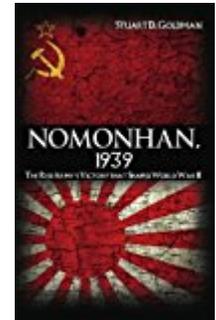


Stuart D. Goldman. *Nomonhan, 1939: The Red Army's Victory That Shaped World War II.* Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2012. xi + 226 pp. \$31.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-61251-098-9.



Reviewed by Roger Reese

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Stuart Goldman, in his book *Nomonhan, 1939: The Red Army's Victory that Shaped World War II*, revisits the 1939 clash between Soviet and Japanese forces at Nomonhan on the Mongolian-Manchurian border, so ably documented by Alvin D. Coox's two-volume work *Nomonhan: Japan against Russia, 1939* (1985), with the intent to show the effect of that short conflict on subsequent Soviet and Japanese diplomacy. Concise and well written, Goldman makes this little-publicized conflict accessible to the general public. In short, this three-month long conflict was the result of the ambitions of the planning staff of the Kwantung Army, which pushed its agenda on the commander. The Kwantung Army was charged with the defense of the Manchurian border with Soviet client state Mongolia. The staff saw the ill-defined border with the Peoples' Republic of Mongolia as a venue for establishing Japanese dominance in the area and building their own military reputations. This attitude was at odds with that of the military and diplomatic leadership in Tokyo. Knowing full well they were acting against

Tokyo's wishes, the Kwantung Army staff engaged in the practice of *gekokujo* (rule from below), in which subordinates shaped their reports and the flow of information to their superiors in order to do what they wanted and suggest an air of uncertainty in understanding what was intended in order to avoid charges of insubordination. Goldman ably shows that Japanese military diplomatic policy regarding the USSR and the border was a contested arena between the Kwantung Army and the Imperial High Command and did not reflect a unified outlook. As a result of this contest, the Kwantung Army, on its initiative, expelled Soviet and Mongolian troops from the disputed area by force in July 1939, which led to a limited small-scale war that ended in September with the Kwantung Army soundly defeated at the hands of the rising star Soviet general Georgy Zhukov and the Japanese government agreeing to the Soviet definition of the border.

Goldman then places subsequent Nazi-Soviet diplomacy and Japanese war-making objectives in the context of this Soviet victory/Japanese defeat.

Goldman is right on the money--and this is where he makes his greatest contribution to our understanding of events--when he identifies the diplomatic upshot as being that Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin needed to protect the USSR from becoming involved in a two-front war against Nazi Germany and Japan. This put Stalin in the driver's seat in his negotiations both with Hitler and with the British and French. Hitler's main objective was to secure a neutral Russia and a quiet eastern front so that he could defend Germany's western front in the event Britain and France did go to war in defense of Poland (which Hitler planned to invade). Comparatively, the British and French wanted an alliance with Russia to contain Hitler. The outcome of the various negotiations was the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact signed in late August, which established trade relations between the two countries and secretly divided Poland and the Baltic between them. Stalin could now build up the Red Army forces in the Far East to defend against possible Japanese aggression, seemingly without having to worry about Nazi aggression. Goldman describes this turn of events as a "stunning diplomatic coup" (p. 162) for Stalin, dismissing the fact that this made Hitler's conquest of western Europe possible and the subsequent German attack on the USSR, which cost the Soviet Union approximately 30 million dead and a devastated economy.

Goldman is on weaker ground when he maintains that the Japanese humiliation at Nomonhan was an important factor in its decision to pursue the southern option that was the attack on Southeast Asia to secure the oil of the Dutch East Indies, without which it would not survive the pending U.S. oil embargo. This is a conclusion that many readers may justifiably question. Not only were there strong voices in Japanese military circles who were still eager to follow the northern option--an attack to seize Soviet Siberia--but preparations were actually taken to accomplish that in 1941, with a buildup of 700,000 men in the Kwantung Army. Goldman clearly shows that it was the

defeat of the Germans in front of Moscow, not the defeat at Nomonhan, that convinced the Japanese not to invade Siberia. There were those in favor of the southern option who reminded their colleagues of Nomonhan, but this may be seen more as a tactic than a conviction. Their real conviction was the critical need for a secure source of petroleum.

Goldman notes that this book was a long time in the making, which may explain why he does not take advantage of a wealth of material published or made available since Coox's book. Once ground is covered there is little incentive to look back. Most critically, the author does not delve into the latest scholarship on Stalin's foreign policy--the work of Gabriel Gorodetsky ought to have been consulted.[1] Whether he believed it played a role or not, the role of ideology, or lack thereof, was worth mentioning.

In sum, Goldman's book provides food for thought while directing attention to an aspect of prewar diplomacy that is too often left out of the analysis of decision making by the many parties involved in shaping the coming war.

Note

[1]. Gabriel Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

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