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Storia Militare Contemporanea



Società Italiana di Storia Militare

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The banner, shown courtesy of the Schwind Collection to Pēteris Cedrinš, is the personal banner of prince Avalov, commander of the West Volunteer Army (Западная добровольческая армия), a White Russian anti-Bolshevik and pro-German force created by Germany Gen. von der Goltz in August 1919 merging the rest of German Freikorps in the Baltic States and some Russian POWs with the Special Russian Corps raised in November 1918 by Gen. Graf Fëdor Arturovič Keller and by Cossack Gen. Pavel Bermond, later Prince Avalov, both Knights of the Russian Branch of the Sovereign Order of Saint John of Jerusalem (SOSJJ). The Corps lent allegiance to Kolchak's white government and later to a Latvian puppet government supported by Berlin, and fought against both the Bolshevik and the Latvian democratic government supported by the Entente, being disbanded in December 1919. The Banner front shows the imperial coat of arms. On the reverse, the Black Maltese Cross with Crown of Thorns memorializes General Graf Keller, murdered by the Bolsheviks

<http://www.theknightsofsaintjohn.com/History-After-Malta.htm>;

<http://www.vexilloграфия.ru/russia/beloe.htm>;

<http://lettonica.blogspot.com/2007/11/bear-slayers-day.html> (Pēteris Cedrinš, *Bear Slayer's Day*, 11 November 2007). Cedrinš posted the image of the Flag's recto on wikipedia commons.

BASILIO DI MARTINO, PAOLO POZZATO

Carri armati contro baionette.
Alle origini della Seconda Guerra Mondiale.
1939 la battaglia di Nomonhan/Khalkhin-Gol

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There is a phrase in English, ‘the rest is history’. It is used when the speaker has reached a point in their narrative where there is no need to continue, as it can be assumed that their listeners are already familiar with what happened next: ‘On 22 June 1941, after months of detailed planning, Hitler finally invaded the Soviet Union. The rest is history.’ As such, as individuals interested in military history, we all *know* when the Second World War started and ended, we all *know* that the Soviet Army, eviscerated by Stalin’s purges, melted in the face of the combination of German panzers and its use of *Auftragstaktik* (‘mission command’), we all *know* that the Japanese, through their combination of tactical flexibility and fanatical bravery, were invincible until steamrolled by

American military-industrial output. But one of the central roles of the historian is to demonstrate when the things we all *know* are in fact wrong.

In this book, two noted military authors, Paolo Pozzato, a former infantry officer, and Basilio Di Martino, a retired air force general, join forces to use the battles between the Soviet Union and Japan in the area of the Khalkhin Gol river in Mongolia during the summer of 1939 as a means to expose how many of the things we all *know* about the Second World War are actually misinterpretations. It is reflective of the European / American focus of most of what has been written about that war that these battles, and their climax in the Nomonhan Incident, are likely to be almost unknown, even to many who are expert on other aspects of that global conflict. Yet Pozzato and Di Martino demonstrate that these battles had profound implications, with impacts felt far from the battlefields of Central Asia. They show that the success of the Soviet forces was down to their effective application of the principles of Deep Battle, bringing together into a single devastating whole the action of armoured penetrations and air power, which combined to overwhelm the Japanese approach to battle. In addition, they make clear the outcome of these battles gave Stalin the confidence that his armed forces remained powerful and effective. This encouraged him to enter into the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact with Nazi Germany on 23 August, as a prelude to the Soviet invasion of eastern Poland (launched on 17 September, the day after hostilities with Japan officially ended), followed in early 1940 by further operations to seize the Baltic States and attempt to bring Finland back into the Soviet sphere. Similarly, the defeat of Japanese Army forces produced a shift in the balance of influence within the Japanese high command. This enabled the Japanese Navy to secure agreement to the 'southern option', which led to the attack on Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941 and the occupation of vast areas of the South Pacific and South East Asia. Large implications indeed from a campaign that few have even heard about. Pozzato and Di Martino go about their task in a systematic manner. The book comprises an introduction, which poses key questions about the way in which history is perceived and written, followed by five chapters, covering, in turn, the context and opening moves of the conflict in Mongolia during the second half of July 1938, the incident at Khalkhin-Gol / Nomonhan during May 1939, the arrival of General Zhukov and the expansion from these initial actions that converted the battle into a wider conflict, the Soviet attack in early August, which almost literally obliterated the Japanese 23rd Division and cleared the area



of operations, and a concluding chapter examining the wider impact on Japanese and Soviet policy from the unexpected course of events in Mongolia, which encouraged each to become embroiled in what became far greater (and disastrous) conflicts on the other side of their huge empires. A final appendix explores the air forces deployed by the opposing forces. The text is supported by an index of names and a comprehensive bibliography.

In the course of their narrative, Pozzato and Di Martino clearly and succinctly draw out the key themes and issues at each stage of the conflict, highlighting the central points and then pulling these together to demonstrate their argument that this obscure campaign really did have implications and impact that helped shape the course of the Second World War. Key features include contrasting the very different nature of the forces engaged. On the one hand, the infantry deployed by the Japanese was immensely tough, determined, and aggressive, but those very characteristics encouraged an obstinate lack of initiative at all levels of command, which meant units struggled to respond to manoeuvres by the enemy, other than by launching suicidal attacks. By contrast, the Soviets placed heavy reliance on the combination of rapid manoeuvre by armoured vehicles and massed artillery fire, supported by air power, which simply blasted the obdurate Japanese from their positions. Yet, as Pozzato and Di Martino make clear, even

after this resounding defeat, the Japanese continued to place their faith in the dogged toughness of their men and disparaged tanks as mere machines. Nonetheless, despite the complete victory achieved, the Soviet losses had been heavy, but the completeness of the victory allowed this inconvenient fact to be glossed over. As they summarise the campaign,

A limited conflict between great powers; the first mass use of armoured vehicles [...]; spectacular confirmation of the validity of the “operation in depth” to gain the upper hand on continuous front lines thanks to the use of armoured forces; confrontation between opposing modern air forces in the most diverse areas of use on the battlefield [...]; the ability to rapidly adapt and improve land and air armaments in the course of the action; organization of a complex system of treatment of the wounded [...]; solving a logistical problem of impressive dimensions and deceiving the adversary about it. There are certainly not a few military themes that decide the importance of the Nomonhan/Khalkhin-Gol “incident” and make its analysis interesting even for today’s scholar. Moreover, there are no small or negligible political factors. (p. 202)

Through their account, Pozzato and Di Martino provide a significant service, which is to underline the severe limits of a perspective on history, both specifically in terms of the study of the Second World War as a conflict and more generally in the consideration of the development of command approaches and modern tactics, that is limited to the traditional Euro-centric view. We are all too accustomed to a discourse on global events and on developments in military science that starts from the (often unconscious) assumption that everything of importance was done in or by Europeans or Americans. Through their strong grasp of the literature, not simply the existing anglophone accounts of the Nomonhan Incident, but also the evidence and analyses in the Russian and Japanese sources, Pozzato and Di Martino avoid that pitfall, demonstrating clearly that important advances and influences arise outside these too-narrow confines.

Pozzato and Di Martino’s work must therefore be strongly recommended. Not only have they brought into the light a campaign that is of significant interest in its own right, they have provided an account that should challenge the accepted narrative of the Second World War. It is very much to be hoped that the book will in due course be published in English translation, in order to bring these insights to a wider audience. If so, then perhaps we might indeed be able to say ‘and the rest is history’.

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