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

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to utilise the new venture into cultural diplomacy to bolster the ideals he held dear: the empire and rearmament.

Although many of the essays here refer to some degree to the role of public opinion, only one is dedicated specifically to the role of newspapers. David Brown, in assessing the press in the ‘age of Palmerston’, argues that it did more than simply create the atmosphere in which diplomacy took place, and that it sometimes functioned as a motive force. Palmerston himself believed that the support of public opinion, as evidenced by the press, gave his policy more weight abroad, while simultaneously utilising it to cement his own control of foreign policy within the government. He paid close attention to the foreign press, and diplomats to Britain paid close attention to the British press - leading him to conclude that ‘the fourth estate was integral to the formulation and execution of British foreign policy.’

Finally, the essay by Melanie Hall and Erik Goldstein might be regarded as the most ambitious in this collection. Rather than a case study of an individual, they have chosen to examine the cultural connections that led to an enduring diplomatic and military alliance between Britain and the United States. They argue that the movement from war, antipathy, and antagonism to friendship and partnership cannot be explained through the formal workings of diplomacy alone. The revolution that the ‘special relationship’ entailed was produced by a multitude of ‘unofficial diplomats’ who established the foundations of mutual understanding, wove networks of personal relationships, and who created a diplomatic substructure upon which governments then built. Their survey of the ‘cultivated people’ responsible for this creation, and of the organisations, the commemorations, and monuments for which they were responsible leads them to argue for what they call the ‘diplomatisation of culture’. And a very persuasive argument it is.

Although the essays in this collection do not cohere into any kind of new ‘thesis’ or argument for a different approach to the study of diplomacy, they are stimulating, imaginative, and should encourage others to follow some of the more lightly worn pathways of diplomatic history.

I would be remiss not to congratulate the publisher on the excellence of the production. The book has been beautifully rendered - with clear, crisp type on good paper, with footnotes rather than endnotes. The editing is immaculate: I did not come across a single typographical error. As more and more academic presses seem to make do with shoddy production values and non-existent editing, Ashgate stands out as an exception. While the price probably puts it beyond the reach of many, it is a valuable and worthwhile purchase for libraries.

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Soviet–Japanese relations were antagonistic during the 1930s and led to bloody military clashes on the Manchurian frontier at Lake Khasan (1938) and Nomohan,
or Khalkhin-Gol as it is known in Russian (May–September 1939). These battles are not unknown to historians, although in the study of the European origins of the Second World War, they do not draw much attention. In Nomonhan, Stuart Goldman wants to find an important ‘link’ (ix) between the conclusion of the Nazi–Soviet non-aggression pact in August 1939 and the battles between Soviet and Japanese military forces on the far western Manchurian frontier with Mongolia. The book is thus composed of two principal elements: a summary of Western–Soviet relations in the late 1930s and a narrative of the battle of Nomonhan or Khalkhin-Gol. The book is somewhat unusual in that it is based on a doctoral dissertation defended in 1970.

Goldman’s narrative of the fighting at Khalkhin-Gol is well done and interesting. There are good maps, which assist the reader in following battlefield deployments and developments. The local Red Army high command, headed by the future Marshal Georgii K. Zhukov, was tasked with protecting a distant point on Soviet Far Eastern frontiers. Zhukov enjoyed outstanding logistical support, deployed excellent artillery, plentiful armour, and good, hard-fighting infantry which he used to crush the Japanese forces arrayed against him. Casualties were heavy on both sides, many tens of thousands, but the Japanese forces were nearly annihilated. It was a decisive victory for the Red Army. Goldman’s battlefield narrative is based mostly on Japanese sources; Russian studies are little exploited.

The actual fighting at Khalkhin-Gol is only one aspect of the author’s work. The other is its ‘link’ with developments in Europe. According to the author, ‘the conflict … helped pave the way for Adolf Hitler’s invasion of Poland - and all that followed … and is directly linked to the German–Soviet Nonaggression Pact and the outbreak of the war in Europe’ (3). This is an interesting assertion, but one that Goldman fails to demonstrate in his summary of diplomatic negotiations in Europe in the spring and summer of 1939. The author cites only a few oblique Soviet references to the fighting in the Far East (e.g., 162) in discussions with German diplomats.

Moreover, the informed reader will be surprised to learn that Goldman’s interpretation of Soviet foreign policy ‘generally follows Adam Ulam’s magisterial Expansion and Coexistence’ (x), published in 1968, but now dated and imbedded in US cold-war assumptions. It is of historiographical interest, but not a reliable reference on Soviet foreign policy. In this same vein, the large majority of titles in the bibliography were published before 1970. Since that time, the cold war has ended, the Soviet Union has disappeared, and various Soviet archives have been partially or largely opened. In addition, excellent document collections have been published on Soviet relations with the West (e.g., Moskva-Washington… 1921–1941, 3 vols., Moscow, 2009; Sovetsko-Amerikanskie otnosheniiia, 1918–1939, 3 vols., Moscow, 2002–3; I. M. Maiskii, Dnevnik diplomata, 1934–1943, 3 vols., Moscow, 2006–9). It would have behoved the author to study the many published collections and the numerous works based on them. It is true that there are a few references to the first Soviet collections published in the early 1990s, but these are cosmetic rather than demonstrative of mastery of the sources. The resulting narrative thus appears to be a cold-war depiction of Soviet foreign policy brought out of mothballs.

Clearly, the author does not like Russian President Vladimir V. Putin or his ‘regime’, which has blocked access to archives in order to ‘salvage the reputation of Soviet foreign and defence policy’ (4). In fact, Soviet policy does not need ‘salvaging’. In spite of problems of limited or complete inaccessibility at the Russian Foreign
Ministry (AVPRF) and presidential archives (APRF) respectively, openings have been sufficient to demonstrate the skill and sophistication of Soviet diplomats and diplomacy during the inter-war years. ‘In Putin’s Russia,’ Goldman continues: study of the Nazi–Soviet non-aggression pact ‘remains a sensitive, if not a downright dangerous subject for Russian scholars’ (5). Sensitive perhaps but certainly not dangerous: rich collections of documents from the AVRF have recently been published on Soviet-German relations (Moskva-Berlin ... 1921–1941, 3 vols., Moscow, 2011; SSSR-Germaniia, 1933–1941, Moscow, 2009). Goldman refers to the non-aggression pact as an ‘alliance’ (160, 164), a key word of the US post-1945 cold war lexicon to blacken the Soviet Union. The pact was in fact a truce between two circling scorpions, tails raised high to strike.

In the same way that Russia is now Putin’s, according to Goldman, Soviet foreign policy was Stalin’s and the Soviet government was ‘Stalin’s regime’. Stalin’s policies were ‘duplicitous’ (52), while, for example, the French premier Pierre Laval was merely ‘cunning’ (42). ‘Soviet Russia’s relations with other major powers,’ writes Goldman, ‘were inherently hostile’ (21). Yes, but ironically the Soviet government was more disposed to trade and deal with the West than the reverse. Necessity made it so. If Soviet dealings with the West were ‘two-faced’ (46), so too were Western relations with the Soviet Union, as indeed the author concedes in passing (52).

Goldman confuses the Comintern endorsement of Popular Fronts in Europe with the Commissariat for Foreign Affairs or NKID’s policy of collective security. Soviet Commissar M. M. Litvinov was uncomfortable with the Popular Front policy, which he warned would undermine Centre-Right political support, especially in France, vital to the success of collective security. Propaganda to the contrary notwithstanding, Soviet policy was anti-Nazi, not anti-Fascist, as the author contends. Litvinov envisioned reconstruction of the First World War anti-German alliance, including Fascist Italy. Soviet policy can be summed up simply: deter Nazi Germany from aggression; defeat it in war if deterrence failed. It was not for Soviet want of trying that collective security was unsuccessful. Nor did the Stalinist purges scuttle Litvinov’s efforts, as Goldman suggests (43): the French and British governments rejected Soviet overtures before the Great Purges launched in the summer of 1936. Anglo-French criticism of the fighting qualities of the Red Army, reported by the author, came ill from governments so ill prepared to face the Wehrmacht.

The author’s assertion that Soviet policy can be determined by ‘deconstructing’ (4) Comintern publications might have been necessary in the 1960s, but not now. Such an approach is blind to the sophistication of Soviet diplomacy and the serious conflicts between the NKID and the Comintern, especially in the 1920s. It is also true that Soviet public discourse was different than the secret language of the NKID.

Although the narrative of the fighting in the Far East is successful, Goldman does not establish the ‘link’ between Khalkhin-Gol and European war origins, nor does he provide an up-to-date narrative of Soviet foreign policy during the inter-war years. It is a curious phenomenon that the less some historians know about Soviet policy, the more they seem certain of their conclusions about it.

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