

BOOK REVIEW

Nomonhan 1939: The Red Army's Victory that Shaped World War II by Stuart D. Goldman. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2012, 226 pp.

The beginnings of *Nomonhan 1939* came about during Stuart Goldman's time as a graduate student, when he noticed a connection between the German–Soviet Nonaggression Pact of August 1939 and the Khalkhin Gol (Nomonhan) conflict. After graduate school, Goldman enjoyed a rewarding career in academia, culminating with his work as a research specialist at the Library of Congress. Goldman made profitable use of his spare time during those years to continue research on the Nomonhan campaign, and the end result is an excellent book that ties the military history of the undeclared Soviet–Japanese border war of 1939 to the broader military and diplomatic history of World War II.

In the introduction of the book, Goldman introduces his central thesis, the causal relationship between the Nomonhan campaign, the German–Soviet Nonaggression Pact of August 1939, and the German–Soviet invasion of Poland in September 1939. The majority of the book is devoted to interpreting the military actions in the Khalkhin Gol valley through a broad diplomatic and geopolitical perspective. Goldman's conclusions are well-supported, based on his extensive research using American, Soviet, Imperial Japanese, and Nazi German military and diplomatic archival sources, supplemented with details culled from memoirs and over 100 secondary works.

Of particular interest to military historians is Goldman's analysis of the unique Japanese tradition of *gekokujo*, or rule from below, and its impact on Imperial Japanese policy regarding the disputed Manchurian–Mongolian border (pp. 84–7). Goldman makes clear how ultranationalist staff officers within the Japanese Kwantung Army, unchecked by their political and military leaders in Tokyo, precipitated an undeclared border war with the Soviet Union. The Kwantung (Manchuria) Army quickly found their presumed superiority in fighting spirit negated by the better equipped and comparably determined Soviet Red Army. As Goldman notes in his conclusions, the Japanese proved culturally unwilling to profit from the lessons of Nomonhan. Most critically, the insubordinate officers of the Kwantung Army, particularly Major Tsuji Masanobu, were never disciplined for their part in the Nomonhan debacle. Instead, sympathetic superiors sheltered Tsuji and many like-minded officers, and in time these officers transferred to the Operations staff of the Imperial Japanese Army. As a consequence, Tsuji and his fellow Kwantung alumni exerted unchecked influence on the Japanese decision to expand into Southeast Asia—thus, putting Japan on the road to war in the Pacific basin under the same assumptions as before the Nomonhan debacle. As a consequence, Japan embarked on a ruinous war with the United States that ended with more than two million dead soldiers and the entire country in ruins. By contrast, the Red Army made more profitable use of lessons learned, particularly the need for careful logistics planning and the development of better-armed and protected tanks. The Red Army performance was not flawless, as Goldman points out, particularly with operational intelligence failures and the employment of uncoordinated but hard-hitting armor attacks—foreshadowing General Georgy Zhukov's later performance during the Great Patriotic War.

The central point of Goldman's book is the linkage between the Nomonhan operation and the signing of a nonaggression pact between the Soviet and Nazi regimes on 23 August 1939, which essentially gave Adolf Hitler the green light to invade Poland. After summarizing the diplomatic maneuvering among Germany, the Soviet Union, and the Anglo–French military mission during mid-1939, Goldman points out how the outbreak of the Nomonhan crisis deepened Josef Stalin's anxiety over the security of his eastern borders. In Stalin's view, a short-term pact of convenience to redirect the increasingly aggressive Nazi regime gave the Red Army time to mass enough combat power and decisively end the border war. Furthermore, a treaty with Germany would make the diplomatically isolated Japanese more willing to limit the scope of the conflict to the Khalkhin Gol region. Goldman highlights another item of particular interest in the linkage between the signing of a cease-fire between Japan and Soviet Union on 16 September 1939 and the otherwise inexplicable delay of the Red Army to take part in the attack on Poland. Goldman attributes the delay to Stalin's desire to avoid a two-front war until a cease-fire agreement was obtained from the chastened Japanese Kwantung Army (p. 164).

Overall, Goldman's book is well-written, and the author presents compelling evidence, supported with detailed analysis, that supports his thesis. The reviewer found *Nomonhan 1939* best suited for readers desiring a broad understanding of the operational and strategic context of the Nomonhan campaign in relation to World War II. In keeping with Goldman's operational/generalist level focus, the book includes eight pages of photographs and six maps, useful for general understanding of the campaign but lacking in tactical details desired by the military history specialist. For those readers desiring more tactical detail, the reviewer suggests reading Alvin D. Coox's *Nomonhan: Japan against Russia, 1939* or Edward J. Drea's *Nomonhan: Japanese–Soviet Tactical Combat 1939*.

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