

## The Battle of Khalkhin Gol

The Battle of Khalkhin Gol (Khalkha river in English) was fought from 11 May 1939 until 15 September 1939 and had a profound strategic impact in the wider political and military reality of its day. This battle had a profound effect on the formulation of Japanese policy towards the Soviet Union and, therefore, determined many of the developments that took place later during the Second World War.

The Battle of Khalkhin Gol unequivocally convinced the Japanese leadership that the Kwantung Army specifically and the Imperial Japanese Army in general could not face the Red Army in a protracted war of attrition.

This meant that Japan would never again undertake offensive operations against the Soviet Union, effectively leaving the Red Army free to concentrate on its European campaigns.

The impact of the Battle of Khalkhin Gol on the political and military developments in the Soviet Union and Imperial Japan has remained largely underestimated and unrecognized until recently. However, some historians have recently begun to re-examine the historical, military and political context in which the Battle of Khalkhin Gol took place and to correctly assess its importance for the entire history of the Second World War.

### The Battle of Khalkhin Gol in context

Japan had emerged the dominant power in Asia after the conquest of Manchuria and Korea. The Japanese leadership was split between two different camps as to the direction that the country's expansionist policy should take following the victories of the Imperial Japanese Army in China and Korea.

Two main factions existed.

One was the faction supported by the Imperial Japanese Army that favored expansion into the Soviet territories in the Far East where vast quantities of natural resources could be obtained. This is known as the "Strike North" faction.

The other faction was supported by the Imperial Japanese Navy and favored expansion into the Pacific where Japan could also obtain the natural resources it required. This is known as the "Strike South" faction.

The conquest of Manchuria and the successes of the Japanese Imperial Army had fueled Japanese aspirations for further expansion into the vast territories of the Russian Far East. Additionally, the re-emergence of the Soviet Union as a contender to the Japanese policy in the Far East, after the defeat in the First World War and the civil war that followed it, was a further stimulant to Japanese planners to test the resolve and capabilities of the Soviet Union.

Manchuria was occupied by the Kwantung Army that contained the best operational units of the Imperial Japanese Army in 1939. The Kwantung Army was heavily influenced by ultra-nationalistic militant officers who were overly aggressive and not completely under central control from Tokyo. In reality, the Kwantung Army enjoyed a considerable degree of independence from the Central Command in Tokyo and was a policy-making factor rather than merely a policy-enforcing one.

The strength and the successes of the Kwantung Army and the perception that Japanese military planners held of the Red Army, re-assured the leadership of the Imperial Japanese Army that a victory could be achieved relatively easily. Japanese officers firmly believed that the purges instituted by Stalin had impaired the Red Army's combat efficiency.

In 1933, a field manual written by the Imperial Japanese Army Chief of Staff, Prince Kanin appeared that exemplified all the stereotypes the Japanese held of the Soviets. The manual described the Russians as docile, obedient and submissive. According to the manual, these characteristics rendered the Russians unable of co-operating in complex flanking or encirclement movements.

A violent and well-executed attack on the flank of the Soviets would quickly undermine their will to fight and would result in the collapse of the Soviet line.

In general however and despite these stereotypes, Japanese officers viewed the Soviet Union as their primary and most dangerous enemy that threatened Japanese possessions in Manchuria from three sides. A significant proportion of the officers of the Imperial Japanese Army favored a unilateral end to operations in China so that Japan could prepare its forces for a major confrontation with the Red Army.

Although there are no written sources that directly point to such an intention, it is reasonable to state that the battle of Khalkhin Gol was probably intended by the leadership of the Kwantung Army to be a case in point of their supremacy over the Red Army and the feasibility of the goals of the "Strike North" faction.

The Soviets understood the threat to their territories in the Far East and the Trans-Siberian railway only too well. To counter the Japanese expansion in China, they had established a Soviet-controlled state in Mongolia where they exercised tight control.

In 1936, they had signed a mutual assistance agreement with the Mongolian People's Republic where they undertook the obligation to come to its aid in case of a Japanese attack.

## **The Imperial Japanese Army in 1939**

The Imperial Japanese Army relied on the infantry as its main fighting element. The objective of the infantry was to approach and neutralize any enemy formation in close combat.

Great emphasis was placed on the role of the offensive in combat operations. Morale, indoctrination and belief in victory were stressed as important factors in achieving final supremacy on the battlefield.

Much emphasis was placed on the leadership ability of junior officers who had to implement tactics on the battlefield.

In 1936, the Imperial Japanese Army had undergone a re-organization by adopting a triangular formation plan for their Infantry divisions - one infantry brigade with three infantry regiments attached to it. A triangular division had a strength of 12,000 men and sixty-five artillery pieces in total.

The battalion was the smallest tactical unit capable of conducting independent combat operations. The battalion consisted of a headquarters formation and four rifle companies of 194 men each, a heavy weapons company with eight 7.7mm heavy machine guns and an artillery platoon with two 70mm howitzers supposed to support the infantry by neutralizing heavy enemy weapons.

A rifle company consisted of three rifle platoons that, in turn, consisted of three rifle squads of eleven riflemen and a 6.5mm light machine gun crew. Each weapons squad had an additional eleven riflemen and three soldiers armed with 50mm grenade launchers.

These numbers indicate the ideal strength of the battalion - about 1,000 men. The units involved in the fighting in Khalkhin Gol had a real strength of about 80 percent.

The morale and training of the Japanese forces that were to participate in the battle of Khalkhin Gol were at a very good level. Officers and men expected to successfully face the Red Army with relative ease.

The Imperial Japanese Army suffered from several structural problems however, that were not obvious at the time. These problems would also become evident in the Pacific at a later stage, when the US had built up and modernized their forces.

The over-reliance of Japanese planners on intangibles such as morale and indoctrination showed a reluctance to accept the fact that the economic and industrial potential of Japan as a nation inevitably posed certain crucial limitations on what the Japanese military in general could achieve.

Probably the most important conclusion is that the Imperial Japanese Army was weak in armored units and artillery. This was due to a decision that Japanese industry would concentrate on the production of aircraft and not on the production of tanks. Japan as a nation lacked the capability to produce both in sufficient quantities.

The enemies that the Imperial Japanese Army had faced until then were no match for the overwhelming might of the Red Army and the Soviet Union as a nation. The leadership of the Kwantung Army was conditioned by the successes against the

Chinese until 1939 to expect a quick and decisive campaign with a successful conclusion at its end.

As it would later turn out on the field of battle, the Imperial Japanese Army would be unable to face an enemy operating with sophisticated combined arms tactics, modern and well-organized logistics and firepower at a massive scale.

## **The Red Army in the Far East in 1939**

The Red Army of that period was a force that had to operate in the vast distances of the Soviet Far East. This fact placed a great burden on the logistics and the support arrangements of the Soviet Army that could frequently be the source of problems affecting the combat ability of Soviet formations.

The political leadership of the Soviet Union and its policy was cautious towards Japan. Stalin's reaction to the Japanese expansion in Manchuria was initially reactive and aimed mainly not to antagonize Japan directly.

This policy was reflected in military matters too. The Soviet Union only took reactive steps to the Japanese advances in Manchuria.

These steps included augmenting and modernizing the available forces in the Far East, overhauling their logistical capability and, in general, using resources from European Russia to enhance Soviet military capabilities in the Far East. Tanks, artillery, aircraft and a modern logistical supply organization were transferred to the Far East.

By 1939, the Soviet forces in the Far East were therefore quite substantial and well-armed. These forces were also backed by the necessary political will to fight. During the Eighteenth Soviet Party Congress in March 1939, Stalin warned that any threat to the Soviet Far East would be met by a massive response.

The first significant conflict between the Soviets and the Japanese in Lake Khasan in 1938 confirmed the suspicions of the Soviet leadership that the Japanese intended to try a north-bound expansion drive.

The Soviets took care to not only modernize their forces in material terms but they also dispatched to the Far East some of their ablest commanders led by General Georgi Zhukov. The leadership of the Soviet Far East Army included some officers of excellent quality such as Zhukov's Chief of Staff, General Shtern.

Soviet commanders were as blooded in battle as were the Japanese and although they did not have the same degree of experience in large scale warfare, they were capable and motivated.

These commanders were able to use the available forces with complex and efficient combined arms tactics and represented a new revolutionary trend in warfare.

Due to these commanders and the modernization that took place in the period before the Battle of Khalkhin Gol, the Red Army possessed a significant superiority in intelligence gathering and analysis, intelligence warfare and command, control and communication.

## **The opposing forces**

### **1 - Imperial Japanese Army**

The Imperial Japanese Army started the battle with about 30.000 men that would be augmented to about 60.000 as the conflict progressed and they reinforced their positions.

The Japanese units to take part in the Khalkhin Gol battle were the 23rd Infantry Division and 7th Infantry Division. These units were supported by a significant number of aircraft from the 2nd Air Brigade.

The Japanese divisional commander in the area was Lieutenant General Michitaro Komatsubara.

### **2- Red Army**

The Red Army forces that participated in the battle numbered at around 58.000 men in total.

The Red Army's forces that participated in the battle of Khalkhin Gol was the 57th Special Rifle Corps that consisted of the 36th Motorized Rifle Division, 6th Cavalry Brigade, 11th Tank Brigade, 7th/8th and 9th Armored Car Brigades. These units had moved into Outer Mongolia in January 1937 to function as a deterrent to the Japanese build-up in Manchuria.

These forces were supported by a significant number of aircraft.

The Soviet forces were commanded by General Georgi Zhukov.

## **Operations**

The dispute that functioned as the direct cause for the initiation of operations was a dispute for the precise border between the collaborationist puppet state Manchukuo (directly controlled by the Japanese) and the Mongolian People's Republic (supported by the Soviet Union).

The Japanese maintained that the border between Mongolia and Manchukuo was the Khalkhin Gol (Khalkha river) and the Soviets and their Mongolian allies maintained that the border was 16 kilometers east of the river, east of the Nomonhan village.

The battle can be analyzed into these main phases.

## 1 - The Japanese Offensive

On 11 May 70 to 90 Mongolian cavalymen wandered into the area in dispute in search of grazing for their horses. The same day, a force of Manchukuoan cavalry attacked the Mongolians who retreated across the Khalkhin Gol.

On 13 May the Mongolians came back in greater numbers. Manchukuoan forces were unable to evict them from the disputed area.

On 14 May the Kwantung Army entered the conflict. Lieutenant Colonel Azuma Yaozo led the 64th Infantry Regiment (minus two companies) of the 23rd Infantry Division and its reconnaissance element in the disputed area in order to evict the Mongolians.

The Mongolians refused to fight and retreated back across the Khalkhin Gol. Mongolian and Soviet activity in the area did not stop however. They continued to strengthen their forces in the disputed area.

On 21 May Lieutenant Colonel Azuma Yaozo and the 64th Infantry Regiment returned in the disputed area to evict Soviet and Mongolian forces.

Things did not turn out well for the Japanese however since the 64th Regiment was surrounded by the Soviet forces and almost completely annihilated.

Predictably, Japanese military planners of the Kwantung Army decided that an escalation was necessary to reverse the situation and organized a counter-attack of divisional size.

On 1 July the Japanese started the operation to evict the Soviets and the Mongolians from the disputed area. The 71st and 72nd Regiments of the 23rd Division seized the high ground over Khalkhin Gol about 18 kilometers north of its confluence with the Holsten river.

On 2 July this same force crossed the Khalkhin Gol and attacked the Soviet forces occupying the Baintsagan Heights, successfully driving them back.

An armored task force concurrently with the actions of the 71st and 72nd Regiments attacked the Soviet positions east of the Khalkhin Gol. This armored force consisted of the 3rd and 4th Tank Regiments, the 64th Regiment and the 2nd Battalion of the 28th Regiment of the 7th Infantry Division. This task force contained an armored element of 73 tanks in total.

On the dawn of 3 July General Zhukov deployed the 11th Tank Brigade (minus one battalion), the 7th Motorized Armored Brigade and the 24th Motorized Rifle Regiment of the 36th Motorized Rifle Division against the Japanese task force described above. This force included a total of 186 tanks and 266 armored cars.

This counter-attack was daring because the Soviet infantry forces necessary to support the armored forces had not yet arrived at the area where the hostilities were taking place.

The casualties on both sides were high.

The Japanese suffered casualties at the high end of several hundreds and were severely shaken after the encounter. As they had neglected to create a reliable logistical infrastructure and their re-supply across the Khalkhin Gol depended on just one pontoon bridge, they were forced to retreat over the course of the next two days. The Japanese forces simply could not be re-supplied fast enough to be able to sustain themselves in battle.

The Soviet forces lost about 120 tanks and armored cars but were in a much better shape than the Japanese after the battle.

The Japanese 3rd and 4th Tank Regiments failed to breach Soviet lines despite their dogged persistence and the loss in battle of 50% of their armor. The 64th Regiment and the 2nd Battalion of the 28th Regiment also failed to breach Soviet lines.

The days from 7 July until 22 July saw probably the fiercest fighting of the conflict and centered on Japanese attempts to force the Soviets off Hill 733. They failed despite repeated attempts and massive losses.

During this period, the Soviets continued to reinforce their positions. The 24th Motorized Rifle Regiment, the 11th Tank Brigade, the 149th Motorized Rifle Regiment, the 5th Machine Gun Brigade, the 602nd and 603rd Rifle Regiments established themselves on the east bank of the Khalkhin Gol.

The Japanese reinforced their units too and moved additional artillery from the Japanese islands to the area of the fighting. To provide their artillery with increased capacities, they brought 6 150mm Type 89 and 16 105mm Type 92 guns. In total they reinforced their artillery with an additional force of 82 artillery weapons.

The Soviets detected these movements and reinforced their artillery with 100 weapons.

On 23 July the Japanese took the offensive once more. The 64th and 72nd Regiments launched a frontal assault against the 11th Tank Brigade, the 149th Motorized Rifle Regiment and the 5th Machine Gun Brigade. These forces were supported by an intense artillery bombardment: from 23 July until 25 July, the Japanese fired over 25,000 artillery rounds into Soviet positions.

This attack was textbook for the Imperial Japanese Army. The infantry supported by an artillery barrage surged forward hoping to quickly bring the fighting close to the Soviet units guarding the front. The Japanese had believed that their artillery was superior and they would easily silence the Soviet artillery units threatening the advance of their infantry.

This hope did not materialize. Soviet gunners quickly responded with an impressive volume of counter-fire and inflicted a heavy price on the advancing Japanese infantry.

The Japanese did manage to make some rather limited gains during this operation but at a high cost.

The battle entered another phase after 25 July. The two adversaries settled to a war of attrition along a front of roughly 30 kilometers. This period was characterized by Soviet tactical probing and occasional attacks at battalion size.

The Japanese were forced to the defensive and devoted their energy into constructing hastily fortified positions to face the Soviets in the battle to come.

## **2 - The Soviet counter-offensive**

General Zhukov continued to strengthen his forces during late July and early August. He built an impressive logistical network of almost 3800 trucks that re-supplied the Red Army with everything necessary for a counter-offensive on a large scale over thousands of kilometers. This was warfare on a scale that the Japanese could not comprehend.

The Soviets also organized a defense in depth and width with interlocking defense positions that would provide cover for each other. Even when the Japanese made gains in ferocious night attacks, they would find formidable defenses facing them at the next step. Soviet counter-attacks during the day would generally reverse any Japanese gains during the night.

General Zhukov carefully studied his enemy's dispositions and prepared his forces accordingly.

The Japanese flanks were covered by Manchukuoan forces that were of lower quality than the Japanese units. In addition to this, the Japanese lacked a mobile reserve force that could face any threat to their flanks. If the Japanese needed to support their flanks, they would have to focus on one flank at a time and to remove forces from other positions along their front.

General Zhukov also proved to have a far superior grasp of intelligence warfare. Radio signals were broadcast in code that the Soviets knew the Japanese could break, providing false and deceptive information. Trucks and aircraft operated on a continuous schedule to cover the sounds of unit deployment.

The Japanese were thus made to believe that the Soviets were establishing defensive positions for the winter.

On 10 August the Japanese forces fighting in Khalkhin Gol were grouped as the Sixth Army. These forces totaled 38.000 men, 318 artillery pieces, 130 tanks and 225 aircraft.

Facing these forces was the Red Army's First Army Group with 57.000 men, 542 artillery pieces, 498 tanks and 515 aircraft.

General Zhukov's battle plan was to launch a frontal assault in the center in order to pin Japanese forces down. Powerful armored forces on his flanks would then execute flanking maneuvers to encircle the Japanese forces and would finally destroy them.

The Red Army's order of battle was as follows.

The left wing was formed by the 6th Mongolian Cavalry Division, the 7th Armored Brigade, the 601st Infantry Regiment of the 82nd Rifle Division and two battalions of the 11th Tank Brigade.

The center was formed by the 36th Motorized Rifle Division, the 5th Machine Gun Brigade, and the remaining 82nd Rifle Division.

The right wing consisted of the 57th Rifle Division, two battalions of the 11th Tank Brigade, three battalions of the 6th Tank Brigade and the 8th Mongolian Cavalry Division.

In addition to these forces, General Zhukov held a mobile reserve force that consisted of the 9th Armored Brigade, one battalion of the 6th Tank Brigade and the 212th Airborne Brigade.

On 20 August the counter-offensive began.

Aerial bombardment started at 05:45 in the morning that was followed by a heavy artillery barrage. At 09:00 Soviet troops moved forward.

The left wing was the first to engage the Japanese. These forces were strengthened with armor and made significant progress against the overwhelmed Japanese soldiers.

Lieutenant General Komatsubara realized the threat to his 23rd Infantry Division but he was unable to reinforce his force in that area because his center and north sectors were also under furious attack from the Soviets. To make matters worse for the Japanese, their north flank was under intense pressure and in danger of collapsing, despite the skillful resistance of the Japanese soldiers. The Japanese were forced to reinforce their north flank.

To counter this move, General Zhukov committed his 9th Armored Brigade and the 212th Airborne Brigade to the fighting in the north and forced the Japanese to retain their focus in that area. In the meantime, the Soviet left wing advanced south and annihilated Japanese resistance on the way.

On 23 August the Soviet left wing had driven to the Manchukuoan border and negated the Japanese forces any possibility of retreat in the area below the Holsten river.

On 24 August the 9th Armored Brigade from the North and the 8th Armored Brigade from the South linked behind the Japanese lines. The encirclement was complete and the Japanese were caught in the trap.

### **3 - Japanese relief efforts**

The Japanese were mortified by the course of events. For the first time they had faced defeat in the battlefield. They quickly rushed forces from Manchukuo to the north in order to relieve their overwhelmed troops.

Between 24 and 26 August the Japanese tried to rescue their trapped forces. These reinforcements came under air attack from the Soviets and were severely hindered.

The 6th Armored Brigade finally delivered a crushing blow to the Japanese reinforcements. The Japanese were forced to watch helplessly as their remaining forces were divided into pockets and were eliminated, one after the other, by the Soviets.

Desperate acts of heroism by individual Japanese soldiers and commanders did nothing to change the course of events; they only helped to increase the horrifying casualties that the Japanese forces suffered during the battle.

By 31 August the Japanese forces in Khalkhin Gol were completely overwhelmed and all resistance seized.

### **4 - Air War in the aftermath**

The Japanese decided to mount an air campaign in order to discourage any Soviet threat towards Manchukuo. They transferred air units from China in Manchuria in order to reinforce their units that had been fighting the Soviets since the beginning of the campaign.

The remnants of the 2nd Air Brigade were incorporated into the new units that were transferred from China. The new units prepared for major operations against the Soviets. The Japanese disposed of 255 aircraft, 158 of which were fighters.

The Soviets also reinforced their air units in Mongolia and prepared for the coming battle.

The Japanese unleashed the Japanese Army Air Force on the Soviets who responded in kind. The results were once again worse for the Japanese than for the Soviets. The Soviets managed to initially hold their own and to reverse the situation at later stages of the conflict.

The losses that the Japanese Army Air Force suffered during the battle essentially crippled it entirely. The loss of trained pilots was especially painful since they were hard to replace.

### **5 - End of hostilities**

Even before the end of the hostilities, talks between the Japanese and the Soviets were taking place. The devastating Japanese defeat accelerated this process.

On 16 September a cease-fire went into effect.

## **Conclusions at the aftermath of the battle**

The impact of the Battle of Khalkhin Gol was significantly different for the Japanese and the Soviets.

### **1 - Imperial Japan**

The Battle of Khalkhin Gol was a significant milestone for the Imperial Japanese Army in both strategic and tactical terms.

Strategically, the Battle of Khalkhin Gol had a profound effect on the formulation of Japanese foreign policy towards the Soviet Union specifically and all other countries in general.

The Japanese leadership was stunned by the defeat at the hands of the Red Army and would take great precautions not to provoke the Soviet Union again.

One important strategic consequence of the Japanese defeat was the fact that the independence that the Kwantung Army enjoyed hitherto vanished.

The Kwantung Army leadership had to shoulder the blame for the defeat. Lieutenant General Komatsubara was recalled to Japan and disgraced. The same fate befell the Lieutenant General Kenkichi Ueda who was re-assigned to Japan, a development that effectively ended his military career.

The tactical lessons for the Imperial Japanese Army were much less obvious however. Japanese military planners did not learn from their defeat at the hands of the Soviets that intangible factors such as indoctrination, courage and morale could not offset the power of modern warfare with massive firepower, highly mobile forces with a well-organized supply network and high quality equipment.

The Imperial Japanese Army would suffer the same fate because of the same weaknesses once again when the Americans and British recovered from their defeats and returned to face Japan.

### **2 - Soviet Union**

To the contrary, the Red Army took their Japanese enemy seriously and was committed to providing the men and materiel necessary to defeat them. The lessons that the Red Army learned in mobile armored warfare would be applied later in their European campaigns.

On a tactical level, the battle influenced the design and development of new tanks and aircraft.

The Battle of Khalkhin Gol shows the Russian way of waging war in very clear detail: tight integration of infantry, artillery, armor and aircraft, elaborate deception measures and ruthless disregard for soldiers' lives.

The same tactics would later result in the complete destruction of one of the most efficient and powerful armies in history: the German Army of the Second World War.