blunder is quite explainable because many units that had fought Nazi Germany in 1941-1945 were ordered to return to their permanent bases. Their officers and men traveled openly through Siberia and the Soviet Far East. They sang songs and mixed with local residents during meetings at major railroad stations. But nobody saw other troop trains move quietly along sidetracks at night because their occupants were forbidden to go out.

To be frank, the number of such trains exceeded that of 'home-bound' trains. In short, the Soviet High Command deployed large forces capable of defeating the Kwantung Army.

The Manchurian strategic offensive was conducted by elements of the Trans-Baikal Front, the First and Second Far Eastern Fronts. The Mongolian Popular Revolutionary Army (Marshal Choibalsan commanding) also took part in the Soviet offensive, which was supported by the Soviet Navy's Pacific Fleet and the Amur flotilla.

Marshal of the Soviet Union Alexander Vasilevsky supervised the entire operation. Soviet and Mongolian forces had over 1,500,000 officers and men, more than 26,000 artillery systems and mortars, about 5,300 tanks and self-propelled guns, 5,200 planes and 93 cruisers, destroyers and submarines.

And here is one more aspect. The Soviet High Command planned to attack Japanese positions in the early hours of August 9. The Japanese Fifth Army's head of intelligence reported this to General Yamada. The latter wrote on his report that 'only a madman can dare start an offensive in the



Manchurian Operation (August 9 - September 2, 1945)
Surrender of the Kwantung Army (Photo Y. Khaldei, RIA Novosti)



**Manchurian Operation
(August 9 - September 2, 1945)
City folk in Harbin (North-Eastern
China) welcoming Soviet soldiers,
August 1945**

(Photo Y. Khaldei, RIA Novosti)

Maritime Territory in August, when the rain never ends, and all roads become unfit for the movement of troops'. (As this quote was taken from a classified Soviet strategic intelligence report, I cannot offer an official source – Gareev).

But the Soviet Union launched an offensive and won, albeit with tremendous effort. Tanks and artillery guns bogged down in mud. Cavalry units could barely move. Kilograms of mud stuck to soldiers' boots and horses' legs. However, we advanced faster than the Army did on the Soviet-German Front even in dry summer weather.

The Chinese peasants also helped us greatly. Nobody asked them to help but they did so of their own free will. The Japanese had driven them to such a state that they literally carried our armored vehicles, so that we could oust their sworn enemies as soon as possible.

Final Observations

I would like to say a few words about our cooperation with the Allies. Those in charge of operations had agreed on combat areas, routes of ad-

vance and occupation zones beforehand. The Big Three (Joseph Stalin, Clement Attlee and Harry Truman) agreed to this in advance at Potsdam. Soviet and U.S. headquarters officers took over later on.

Not all missions were accomplished without a hitch. For example, battalions of Colonel-General Ivan Chistyakov's Twenty-Fifth Army reached the outskirts of Seoul and waited there for two days before the Americans came and occupied their designated area. When elements of our Thirty-Ninth Army approached Port Arthur, two groups of Americans on fast boats attempted to land and seize a strategic bridgehead. Soviet soldiers fired their submachine guns into the air and drove off the 'uninvited guests'.

Nor did the Americans honor their commitment to jointly occupy the Island of Hokkaido, as the Big Three leaders had agreed. General Douglas MacArthur, whose word carried much weight with President Truman, resolutely opposed the idea of a Soviet presence in Japan. (D. MacArthur wrote about this in *Reminiscences*. N. Y. 1965. pp. 260-261). Consequently, Soviet troops never set foot on Japanese territory. On the

other hand, Moscow did not allow the Pentagon to deploy its military bases on the Kurile Islands. It was obvious that if the Americans had occupied those islands, it would have been extremely difficult to make them leave.

A study of the outcome of World War II and the events of its last few days suggests the following main conclusion. Leading countries can defeat a common evil only by concerted effort. German Nazism and Japanese militarism were a common evil in the middle of the twentieth century. International terrorism has now become our common enemy.

We must support each other and help our partners in every possible way. Without solidarity and all-round mutual assistance, we are doomed to failure. There is no place for time-serving considerations and petty selfish politics here. But we are invincible when we act hand in hand.

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