

# An August Storm: the Soviet-Japan Endgame in the Pacific War

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By Mark Ealey

In a postbellum environment, far more war crimes are ultimately left untouched than are ever pursued in tribunals. This is particularly true if the victors commit the crimes against the vanquished. If that victor is a superpower, the difficulties involved in the pursuit of justice increase exponentially. As World War II entered its final stages the belligerent powers committed one heinous act after another: the Japanese military massacred civilians in Manila and murdered allied prisoners of war and slave laborers in an attempt to hide the evidence of their barbaric treatment, not to mention the ongoing acts of brutality in China. On the victors' side, while the United States and Britain bombed German and Japanese cities and their civilian inhabitants into oblivion to "bring the war to a speedy end," the Soviet Union was unleashing acts of vengeance on the German population. Fresh from victory over the Nazi regime and emboldened by favorable political developments in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union turned its attention to Japan.

On August 8, 1945, after weeks of deflecting Japan's requests to mediate a surrender to the United States and its allies, Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov presented Japanese Ambassador Sato with a declaration of war, thereby breaching the Neutrality Pact that remained in force between the two countries. The declaration stated that, "the Soviet Government decided to accept the proposition

of the Allies and joined the [Potsdam] declaration of the Allied Powers of July 26..."[1] Soviet acceptance of the Potsdam Proclamation meant recognition of the content of the Cairo Declaration of December 1943, which stated that the Allies "covet no gain for themselves and have no thought of territorial expansion." [2] Two years earlier, the Soviet government had also clearly expressed "agreement with the basic principles of" the Atlantic Charter, which stated that the signatories "seek no aggrandizement, territorial or other... [and] desire to see no territorial changes that do not accord with the freely expressed wishes of the peoples concerned." [3] The Soviet Union and the United States, between Yalta and the immediate postwar months, would fiercely negotiate territorial and other parameters of power centered on the distribution of territories including both the homeland and colonies of the defeated Japanese empire and the division of Korea into Northern and Southern zones.

Stalin's promise to Roosevelt and Churchill to enter the war against Japan, long sought as a means to bring the war to a swift end and reduce allied casualties, manifested itself as Operation August Storm, the Soviet offensive in Manchuria, the Korean Peninsula, the island of Sakhalin and the Kuriles. [4] "August Storm" can be divided into two phases. The first was the week from August 9 to 14 when Soviet forces swept aside demoralized Japanese defenders in Manchuria and Korea and moved south in Sakhalin over the border at the 50th parallel. [5] The second was the two-week period from August 15 - the date when Japan

formally accepted the Potsdam Proclamation – to September 2, when Japanese government representatives signed the instrument of surrender on board the U.S.S. Missouri. While the former period saw a short but effective Soviet campaign that dealt a body blow to the Kwantung Army, the latter saw a determined push to occupy the territories discussed at Yalta and the unleashing of acts that targeted not only the Japanese military but also the helpless civilian population.

Soviet and now Russian writers emphasize September 2 as the end of the War in the Far East, blurring the fact that the Soviet military advance and acts of brutality towards Japanese civilians occurred not only before, but also after the Emperor’s surrender broadcast on August 15. The most horrific Soviet atrocity committed in the days before Tokyo accepted the Potsdam Proclamation occurred near Gegenmiao in Manchuria on August 14 when a Soviet armored unit attacked approximately 1,500 Japanese civilians - mostly women and children. Survivor, Kawauchi Mitsuo, seven years old at the time, remembers the incident as follows 60 years later.

It’s known as the Gegenmiao Incident. It was a massacre at a place called Gegenmiao in Manchuria in which one thousand several hundred Japanese refugees were attacked by a Soviet armored unit. Over one thousand people were slaughtered. The tanks came after eleven in the morning, attacking as we fled from the fighting around Kou’angai. It was a crazy mix of sound from the tank engines and machine guns. Everyone was screaming as they ran to get away. Some people fell hit by bullets; others were crushed by tanks.[6]



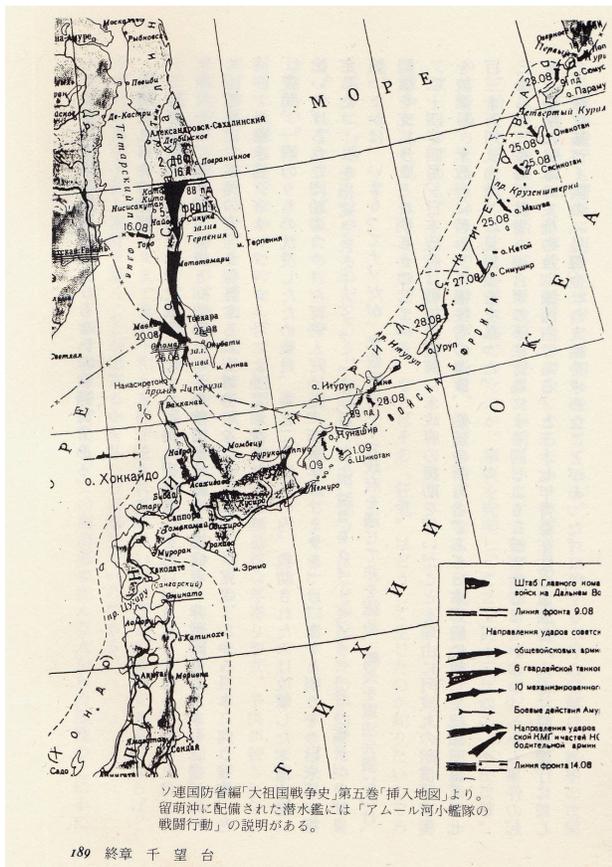
A Soviet tank column

The indiscipline and depravity of the Red Army in Germany a few short months earlier was mirrored in Manchuria and Southern Sakhalin. Fueled by propagandists such as Ilya Ehrenburg,[7] some of those same units that had raped and pillaged their way through East Prussia. Thoroughly dehumanized by their experiences on the Eastern Front, these units had transferred eastwards directly after the fall of Berlin. The youngest survivors of massacres in Manchuria become *zanryu koji* (orphans who were adopted by Chinese families and remained in China,) another tragic legacy of Japan’s failed attempt to create a continental empire. [8]

Applying the brakes to the Soviet offensive after Japan accepted the Potsdam Proclamation on August 15 proved no easy matter. After some confusion among the Kwantung Army commanders over communication from Tokyo regarding Japan’s capitulation, General Yamada sent a telegram to Marshal Vasilevskii’s headquarters on August 17 offering a ceasefire, which was rejected. The next day, Yamada’s chief-of-staff flew to the First Far Eastern Front HQ to offer surrender, and on August 19 a surrender agreement was signed. In the interim, Soviet forces continued their advance through Manchuria in line with an August 18 order from Soviet Chief of Staff General Ivanov

to ignore all ceasefire offers unless Japanese soldiers had already clearly surrendered and laid down their arms.[9]

Early in the morning of August 18, Soviet forces landed on the island of Shimushu at the northern extreme of the Kurile chain. Faced with a sudden pre-dawn assault, the Japanese 91st Division on Shimushu defended its positions fiercely, only surrendering after five days of heavy fighting. Well over 1,000 Soviet troops, and half that number of Japanese, were killed in the last land battle of World War II.[10]



A map of Soviet advances through Sakhalin and the Kuril islands

On Sakhalin, Soviet forces moving southwards from August 10 encountered the Japanese 88th Division along the line of fortifications near the border with the Soviet sector of the island. The defenders' objective was to buy time for

civilians to flee by ship to Hokkaido. Six thousand residents of Maoka (now Kholmok) on the western coast had already been evacuated when the Soviet attack commenced before dawn on August 20. Soviet warships entered the harbor, firing on the town and the 18,000 refugees waiting to be evacuated. Civilians were machine-gunned as they ran towards the hills in an attempt to escape the Soviet troops pouring off the warships. Japanese records suggest that approximately 1,000 people were killed that morning. After reporting the happenings of the previous few hours, the final message from the last of nine young telephonists at the exchange at Maoka, 22 year-old Itoh Chie, ended with these poignant words.[11]

To everyone back in *Naichi* [Japanese mainland].... To our friends at the Wakkanai Exchange... Soviet soldiers have just entered the building here in the Maoka Exchange. This will probably be the last message from Karafuto [Sakhalin]. The nine of us have stayed at our posts right through to the end, and it won't be long before all nine of us will have departed for the next world.

The Soviet troops are coming closer. I can hear their footsteps getting nearer. Everyone in Wakkanai, *sayonara*, this is the end. To everyone in *Naichi*, *sayonara*, *sayonara*....

Moments later Itoh took cyanide.

After witnessing the massacre of civilians in Maoka, pockets of Japanese troops in the vicinity continued to resist until August 23. During that period some who had withdrawn from Maoka to nearby Arakaizawa were shot to death as they came forward to discuss surrender.[12]

On August 22, one full week after Japan had surrendered, Soviet warplanes attacked Toyohara (now Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk). Despite the local authorities having set up a large white flag and a tent marked with a red cross in front

of the railway station for the throng of refugees, five or six fragmentation bombs and approximately 20 incendiaries were dropped into the crowd, killing several hundred people. [13]

Early in the morning that same day, reminiscent of the sinking of ships packed with fleeing German civilians in the Baltic Sea just months earlier,[14] a “wolf pack” of three Soviet submarines (SHCH126, L12, L19) attacked the Japanese refugee transport ships the Dai-Ni Shinko-Maru, the Ogasawara-Maru and the Taito-Maru off Rumoi in western Hokkaido.[15] As they floated in the water the survivors of the Ogasawara-Maru were strafed by fighter planes - only seventeen of the 750 people on board were rescued. The Dai-Ni Shinko-Maru limped into port but the other two ships sank with a loss of 1,708 people.[16]

The Soviet Union completed the occupation of Sakhalin and Habomai - the southernmost island of what the Japanese call the Northern Territories - on September 5. Over the next two years, the Soviets repatriated all Japanese civilians and expelled the indigenous Sakhalin and Kurile Ainu as well as part of the Nivkhi and Uilta population. Not everyone, however, was repatriated. The Korean workers taken to Sakhalin by Japan in the period 1920-1945 on forced labor programs (*kyosei renko*) remained, consigned to equally harsh treatment under a new regime. The tragedy surrounding the repatriation of the 43,000 Korean laborers left behind on Sakhalin has created yet another painful conundrum in Japan’s postwar relations with its neighbors.

Almost 600,000 Japanese soldiers surrendered to Soviet forces in Manchuria, Sakhalin and the Kurile chain. Most were transported to labor camps in Siberia, where roughly 10 percent died in the following decade.[17] Some of the Japanese POWs repatriated in 1956 had been captured in the large-scale border clashes at Nomonhan and Changkufeng in the late 1930s,

all of this in violation of the Potsdam Proclamation, which Japan had accepted before surrendering.[18] While Japanese acts of brutality towards Allied POWs rightly attracted outrage and punitive justice, following on from the violation of a neutrality pact and the refusal to honor a surrender, the Soviet use of Japanese POWs as slave labor in the immediate postwar era was Stalin’s third major contravention of the tenets of international law in the Far East to go unquestioned by any postwar tribunal.



Captured Japanese in a Soviet prison camp

Genuine *vergangenheitsbewältigung* - overcoming the legacy of the past - not only requires brave politicians, bureaucrats and academics to study and debate the past, but to be prepared to accept that wartime excesses and violations of international law were conducted by all parties. If we are ever to create a meaningful global human rights regime, crimes ranging from what might neatly be categorized as “collateral damage” to acts of outright barbarism must all be subject to the same scrutiny, whether committed by the victors or the vanquished. That principle of equality before the law was the core of the Nuremberg concept, one unfortunately that was honored in the breach with punishment restricted to the defeated Germans and Japanese.

Every year, the “Association of Bereaved

Families from the Three Ships Incident” asks the Japanese government to request an apology from Russia for the killing of 1,708 people on the Ogasawara-Maruru, the Taito-Maruru and the Dai-Ni Shinko Maru in the days immediately following Japan’s surrender.[18] Every year, the Japanese Foreign Ministry replies that they are waiting for a response from the Russian government about these incidents. The Putin administration seems as likely to respond to this request with contrition as it is to return the disputed islands.

For the Japanese government, dealing with war crimes committed against its citizens during the Pacific War (even those committed after the war) has little appeal. Sadly, the issue is complicated by the fact that memories lurk on the other side of the door to a collective repository - a kind of Pandora’s Box - in which everything is inextricably linked to the excesses of Japan’s own dark past.

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[1] Soviet Declaration of War Against Japan:

<http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/policy/1945/450808a.html>

[2] Statement released after the Cairo Conference:

<http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/policy/1943/431201b.html>

[3] Full text of the Atlantic Charter:

<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/wwii/atlantc.htm>

[4] The Soviet Strategic Offensive in Manchuria, 1945: “August Storm” [Air & Space Power Journal](#), Fall, 2004, by [Gilles Van Nederveen](#).

[5] In the Treaty of Shimoda in 1855, Sakhalin

became a mutual possession of Japan and Russia, and the Kuriles were divided between Uruppu and Etorofu. This was followed in 1875 by the Treaty of St. Petersburg by which Japan gave up all claim to Sakhalin in return for all of the Kurile chain as far as Kamchatka. Japan took control of the southern 40 percent of Sakhalin through the Treaty of Portsmouth after victory over Russia in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. The border was set at the 50th parallel. Japan therefore has no claim on Sakhalin but demands the return of what it terms the Northern Territories: the four islands of Etorofu, Kunashiri, Shikotan and the islets known as Habomai, none of which were ever possessed by Russia or the Soviet Union prior to their being seized by Soviet troops in 1945.

[6] The Gegenmiao Incident is described by survivor, Kawauchi Mitsuo, on:

<http://www.nishinippon.co.jp/news/2005/sengo60/sengo5/01.html> Also see: Fujiwara Sakuya, “Manshu, Shokokumin no senki” (Kyoyo bunko #1561, publ. Shakai Shisoshu, 1995). Yano Ichiya and Yan Ye-son, “Manshu Chinkon: Hikiage kara miru senchu/sengo” (Inpakuto Shuppankai, 2001).

[7] Alfred de Zayas, *Nemesis at Potsdam* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 2nd edition, 1979); and, Erich Kern (ed.), *Verheimlichte Dokumente* (Munich: FZ-Verlag, 1988).

[8] Japanese Ministry of Health and Social Welfare records suggest that Japanese 26,000 soldiers and support personnel were killed in Manchuria during August 1945. In addition, more than 30,000 civilians perished and another 30,000 were never accounted for. Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, “Zokuzoku - Hikiage-Enge no Kiroku” 1963, p. 187.

See: <http://home.s01.itscom.net/i-ioriya/sangeki.html> for details of other Japanese works that refer to Gegenmiao and other similar incidents.

[9] Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy*,

Harvard University Press, 2005. p 254-257.

[10] For the Russian side of the Battle of Shimushu see:

[http://www.fegi.ru/prim/flot/flot1\\_13.htm](http://www.fegi.ru/prim/flot/flot1_13.htm)

[11] Details of the fate of the nine telephonists in Maoka can be found in Kawashima Yasuo's "Kyuunin no Otome - Isshun no Natsu" (transl: *Nine Young Women - A Moment in Summer*) 2003, publ. by Kyobunsha, Sapporo. Description of the scene in Maoka on August 20, including eyewitness comment, can be found at:

[http://www2s.biglobe.ne.jp/~t\\_tajima/nenpyo-5/tizu-2.html](http://www2s.biglobe.ne.jp/~t_tajima/nenpyo-5/tizu-2.html) For the original quote from one of Ito h Chie: [http://www2s.biglobe.ne.jp/~nippon/jogbd\\_h13/jog203.html](http://www2s.biglobe.ne.jp/~nippon/jogbd_h13/jog203.html)

[12] See

[http://www2s.biglobe.ne.jp/~t\\_tajima/nenpyo-5/ad1945k.htm](http://www2s.biglobe.ne.jp/~t_tajima/nenpyo-5/ad1945k.htm) for a transcription of diary entries and letters describing of the incident at Arakaizawa, just outside Maoka, in which a group of emissaries led by a Lieutenant Murata of the 25th Infantry Regiment went forward to discuss surrender only to be fired on by Soviet troops. Only one survived.

[13] Details of the bombing of refugees in the square in front of Toyohara Station can be found at: [http://www2s.biglobe.ne.jp/~nippon/jogbd\\_h13/jog203.html](http://www2s.biglobe.ne.jp/~nippon/jogbd_h13/jog203.html)

[14] Most notably the Wilhelm Gustloff, General Steuben and the Goya.

[15] Mainichi Shimbun, 1/10/92. "Shuusen 7- Nichigo no Saharin kara no Hinansen Gekichin

*wa Sorengun no Kougeki data Sensuikan Gyorai de"* (trans: Soviets Sink Refugee-Ships From Sakhalin Sunk Seven Days After End of War - Torpedoes from Submarines) for details of Hata Ikuhiko's research. Mainichi Shimbun, 28/3/96. "Kinkou kaku Sengo Shori - Kyuu-Soren no "Anbu" Akiraka ni - Karufuto Hinansen Gekichin Jiken" (trans: Balance Lacking in Handling of Legacy of The War - Dark Side of Former Soviet Union Revealed - Sinking of Refugee Ships from Karafuto) for the details of the Soviet submarines.

[16] "Saigo no Nihonkai-Kaisen: Showa 20 8 Gatsu 22 Nichi, Hokkaido Rumoi Oki Sansen no Higeki" (transl: *The Last Battle in the Japan Sea: August 22, 1945, The Tragedy of Three Ships off Rumoi*) [http://homepage2.nifty.com/abe-san/sakusaku/6\\_1.htm](http://homepage2.nifty.com/abe-san/sakusaku/6_1.htm)

[17] Elena Bondarenko. *Exploitation of Japanese POW labor in the USSR*. In: Far Eastern Affairs, 1995. No. 1. pp. 72-85.

[18] The Potsdam Proclamation states: (9) The Japanese military forces, after being completely disarmed, shall be permitted to return to their homes with the opportunity to lead peaceful and productive lives.

[19] Dai-Ni Shinko Maru - a Q-Ship - scored a hit on the submarine's conning tower when it surfaced to finish off the Japanese vessel. A large oil slick was reported directly after the submarine submerged. Also, the attached map is from Volume 5 of the History of the Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union 1941-1945. (Soviet Ministry of Defense) To the bottom right of the map "Amur River Submarine Squadron combat action" is written in Russian to explain the arrow off the western coast of Hokkaido.