

Anti-Soviet Operations of Kwantung Army Intelligence, 1940-41

Reorganization of Japanese military intelligence in Manchuria after the outbreak of war in Europe.

In April 1940 Japanese military strength in Manchuria, consisting mainly of the Kwantung Army, was in the midst of a general expansion. The number of divisions had increased from two in 1931, when the Mukden Incident led to full Japanese control of Manchuria, to nine. Nondivisional strength, moreover, a significant proportion of the total Japanese garrison, had increased steadily. In the intelligence establishment, however, personnel strength had lagged and tactical and organizational deficiencies persisted.

As described in an earlier article,² the principal operating intelligence units, responsible for espionage, propaganda, and sabotage, had been the Army Special Services Agencies in the field, a large one at Harbin, whose diversified operations included document and radio broadcast analysis, and seven "front-line" ASSA's mostly located near the borders, which interrogated refugees and deserters and tried without much success to run cross-border operations into the Soviet Union. These all reported in parallel direct to the Kwantung Army's headquarters Intelligence Section in Changchun, which therefore had tended to function as an operations management center and neglect its duties as a member of the headquarters' planning and policy staff. In addition to the ASSA's there were teams for visual observation of Soviet territory attached to tactical units stationed on the border and a Research Unit responsible at first only for breaking Soviet cipher messages but later for some plain-text traffic also. Plain-text communications intelligence had originally been the responsibility of a branch of the South Manchurian Railway Company--reporting, in another anomaly, not to the Intelligence Section but to the Operations Section at headquarters--which still handled the interception and analysis of traffic concerning the progress of the Baikal-Amur Magistral being constructed by the Soviets to supplement the Trans-Siberian Railroad.

The poor performance of this intelligence set-up during the Nomonhan incident, an engagement of divisional magnitude with Soviet troops near the Mongolian border in the middle of 1939, was investigated by a Nomonhan Incident Research Committee formed in December of that year, and the following spring saw the beginning of a reorganization stimulated by its findings.

This reorganization had two principal objectives: to separate the intelligence policy and planning echelon from the operating echelon; and to place the control of the ASSA's in a single intermediate headquarters. The policy and planning element, the Army headquarters Intelligence Section, would remain organically unchanged and would continue to exercise staff supervision over the ASSA's, but its tendency to translate its supervisory responsibility into operational control would be curtailed. The reorganization sought also to define the scope of operating units' functions, to tighten control over the ASSA's, and to provide separate units to handle different categories of intelligence.

The KAIG

The first step in the reorganization process was the creation of a Kwantung Army Intelligence Group to which all ASSA's were assigned for administration and operational control. The KAIG itself was immediately subordinate to the commanding general. The headquarters Intelligence Section was thus relieved of the many operational duties it had assumed while the ASSA's were subject to its direct control and was enabled to devote its entire attention to its mission of evaluating information and preparing intelligence estimates.

The outlying ASSA's, redesignated KAIG field branches, were augmented in number until they ultimately made 11 main branches and 6 sub-branches. At KAIG headquarters, formed from the Harbin ASSA, the principal component was an Intelligence Department staffed by 10 intelligence officers, 150 NCO's, and an undetermined number of Army civilians and other employees such as White Russians. The Department had separate divisions for Espionage, Documents, Communications, Propaganda and Sabotage, and Research. In addition, there were two Schools, one for Interpreter Training and one for Espionage Training.

Organization was not uniform among the field branches, varying with their mission, volume of work, and location. Most of them had, beside a chief and deputy, one to three intelligence officers. At least two were given duties extraneous to the KAIG intelligence mission: the Apaka Branch, organized in eastern Mongolia after the Kwantung Army had made an advance there, served simultaneously as an agency of the newly-formed Mongolia Garrison Army; and the Mukden Branch was required to supervise the key munitions industries in the area. These undesirable diversions from the intelligence point of view were ordered by Kwantung Army Headquarters.

The KAIG mission did not include communications intelligence, which the investigation of the Nomonhan incident had determined to be the weakest link in the Kwantung Army's intelligence establishment. This was given to two organizations especially established for the purpose, one for the interception and deciphering of cryptographic messages, the other for the interception and analysis of plain-text messages.

Cipher Intercepts

To handle cryptographic intercepts a Kwantung Army Communication Intelligence Group was formed, based on the old Research Unit but with considerably augmented organization and equipment. The Communication Intelligence Group concentrated on Soviet cryptographic traffic and, except for a separate Kwantung Army Air Force organization specializing in Soviet Air Force codes, had exclusive responsibility in this field; other cryptanalytic activities of the Japanese Army were confined to other countries than the Soviet Union.

Several steps were taken to increase the Group's capacity for deciphering Soviet traffic, and one of these was made possible by a little-known history of Japanese-Polish cooperation in anti-Soviet intelligence; it had been this collaboration between the general staffs of the Japanese and Polish armies in the thirties that had resulted in the formation of the old Research Unit. When the Polish General Staff collapsed in 1939 with the fall of Warsaw, four of its qualified intelligence officers, including one cryptanalyst, facing capture by Soviet forces, were recruited by the Japanese military attaché and dispatched to

Japan, arriving in March 1940. After Japan signed the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy, three of them left for London to join the Polish Army Headquarters in exile, but it was suggested to the cryptanalytic expert that he stay in Japan because of his past friendly relations with the Japanese Army General Staff. This man was put in charge of the Communication Intelligence Group's research effort, and he rendered significant service in improving techniques for deciphering Soviet codes.

Plain Text and Traffic Patterns

The South Manchurian Railway Company's and more recently the Research Unit's successes with the interception of messages in clear text had increased the importance accorded by the Intelligence Section to this aspect of communications intelligence. Consequently it was decided to expand facilities for interception of both wireless telegraphy and radiotelephone traffic and also to commence intensified study and research on the Soviet Union's entire Far Eastern signal complex, plotting the location of all types of communications stations as a basis for estimating the strength and disposition of the Soviet forces. The plans, which received full support from all echelons, including the Army General Staff, called for an uninterrupted surveillance of Soviet communications activity that would make it possible to draw conclusions from such data as numbers of transmissions daily, volumes of traffic, and changes in established patterns.

A principal step in the implementation of this program was the formation in August 1940 of an East Asia Communication Investigation League to monitor and copy the Soviet traffic. Its personnel were drawn mainly from the Manchurian Telephone and Telegraph Company, an organ of the Manchukuoan Government. The League was allocated equipment and supplies valued at \$425,000 and was subordinated to the Kwantung Army commander. The Intelligence Section exercised staff supervision over its organization, installations, and activities and was to be forwarded its product daily.

In the spring of 1941, as the League began to be effective, it had about 320 communication technicians and intelligence personnel distributed among eight components. Its headquarters at Changchun included a

section numbering about 50 that was responsible for evaluating the information obtained from the intercept stations. The Intelligence Section assigned one of its officers who had received training in communications intelligence to this headquarters. It assigned another to the League's Central Intercept Station, established in Harbin. This station, equipped with excellent facilities for intercepting both manual and automatic transmissions, performed in addition to the recording and copying of wireless telegraph and radiotelephone communications the functions of collating data obtained from these interceptions, determining the locations of Soviet transmitters and keeping their transmissions under uninterrupted study, and doing research on communications technology, especially interception techniques. In six cities where the KAIG had espionage branches the League established auxiliary intercept stations operating under the command of the local KAIG chief and responsible for copying local telegraphic communications and monitoring Soviet radio broadcasts. Plans to equip these stations with direction finders to assist the Central Station in fixing transmitter locations never materialized.

At this time a Technical Advisory Committee was formed to give the League the benefit of outside expertise. Consisting of six civilian communication experts from Japan, it was to keep abreast of new developments in communications equipment and techniques in order to anticipate improvements in Soviet communications. The Committee made significant contributions to improved interception of messages in Manchuria, and it also was of assistance to the intercept agencies of the Army General Staff in Tokyo, particularly during the closing days of the war.

Kwantung Army Intelligence



Kwantung Army intelligence planners had expected the League to absorb the original agency to venture into the field of plain-text interception, the Northern Group Branch of the South Manchurian Railway's Communication Research Department. Differences which developed between the two organizations, however, militated against their merger, and the Railway's unit continued to function under the Operations Section, although it did furnish information to the Intelligence Section.

Other Measures

Physical scrutiny of Soviet territory, the principal intelligence activity of the tactical commands, was greatly improved by measures taken after the Nomonhan Incident. Observation teams were enabled to work more efficiently, especially after the spring of 1941, by being furnished more and better telescopes, an increased number of observation points, and improved techniques. One defect in the system which continued to be felt was that all personnel for the observation teams were drawn from the tactical units and so reduced the strength of the combat echelons manning the Soviet border.

By June 1941, when hostilities broke out between Germany and the Soviet Union, the Intelligence Section had relinquished direct control of field activities and resumed its normal duties. No longer attempting to control a scattering of small units, it restricted itself to supervision of the three major intelligence agencies and the intelligence sections of the tactical commands.

Of other steps taken by the Intelligence Section to enhance the efficiency of operations, the most notable were the revision of the Peacetime Intelligence Service Regulations, the development of Wartime Intelligence Service Regulations, and the establishment of procedures for processing raw intelligence. The revision of the peacetime regulations was primarily a matter of adjusting them to the changes in operational control and supervision resulting from the reorganization. The formulation in March 1941 of emergency or wartime regulations, which fulfilled a recommendation of the Nomonhan Incident Research Committee, led to a provision in the Kwantung Army's emergency mobilization plan for organizing, in an emergency, five field intelligence units to be assigned to the front-line armies. This concept grew from the Harbin ASSA's initiative in organizing and sending three such units to the front during the Nomonhan incident. In its study of the processing of raw data, the Intelligence Section took the position that sound conclusions could be drawn only by systematic examination and evaluation after the raw and often fragmentary information had been accumulated and collated. In order to highlight this outlook, the Intelligence Section redesignated its Intelligence Division the "Evaluation Division." Composed of experienced military and civilian personnel, this division was closely supervised by the chief of the Intelligence Section himself.

An important additional measure taken by the Kwantung Army was the establishment, for the first time, of an intelligence communication

network. The completion of an underground cable from Changchun to Harbin gave the Intelligence Section a direct telephone line to the KAIG headquarters for intelligence matters exclusively. A communications system between each army headquarters in the field and its Soviet territory observation teams had been organized earlier.

The improvements in the Kwantung Army intelligence organization recommended by the Nomonhan Incident Research Committee had nearly been completed by June 1941 when Germany attacked the Soviet Union. These improvements, however, except for the provision of the Wartime Intelligence Service Regulations, were within the framework of peacetime organization and operations. The instrumentality for implementing these regulations and converting the complex to a wartime footing was the "Kwantung Army Special Maneuvers" ordered now as a cover for contingent mobilization against the USSR.

Mobilization for War

The Kwantung Army's General Staff, assessing the situation after the outbreak of German-Soviet hostilities, concluded that its best course was to watch and wait for developments in what promised to be a long conflict, meanwhile only tightening its security measures against the Soviet Union. Authorities in Tokyo, however, attached greater weight to word from the German High Command through the Japanese ambassador in Berlin that operations against the Soviet Union would develop rapidly. In early July the Government decided that although Japan should not intervene for the present, if the German campaign created a favorable situation she should settle by force of arms the matter of the Soviet presence in the Far East. The General Staff in Tokyo consequently decided to reinforce Manchuria secretly, doubling the Kwantung Army's strength. For the ostensible purpose of the Special Maneuvers a mobilization was effected in Manchuria and reinforcements were sent from Japan--two divisions, 200 smaller ground units, and 100 air service units.

The Kwantung Army's intelligence organization was now put on a corresponding semi-wartime footing. On the basis of the wartime regulations formulated a few months before, additional intelligence

personnel were authorized and obtained; funds and equipment on a huge scale became available. Having long felt that support for anti-Soviet intelligence operations was neglected, the Intelligence Section grasped this opportunity to expedite the completion of its planned improvement and an expansion on a wartime basis. Although its strenuous efforts along this line were aimed more at securing a long-desired improvement in the intelligence organization than at preparing for probable hostilities, the result was the creation of a wartime intelligence establishment and changes among its components. Among these changes were the following.

The observation teams scrutinizing Soviet territory were strengthened. Additional personnel to the number of 700 or 800 were made available, and each team was placed under direct control of Kwantung Army Headquarters, remaining dependent on tactical units only for supply and administration. A communications network linking each team directly with the Headquarters was installed.

Battlefield intelligence units as originally conceived during the Nomonhan Incident were organized on an emergency basis. These units, numbering each about 20 persons, had transportation and communication facilities. Their mission was the collection of field data from POW's, documents, and similar sources, and the initial disposition of this information. Placed under the direct control of the local intelligence staff officer in order to facilitate distribution of collected information, they were to assist him in his peace-time duties until hostilities began.

Similarly the KAIG, besides reinforcing elements of its own headquarters and each field branch with additional personnel, prepared to organize several "field collection teams" to be sent wherever they were needed at any time. They were to collect data needed in prolonged operations, both from the battlefield intelligence units and by their own activity, reporting it rapidly to each field army and to the KAIG.

The East Asia Communication League was ordered to organize four mobile interception groups with a double mission--to provide tactical units with intercepted battlefield data, and to assist in deciphering coded Soviet traffic. Although the League was restricted to the interception of plain-text messages, these provided clues for the decipherment of encrypted traffic because they often duplicated or were related to those in code. The League organized these mobile

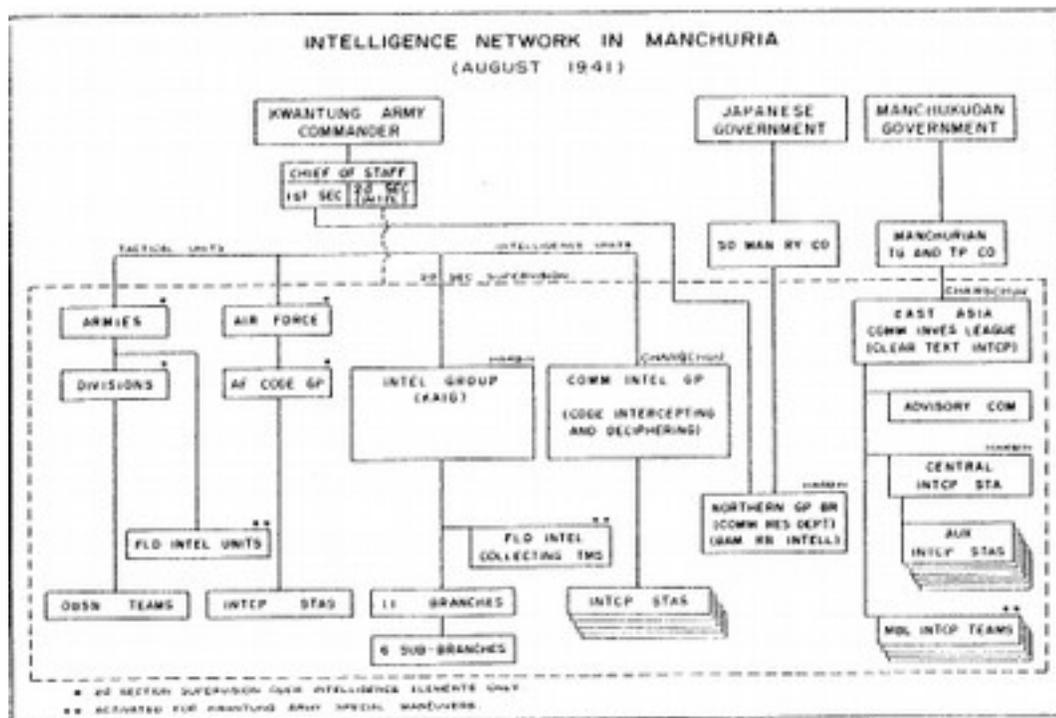
groups, and the Intelligence Section planned to assign one of them to each front-line army headquarters at the appropriate time.

Assessment of Results

The expansion of the Kwantung Army's intelligence establishment stimulated by the Nomonhan Incident was thus given an exceptional urgency through the "Special Maneuvers." When war broke out in the Pacific some of the planned reorganization and expansion remained to be completed, but the network had attained its largest size and intelligence operations showed a marked improvement in almost every respect.

In the cryptology field the Communication Intelligence Group continued to be successful in deciphering Soviet codes of four letters and in keeping abreast of changes in the code keys. Moreover, the Air Force Code Group had also made progress: in the spring of 1941 it learned many details about Soviet air maneuvers in the Trans-Baikal by deciphering encrypted traffic. The East Asia Communication Investigation League, through Intercepting plain-text telegraphic messages, continuously obtained significant fragmentary data bearing on the Soviet forces, much of it from telegrams sent home by Soviet soldiers which revealed details of local mobilizations and the arrival of fresh units in the Far East. Such message traffic provided information on the formation of new divisions in the Far East to replace the four sniper divisions hurried westward shortly after the German invasion.

Kwantung Army Intelligence



Uninterrupted study of the Soviet communications system developed a detailed knowledge of its organization and enabled the Kwantung Army to learn through station calls the disposition of Soviet air and ground strength. This constant study also made possible the quick recognition of changes in the usual Soviet communications routine that might be significant. For example, it was reported at about 1300 hours on 2 August 1941 that communications in the Soviet Far Eastern area had been suspended for about two hours. Considering that such a black-out might indicate an imminent Soviet move, the Intelligence Section alerted the commanders concerned and reported the information to Tokyo by telephone. So heavily did the Tokyo General Staff weigh this information that the Government convened an emergency conference with Imperial General Headquarters. That evening, however, the black-out was found to be due to propagation conditions, and the alert was lifted.

The observation teams scrutinizing Soviet territory greatly improved their work, including the statistical recording of all observed troop movements in most minute detail. Observations by the Third Army in the spring of 1941, for example, detailed the progress of Soviet army maneuvers being held in the Mountain Provinces east of Suifenhö. The observational data was so complete and carefully compiled that when German-Soviet hostilities began both the movement of Soviet troops westward to the

front and their replacement by personnel, weapons, and equipment moving eastward were noted in detail, along with the operation of the military rail trains and their loading and unloading points.

A rich mine of intelligence information were deserters from Soviet territory, who increased in numbers after the war with Germany began. In some localities they were reported at the rate of one every two days; at the end of 1941 they totalled about 130, mostly Soviet soldiers. Nearly all of them were taken to KAIG front-line branches for immediate questioning and later to KAIG headquarters in Harbin for further interrogation. By collating their statements KAIG ascertained the scale of Soviet mobilization, the approximate number, age, and quality of men drafted, the movement of units between the European and Far Eastern reaches of the Soviet Union, and the organization and equipment of the units. This flow of information more than compensated for KAIG's inadequate trans-border espionage. Stimulated by the scale of desertion from Soviet territory and the deserters' readiness to give information, the KAIG planned a program of inducing more of them, but the outbreak of war in the Pacific forestalled its application.

The overall performance of Kwantung Army intelligence must be considered of mixed quality, and its successes were relatively minor. Its lack of spectacular achievements can be attributed at least in part to Japan's wartime policy of avoiding provocation of the Soviet Union and restricting operations to the maintenance of close surveillance over Soviet activities, a difficult assignment to carry out under a limitation to the use of inoffensive means. There were, however, improvements in the intelligence mechanism as a result of the extensive reorganization and expansion. In many instances the resulting product was of good quality. The continuous accumulation of fragmentary data did lead to noticeable gains over the less well founded intelligence offered in earlier phases of the Japanese military venture in Manchuria. The Intelligence Section was enabled to assess data on the Soviet area with much more confidence and to make more valid estimates of the enemy situation. In the first year of war in the Pacific, Kwantung Army intelligence offered promise of considerable accomplishment, having been strengthened during the Special Maneuvers, having steadily improved its efficiency, and having amassed a store of significant information.

As the course of the war turned unfavorable for Japan, the strength of the Kwantung Army was reduced in a piecemeal fashion to provide reinforcements for Japanese forces in active combat theaters. As a

consequence the intelligence organization was given less and less support, and with decreasing personnel, fiscal resources, and equipment it unquestionably found it more and more difficult to perform its mission. Detailed information on its wartime performance, however, is practically non-existent: at the end of the war almost all personnel who had been engaged in anti-Soviet intelligence had been captured and all documents and records captured or destroyed.

¹This article is based on unclassified historical data compiled, with the assistance of personnel of the Japanese Kwantung Army, by the Military History Section of Headquarters, Army Forces Far East, and distributed by the Office of Military History, Department of the Army. The principal source is Volume X of the series Japanese Special Studies on Manchuria, issued in June 1955 under the title "Japanese Intelligence Planning Against the USSR."

²"Anti-Soviet Operations of Kwantung Army Intelligence, 1931-39," Intelligence Articles IV 2, p. 25 ff.

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