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The Outbreak of War

JUNE–AUGUST 1939

On 1 June 1939, Georgii Zhukov, a short and sturdy cavalry commander, received an urgent summons to Moscow. Stalin's purge of the Red Army, begun in 1937, still continued, so Zhukov, who had been accused once already, presumed that he had been denounced as an 'enemy of the people'. The next stage would see him fed into Lavrenti Beria's 'meatgrinder', as the NKVD's interrogation system was known.

In the paranoia of the 'Great Terror', senior officers had been among the first to be shot as Trotskyite-fascist spies. Around 30,000 were arrested. Many of the most senior had been executed and the majority tortured into making ludicrous confessions. Zhukov, who had been close to a number of the victims, had kept a bag packed ready for prison since the purge began two years before. Having long expected this moment, he wrote a farewell letter to his wife. 'For you I have this request,' it began. 'Do not give in to snivelling, keep steady, and try with dignity to endure the unpleasant separation honestly.'

But when Zhukov reached Moscow by train the next day, he was not arrested or taken to the Lubyanka Prison. He was told to report to the Kremlin to see Stalin's old crony from the 1st Cavalry Army in the civil war, Marshal Kliment Voroshilov, now the people's commissar of defence. During the purge, this 'mediocre, faceless, intellectually dim' soldier had strengthened his position by zealously eliminating talented commanders. Nikita Khrushchev, with earthy directness, later called him 'the biggest bag of shit in the army'.

Zhukov heard that he was to fly out to the Soviet satellite state of Outer Mongolia. There he was to take command of the 57th Special Corps, including both Red Army and Mongolian forces, to inflict a decisive reverse on the Imperial Japanese Army. Stalin was angry that the local commander seemed to have achieved little. With the threat of war from Hitler in the west, he wanted to put an end to Japanese provocations from the puppet state of Manchukuo. Rivalry between Russia and Japan dated from Tsarist times and Russia's humiliating defeat in 1905 had certainly not been forgotten by the Soviet regime. Under Stalin its forces in the Far East had been greatly strengthened.

The Japanese military were obsessed by the threat of Bolshevism. And

ever since the signature in November 1936 of the Anti-Comintern Pact between Germany and Japan, tensions on the Mongolian frontier had increased between Red Army frontier units and the Japanese Kwantung Army. The temperature had been raised considerably by a succession of border clashes in 1937, and the major one in 1938, the Changkufeng Incident at Lake Khasan, 110 kilometres south-west of Vladivostok.

The Japanese were also angry that the Soviet Union was supporting their Chinese enemy not just economically but also with T-26 tanks, a large staff of military advisers and 'volunteer' air squadrons. The leaders of the Kwantung Army became increasingly frustrated with the Emperor Hirohito's reluctance in August 1938 to allow them to respond to the Soviets in massive force. Their arrogance was based on the mistaken assumption that the Soviet Union would not strike back. They demanded carte blanche to act as they saw fit in any future border incidents. Their motives were self-interested. A low-level conflict with the Soviet Union would force Tokyo to increase the Kwantung Army, not reduce it. They feared that some of their formations might otherwise be diverted south to the war against the Chinese Nationalist armies of Chiang Kai-shek.

There was some support for the aggressive views of the Kwantung leadership within the imperial general staff in Tokyo. But the navy and the civilian politicians were deeply concerned. Pressure from Nazi Germany on Japan to regard the Soviet Union as the main enemy made them most uneasy. They did not want to become involved in a northern war along the Mongolian and Siberian borders. This split brought down the government of Prince Konoe Fumimaro. But the argument in senior government and military circles did not abate as the approach of war in Europe became self-evident. The army and extreme right-wing groups publicized and often exaggerated the growing number of clashes on the northern frontiers. And the Kwantung Army, without informing Tokyo, issued an order allowing the commander on the spot to act as he thought fit to punish the perpetrators. This was passed off under the so-called prerogative of 'field initiative', which allowed armies to move troops for reasons of security within their own theatre without consulting the imperial general staff.

The Nomonhan Incident, which the Soviet Union later referred to as the Battle of Khalkhin Gol after the river, began on 12 May 1939. A Mongolian cavalry regiment crossed the Khalkhin Gol to graze their shaggy little mounts on the wide, undulating steppe. They then advanced some twenty kilometres from the river, which the Japanese regarded as the border, to the large village of Nomonhan, which the Mongolian People's Republic claimed lay on the frontier line. Manchurian forces from the Kwantung Army pushed them back to the Khalkhin Gol, then the Mongolians counter-attacked. Skirmishing back and forth continued

for about two weeks. The Red Army brought up reinforcements. On 28 May, the Soviet and Mongolian forces destroyed a Japanese force of 200 men and some antiquated armoured cars. In mid-June, Red Army aviation bombers raided a number of targets while their ground forces pushed forward into Nomonhan.

Escalation rapidly followed. Red Army units in the area were reinforced by troops from the Trans-Baikal military district, as Zhukov had demanded after his arrival on 5 June. The main problem facing the Soviet forces was that they were operating over 650 kilometres from the nearest railhead, which meant a huge logistic effort with trucks over dirt roads that were so bad that the round trip took five days. This formidable difficulty at least lulled the Japanese into underestimating the fighting power of the forces Zhukov was assembling.

They sent forward to Nomonhan the 23rd Division of Lieutenant General Komatsubara Michitaro and part of the 7th Division. The Kwantung Army demanded a greatly increased air presence to support its troops. This caused concern in Tokyo. The imperial general staff sent an order forbidding retaliatory strikes and announced that one of their officers was coming over to report back on the situation. This news prompted the Kwantung commanders to complete the operation before they were restrained. On the morning of 27 June, they sent their air squadrons in a strike against Soviet bases in Outer Mongolia. The general staff in Tokyo were furious and despatched a series of orders forbidding any further air activity.

On the night of 1 July, the Japanese stormed across the Khalkhin Gol and seized a strategic hill threatening the Soviet flank. In three days of heavy fighting, however, Zhukov eventually forced them back across the river in a counter-attack with his tanks. He then occupied part of the east bank and began his great deception – what the Red Army termed *maskirovka*. While Zhukov was secretly preparing a major offensive, his troops gave the impression of creating a static defensive line. Badly encoded messages were sent demanding more and more materials for bunkers, loudspeakers broadcast the noise of pile-drivers, pamphlets entitled *What the Soviet Soldier Must Know in Defence* were distributed in prodigal quantities so that some fell into enemy hands. Zhukov, meanwhile, was bringing in tank reinforcements under cover of darkness and concealing them. His truck drivers became exhausted from ferrying up sufficient reserves of ammunition for the offensive over the terrible roads from the railhead.

On 23 July, the Japanese attacked again head-on, but they failed to break the Soviet line. Their own supply problems meant that they again had to wait some time before they were ready to launch a third assault. But they were unaware that Zhukov's force had by now increased to 58,000

men, with nearly 500 tanks and 250 aircraft.

At 05.45 hours on Sunday, 20 August, Zhukov launched his surprise attack, first with a three-hour artillery bombardment, then with tanks and aircraft, as well as infantry and cavalry. The heat was terrible. With temperatures over 40 degrees Centigrade, machine guns and cannon are said to have jammed and the dust and smoke from explosions obscured the battlefield.

While the Soviet infantry, which included three rifle divisions and a paratroop brigade, held hard in the centre tying down the bulk of the Japanese forces, Zhukov sent his three armoured brigades and a Mongolian cavalry division from behind in encircling movements. His tanks, which forded a tributary of the Khalkhin Gol at speed, included T-26s, which had been used in the Spanish Civil War to support the Republicans, and much faster prototypes of what later became the T-34, the most effective medium tank of the Second World War. The obsolete Japanese tanks did not stand a chance. Their guns lacked armour-piercing shells.

Japanese infantry, despite having no effective anti-tank guns, fought desperately. Lieutenant Sadakaji was seen to charge a tank wielding his samurai sword until he was cut down. Japanese soldiers fought on from their earth bunkers, inflicting heavy casualties on their attackers, who in some cases brought up flamethrowing tanks to deal with them. Zhukov was undismayed by his own losses. When the commander-in-chief of the Trans-Baikal Front, who had come to observe the battle, suggested that he should halt the offensive for the moment, Zhukov gave his superior short shrift. If he stopped the attack and started it again, he argued, Soviet losses would be ten times greater 'because of our indecisiveness'.

Despite the Japanese determination never to surrender, the Kwantung Army's antiquated tactics and armament produced a humiliating defeat. Komatsubara's forces were surrounded and almost completely destroyed in a protracted massacre inflicting 61,000 casualties. The Red Army lost 7,974 killed and 15,251 wounded. By the morning of 31 August, the battle was over. During its course, the Nazi–Soviet pact had been signed in Moscow, and, as it ended, German troops massed on the Polish frontiers ready to begin the war in Europe. Isolated clashes continued until the middle of September, but Stalin decided in the light of the world situation that it would be prudent to agree to Japanese requests for a ceasefire.

Zhukov, who had come to Moscow fearing arrest, now returned there to receive from Stalin's hands the gold star of Hero of the Soviet Union. His first victory, a bright moment in a terrible period for the Red Army, had far-reaching results. The Japanese had been shaken to the core by this unexpected defeat, while their Chinese enemies, both Nationalist and

Communist, were encouraged. In Tokyo, the 'strike north' faction, which wanted war against the Soviet Union, received a major setback. The 'strike south' party, led by the navy, was henceforth in the ascendant. In April 1941, to Berlin's dismay, a Soviet–Japanese non-aggression pact would be signed just a few weeks before Operation Barbarossa, Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union. The battle of Khalkhin Gol thus represented a major influence on the subsequent Japanese decision to move against the colonies of France, the Netherlands and Britain in south-east Asia, and even take on the United States Navy in the Pacific. The consequent refusal by Tokyo to attack the Soviet Union in the winter of 1941 would thus play a critical role in the geo-political turning point of the war, both in the Far East and in Hitler's life-and-death struggle with the Soviet Union.

Hitler's strategy in the pre-war period had not been consistent. At times he had hoped to make an alliance with Britain in advance of his eventual intention to attack the Soviet Union, but then planned to knock it out of a continental role by a pre-emptive strike against France. To protect his eastern flank in case he did strike west first, Hitler had pushed his foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop into making overtures to Poland, offering an alliance. The Poles, well aware of the dangers of provoking Stalin, and rightly suspecting that Hitler wanted their country as a satellite, proved exceedingly cautious. Yet the Polish government had made a serious mistake out of sheer opportunism. When Germany moved into the Sudetenland in 1938, Polish forces occupied the Czechoslovak province of Teschen, which Warsaw had claimed since 1920 to be ethnically Polish, and also pushed forward the frontier in the Carpathian Mountains. This move antagonized the Soviets and dismayed the British and French governments. Polish over-confidence played into Hitler's hands. The Poles' idea of creating a central European bloc against German expansion – a 'Third Europe' as they called it – proved to be a delusion.

On 8 March 1939, shortly before his troops occupied Prague and the rest of Czechoslovakia, Hitler told his generals that he intended to crush Poland. He argued that Germany would then be able to profit from Polish resources and dominate central Europe to the south. He had decided to secure Poland's quiescence by conquest, not by diplomacy, before attacking westwards. He also told them that he intended to destroy the 'Jewish democracy' of the United States.

On 23 March, Hitler seized the district of Memel from Lithuania to add to East Prussia. His programme for war was accelerated because he feared that British and French rearmament would soon catch up. Yet he still did not take seriously Chamberlain's guarantee to Poland, announced in the House of Commons on 31 March. On 3 April, he ordered his generals to

prepare plans for Operation White, an invasion of Poland which was to be ready by the end of August.

Chamberlain, reluctant to deal with Stalin out of a visceral anti-Communism, and overestimating the strength of the Poles, was slow to create a defensive bloc against Hitler across central Europe and the Balkans. In fact the British guarantee to Poland implicitly excluded the Soviet Union. Chamberlain's government began to react to this glaring omission only when reports came of German–Soviet trade talks. Stalin, who loathed the Poles, was deeply alarmed by the failure of the British and French governments to stand up to Hitler. Their omission the previous year to include him in the discussions over the fate of Czechoslovakia had only increased his resentment. He also suspected that the British and French wanted to manoeuvre him into a conflict with Germany to avoid fighting themselves. He naturally preferred to see the capitalist states engage in their own war of attrition.

On 18 April, Stalin put the British and French governments to the test by offering an alliance with a pact promising assistance to any central European country threatened by an aggressor. The British were uncertain how to react. The first instinct of both Lord Halifax, the foreign secretary, and Sir Alexander Cadogan, his permanent under-secretary, was to consider the Soviet démarche to be 'mischievous' in intent. Chamberlain feared that to agree to such a move would simply provoke Hitler. In fact it spurred the Führer to seek his own accord with the Soviet dictator. In any case, the Poles and the Romanians were suspicious. They rightly feared that the Soviet Union would demand access for Red Army troops across their territory. The French, on the other hand, having seen Russia as their natural ally against Germany since before the First World War, were much keener on the idea of a Soviet alliance. They felt that they could not move without Britain, and so applied pressure on London to agree to joint military talks with the Soviet regime. Stalin was unimpressed by the hesitant British reaction, but he also had his own secret agenda of pushing the Soviet frontiers further west. He already had his eye on Romanian Bessarabia, Finland, the Baltic states and eastern Poland, especially the parts of Belorussia and Ukraine ceded to Poland after its victory in 1920. The British, finally accepting the necessity of a pact with the Soviet Union, only began to negotiate towards the end of May. But Stalin suspected, with a good deal of justification, that the British government was playing for time.

He was even less impressed by the Franco-British military delegation which departed on 5 August aboard a slow steamer to Leningrad. General Aimé Doumenc and Admiral Sir Reginald Plunkett-Ernle-Erle-Drax lacked any power of decision. They could only report back to Paris and London. Their mission was in any case doomed to failure for other reasons.

Doumenc and Drax faced an insuperable problem with Stalin's insistence on the right of transit for Red Army troops across Polish and Romanian territory. It was a demand which neither country would countenance. Both were viscerally suspicious of Communists in general and of Stalin above all. Time was slipping away as the fruitless talks continued into the second half of August, yet even the French, who were desperate for a deal, could not persuade the government in Warsaw to concede on this point. The Polish commander-in-chief, Marshal Edward Śmigły-Rydz, said that 'with the Germans we risk the loss of our liberty, but with the Russians we lose our soul'.

Hitler, provoked by the British and French attempts to include Romania in a defensive pact against further German aggression, decided that it was time to consider the ideologically unthinkable step of a Nazi–Soviet pact. On 2 August, Ribbentrop first broached the idea of a new relationship with the Soviet chargé d'affaires in Berlin. 'There is no problem from the Baltic to the Black Sea', Ribbentrop said to him, 'that could not be solved between the two of us.'

Ribbentrop did not hide Germany's aggressive intentions towards Poland and hinted at a division of the spoils. Two days later, the German ambassador in Moscow indicated that Germany would consider the Baltic states as part of the Soviet sphere of influence. On 14 August, Ribbentrop suggested that he should visit Moscow for talks. Vyacheslav Molotov, the new Soviet foreign minister, expressed concern at German support for the Japanese, whose forces were still locked in combat with the Red Army either side of the Khalkhin Gol, but he nevertheless indicated a Soviet willingness to continue discussions, especially about the Baltic states.

For Stalin, the benefits became increasingly obvious. In fact he had been considering an accommodation with Hitler ever since the Munich Agreement. Preparations were taken a step further in the spring of 1939. On 3 May, NKVD troops surrounded the commissariat of foreign affairs. 'Purge the ministry of Jews,' Stalin had ordered. 'Clean out the "synagogue".' The veteran Soviet diplomat Maxim Litvinov was replaced as foreign minister by Molotov and a number of other Jews were arrested.

An agreement with Hitler would allow Stalin to seize the Baltic states and Bessarabia, to say nothing of eastern Poland, in the event of a German invasion from the west. And knowing that Hitler's next step would be against France and Britain, he hoped to see German power weakened in what he expected would be a bloody war with the capitalist west. This would give him time to build up the Red Army, weakened and demoralized by his purge.

For Hitler, an agreement with Stalin would enable him to launch his war, first against Poland and then against France and Britain, even without

allies of his own. The so-called Pact of Steel with Italy, signed on 22 May, amounted to very little, since Mussolini did not believe his country would be ready for war until 1943. Hitler, however, still gambled on his hunch that Britain and France would shrink from war when he invaded Poland, despite their guarantees.

Nazi Germany's propaganda war against Poland intensified. The Poles were to be blamed for the invasion being prepared against them. And Hitler took every precaution to avoid negotiations because he did not want to be deprived of a war this time by last-minute concessions.

To carry the German people with him, he exploited their deep resentment against Poland because it had received West Prussia and part of Silesia in the hated Versailles settlement. The Free City of Danzig and the Polish Corridor which, created to give Poland access to the Baltic, separated East Prussia from the rest of the Reich were brandished as two of the Versailles Treaty's greatest injustices. Yet on 23 May the Führer had declared that the coming war was not about the Free City of Danzig, but about a war for *Lebensraum* in the east. Reports of the oppression against the one million ethnic Germans in Poland were grossly manipulated. Not surprisingly, Hitler's threats to Poland had provoked discriminatory measures against them and some 70,000 fled to the Reich in late August. Polish claims that ethnic Germans were involved in acts of subversion before the conflict began were almost certainly false. In any case, allegations in the Nazi press of persecution of ethnic Germans in Poland were portrayed in dramatic terms.

On 17 August, when the German army was carrying out manoeuvres on the River Elbe, two British captains from the embassy who had been invited as observers found that the younger German officers were 'very self-confident and sure that the German Army could take on everyone'. Their generals and senior foreign ministry officials, however, were nervous that the invasion of Poland would bring about a European war. Hitler remained convinced that the British would not fight. In any case, he reasoned, his forthcoming pact with the Soviet Union would reassure those generals who feared a war on two fronts. But on 19 August, just in case the British and French declared war, Grossadmiral Erich Raeder ordered the pocket battleships *Deutschland* and *Graf Spee*, as well as sixteen U-boats, to put to sea and head for the Atlantic.

On 21 August at 11.30 hours, the German foreign ministry on the Wilhelmstrasse announced that a Soviet–German non-aggression pact was being proposed. When news of Stalin's agreement to talks reached Hitler at the Berghof, his Alpine retreat at Berchtesgaden, he is supposed to have clenched his fists in victory and banged the table, declaring to his

entourage: 'I've got them! I've got them!' 'Germans in cafés were thrilled as they thought it would mean peace,' observed a member of the British embassy staff. And the ambassador, Sir Nevile Henderson, reported to London soon afterwards that 'the first impression in Berlin was one of immense relief . . . Once more the faith of the German people in the ability of Herr Hitler to obtain his objective without war was reaffirmed.'

The British were shaken by the news, but for the French, who had counted far more on a pact with their traditional ally Russia, it was a bombshell. Ironically, Franco in Spain and the Japanese leadership were the most appalled. They felt betrayed, having received no warning that the instigator of the Anti-Comintern Pact was now seeking an alliance with Moscow. The government in Tokyo collapsed under the shock, but the news also represented a grave blow to Chiang Kai-shek and the Chinese Nationalists.

On 23 August, Ribbentrop made his historic flight to the Soviet capital. There were few sticking points in the negotiations as the two totalitarian regimes divided central Europe between them in a secret protocol. Stalin demanded all of Latvia, which Ribbentrop conceded after receiving Hitler's prompt approval by telephone. Once both the public non-aggression pact and the secret protocols had been signed, Stalin proposed a toast to Hitler. He said to Ribbentrop that he knew 'how much the German nation loves its Führer'.

That same day, Sir Nevile Henderson had flown down to Berchtesgaden with a letter from Chamberlain in a last-ditch attempt to avoid war. But Hitler simply blamed the British for having encouraged the Poles to adopt an anti-German stance. Henderson, although an arch-appeaser, was finally convinced that 'the corporal of the last war was even more anxious to prove what he could do as a conquering Generalissimo in the next'. That same night, Hitler issued orders for the army to prepare to invade Poland three days later.

At 03.00 hours on 24 August, the British embassy in Berlin received a telegram from London with the codeword Rajah. Diplomats, some of them still in their pyjamas, began to burn secret papers. At midday a warning was issued to all British subjects to leave the country. The ambassador, although short of sleep from his journey to Berchtesgaden, still played bridge that evening with members of his staff.

The following day, Henderson again saw Hitler, who had come up to Berlin. The Führer offered a pact with Britain once he had occupied Poland, but he was exasperated when Henderson said that to reach any agreement he would have to desist in his aggression and evacuate Czechoslovakia as well. Once again, Hitler made his declaration that, if there was to be war, it should come now and not when he was fifty-five or sixty. That

evening, to Hitler's genuine surprise and shock, the Anglo-Polish pact was formally signed.

In Berlin, British diplomats assumed the worst. 'We had moved all our personal luggage into the Embassy ballroom,' one of them wrote, 'which was now beginning to look like Victoria station after the arrival of a boat-train.' German embassies and consulates in Britain, France and Poland were told to order German nationals to return to the Reich or move to a neutral country.

On Saturday, 26 August, the German government cancelled the commemoration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Battle of Tannenberg. But in fact this ceremony had been used to camouflage a massive concentration of troops in East Prussia. The old battleship *Schleswig-Holstein* had arrived off Danzig the day before, supposedly on a goodwill visit, but without any notification to the Polish government. Its magazines were filled with shells ready to bombard the Polish positions on the Westerplatte Peninsula near the estuary of the Vistula.

In Berlin that weekend, the population revelled in the glorious weather. The beaches along the Grunewald shore of the Wannsee were packed with sunbathers and swimmers. They seemed oblivious to the threat of war, despite the announcement that rationing would be introduced. At the British embassy, the staff began drinking up the stocks of champagne in the cellar. They had noted the greatly increased number of troops on the streets, many of them wearing newly issued yellow jackboots, whose leather had not yet been blackened with polish.

The start of the invasion had been planned for that day, but Hitler, taken off balance by Britain and France's resolution to support Poland, had postponed it the evening before. He was still hoping for signs of British vacillation. Embarrassingly, a unit of Brandenburger commandos, who did not receive the cancellation order in time, had advanced into Poland to seize a key bridge.

Hitler, still hoping to put the blame on Poland for the invasion, pretended to agree to negotiations, with Britain and France and also with Poland. But a black farce ensued. He refused to present any terms for the Polish government to discuss, he would not invite an emissary from Warsaw and he set a time limit of midnight on 30 August. He also rejected an offer from Mussolini's government to mediate. On 28 August, he again ordered the army to be ready to invade on the morning of 1 September.

Ribbentrop, meanwhile, made himself unavailable to both the Polish and British ambassadors. It accorded with his habitual posture of gazing in an aloof manner into the middle distance, ignoring those around him as if they were not worthy to share his thoughts. He finally agreed to see Henderson at midnight on 30 August, just as the uncommunicated peace

terms expired. Henderson demanded to know what these terms were. Ribbentrop 'produced a lengthy document', Henderson reported, 'which he read out to me in German, or rather gabbled through to me as fast as he could, in a tone of the utmost annoyance . . . When he had finished, I accordingly asked him to let me see it. Herr von Ribbentrop refused categorically, threw the document with a contemptuous gesture on the table and said that it was now out of date since no Polish Emissary had arrived at Berlin by midnight.' The next day, Hitler issued Directive No. 1 for Operation White, the invasion of Poland, which had been prepared over the previous five months.

In Paris, there was a grim resignation, with the memory of more than a million dead in the previous conflict. In Britain, the mass evacuation of children from London had been announced for 1 September, but the majority of the population still believed that the Nazi leader was bluffing. The Poles had no such illusions; yet there were no signs of panic in Warsaw, only determination.

The Nazis' final attempt to manufacture a *casus belli* was truly representative of their methods. This act of black propaganda had been planned and organized by Reinhard Heydrich, deputy to Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler. Heydrich had carefully selected a group of his most trusted SS men. They would fake an attack both on a German customs post and on the radio station near the border town of Gleiwitz, then put out a message in Polish. The SS would shoot some drugged prisoners from Sachsenhausen concentration camp dressed in Polish uniforms, and leave their bodies as evidence. On the afternoon of 31 August, Heydrich telephoned the officer he had put in charge of the project to give the coded phrase to launch the operation: 'Grandmother dead!' It was chillingly symbolic that the first victims of the Second World War in Europe should have been concentration camp prisoners murdered for a lie.