

SPECIAL ISSUE: JAPAN'S MILITARY EXPANSION IN MODERN TIMES AND CHINA'S WAR OF RESISTANCE: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Reinterpreting the Soviet Policy toward Japan before and after the Mukden Incident

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九一八事变爆发后，无论是挑起战端的日军，还是奉张及南京当局都密切关注莫斯科对此事变的外交态度。虽然面对中东铁路可能遭遇日军威胁的严峻情势，但苏联依旧采取“不干预政策”，坐视日军侵占中国整个东北地区。1932年后，苏联甚至第一时间便承认“满洲国”并开始与日本商洽中东铁路的售让事宜。斯大林及苏联最高当局之所以做出这样一系列的外交决策，除了受制于国际层面的大背景外，也与苏联当时已逐渐成型的外交模式有关，而且期间更掺杂了诸如情报缺失、预判失误等历史细节因素。

关键词：九一八事变 苏联外交 不干预政策 斯大林

Following the outbreak of the Mukden Incident, the Japanese Army, who provoked the incident, Fengtian warlord clique Zhang Zuolin and the Nanjing authorities all paid close attention to the diplomatic stance of Moscow regarding this incident. Although faced with the serious situation of the possibility of the Chinese Eastern Railway being threatened by the Japanese Army, the Soviet Union still adopted a “non-intervention policy,” sitting by and watching the whole of Northeast China occupied by the Japanese Army. After 1932, the Soviet Union even took the first opportunity to recognize the “Manchukuo” and began negotiations with Japan about the sale of the Chinese Eastern Railway. The series of diplomatic decisions made by Stalin and the Soviet authorities were related to the gradually formed diplomatic model of the Soviet Union apart from the overall international background. In addition, they were also influenced by such historical details as lack of intelligence and failure to correctly judge the future.

Keywords: Mukden Incident, Soviet diplomacy, non-intervention policy, Stalin

I. Introduction

Late in the evening of September 18, 1931, the squadron of Liutiao Lake of the Hushitai Garrison Unit, Japanese Kwangtung Army, detonated the dynamite placed in advance at Liutiao Lake South Manchuria Railway branch, 7.5 kilometers north of Shenyang, and sabotaged a section of the railway. After the explosion, the Kwangtung Army instantly accused the Chinese Army of the act and then branched out into columns to attack the garrison of Beidaying of the Northeastern Army and provoked the Mukden Incident (September 18 Incident 九·一八事变), marking the beginning of Japanese invasion of the Northeast China.

At the start of the incident, Chinese people widely believed that as the traditional interested party of the Northeast region, the Soviet Union would certainly do its utmost to maintain its rights and interests in the Northeast China. Besides, Japan was originally the top enemy of the Soviet Union in the Far East. How to deal with the expansion of Japanese power had always been the priority of its policies in the Far East, and Northeast China was the first “bulwark” of Soviet Union against the Japanese threat. Based on the response of the Soviet Union in the “Chinese Eastern Railway Incident” two years before the Mukden incident, quite some people believed that the Soviet Union would take the opportunity to intervene. Newspapers around China anticipated that the Soviet Union might take intervening actions: “Soviet Russian army taking action and to reinforce border defense.”¹ Many European and American major newspapers and magazines also believed that the Soviet Union might use force to intervene.

Except the conjecture made by the media at home and abroad about the response of the Soviet Union, Fengtian and Nanjing authorities also had doubts about the massive Soviet forces being assembled at Sino-Soviet border. They both suspected that the Soviet Union might directly intervene in the Manchuria current political situation.² However, the situation turned out to be totally different from the original expectations of all parties. Far from dispatching troops to intervene, the Soviet Union, instead, adhered to the so-called “non-intervention policy,” indifferent at the sight of the whole Northeast area being annexed by Japan. Up to April 1932, Moscow took the first opportunity to recognize the “Manchukuo” (满洲国) and even negotiated with Japan afterward regarding the issue of selling the Chinese Eastern Railway. What had led the Soviet Union to make a series of such important

1 “Soviet Russia Prepares to Send Troops to Guard the Railway,” *The Republican Daily News*, September 21, 1931, Ed. 4.

2 “Wang Ruihua Reports to Zhang Jinhui on Soviet Troops Gathering in Dauriya” (September 24, 1931). Edited by Liaoning Provincial Archives, *Zhang Xueliang Archive (5) Reserved by Liaoning Provincial Archives—Zhang Xueliang and the Mukden Incident*, vol. 1), pp. 375-377; C.f. “Mo Teh-hui Reports to Zhang Jianghui that Soviet Increase of Troops at Sino-Soviet Borders Is Actually for Self-defense” (September 25, 1931), Edited by Liaoning Provincial Archives, *Zhang Xueliang Archive (5) Reserved by Liaoning Provincial Archives—Zhang Xueliang and the Mukden Incident*, vol. 1, p. 384; C.f. *Archives of President Chiang Kai-shek Biographical Sketch Manuscript*, November 1, 1931, vol. 12, pp. 221-222.

compromises to Japan? Were they established strategies of the Soviet Union all along or were they adopted against the will?

While trying to answer this question, previous research often held a dualistic view. On the one hand, the Soviet Union naturally opposed the military invasion of Japan forcefully and extremely sympathized with sufferings of China based on considerations of the revolutionary ideology of “anti-imperialism”; on the other hand, from the beginning to the end, the Soviet Union could not make the decision to fully support China to resist against Japan or curb the Japanese aggression and expansion itself. Most scholars who adopted this view believed that the Soviet attitude towards the Northeast issue had changed from “sympathy and support” to “compromise and concession.” As a result, we could simply arrive at the conclusion that the policy adopted by the Soviet Union was a result of constant compromises from “internationalism” to “national interest.”³

On top of this, some also believed that the non-intervention policy of the Soviet Union was not at all the result of compromise from “internationalism” to “national interest,” but a well-planned political conspiracy, i.e., to make China and Japan run into long-term hostilities through pursuing the appeasement policy so as to free itself from the fear of attacks to the Far East region of the Soviet Union. Disregarding the ideological factors, such a view was not entirely groundless. If based on this perspective, the neutrality of the Soviet Union at the beginning of the Mukden Incident could be attributed to the makeshift device of the Moscow side. However, concerning the big issues of recognizing the “Manchukuo” and selling the Chinese Eastern Railway, Moscow’s act of constant compromises also tended to make people more confused.⁴

This could naturally lead to a further question: could it be that the Soviet Union intentionally gave up the Northeast so as to direct Japan against China? The above two perspectives seemed to be completely different, but we could also find the similarities of their analyzing patterns, i.e., they both focused on the grand historical background, mostly proceeding from the ideology of the Soviet International Communism or its grand strategy at Far East in hopes of analyzing the changes of the Soviet attitudes toward the Northeast issue after the Mukden Incident.⁵ Another example, while talking about the Soviet policy in the Far East, quite some researchers often attributed the Soviet constant compromises to Japan

3 This is still the mainstream view in China, c.f. You Dongxiao, “An Exploration into the Attitude of the Soviet Union toward the Mukden Incident,” pp. 43-48; Ma Yueshan, “The Soviet Union’s Diplomatic Policy toward Japan and Its Effects before and after the Mukden Incident,” pp. 22-25; Wang Zhen, “The Soviet Non-intervention Policy toward the Sino-Japanese Conflict after the Mukden Incident,” pp. 26-37; Yi Xintao, “The Mukden Incident and the Slow Change of Soviet Policy toward China,” pp. 7-10.

4 For the Soviet stance on the issues of the “Manchukuo” and the Chinese Eastern Railway, most Chinese scholars held the same view about it as in the Mukden Incident, i.e. on the issue of the Northeast China, there were conflicts between ideology and national interests for the Soviet Union, which had given rise to the vacillation and concession in its diplomatic policy.

5 C.f. Condoleezza Rice, “The Evolution of Soviet Grand Strategy,” pp. 145-164. Also see George Alexander Lensen, *The Damned Inheritance: The Soviet Union and the Manchurian Crises, 1924-1935*.

to its intensive efforts to cope with German threat on the Western Front. Nevertheless, we have to point out that this interpretation is not applicable to the international situation prior to 1933, when Nazi had not yet risen to power and Germany's rearmament didn't start until 1935.⁶ In terms of only the Mukden Incident, when there was no direct pressure from the Western Front, why did the Soviet Union choose to give tacit consent to Japan for taking over Northeast China and recognize the puppet State of Manchuria and sell the Chinese Eastern Railway within so short a time? How actually did Moscow study and judge the nature of the Mukden Incident and arrive at such a judgment? And what were the specific motives that had prompted its action?

To answer these questions, we need to not only understand the evolutionary trends in context of the times but also pay attention to the real-time factors before and after the incident. These historical details seem quite insignificant, but may help us bring out the causal logical extensions behind the historical event. In recent years, As the Soviet files and relevant documents are gradually open to the public and collected and published, we have the opportunity to look into the real situations of Moscow's internal decision-making at that time and researchers are also able to answer the above questions from brand new perspectives. With the aid of mainly the recently made public and published relevant documents and data, this paper hopes to intensively discuss the evolutionary process of the Soviet attitudes toward the situation of the Northeast China before and after the Mukden Incident and attempts to explore the context of another secret event behind this, allowing it to complement with the traditional pattern of interpretation.

II. "China Will Have Trouble": Weakening of the Soviet Power in China

After the outbreak of the Mukden Incident, People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs of the Soviet Union Litvinov took the first opportunity to proclaim in public that this Sino-Japanese conflict was unavoidable and further indicated that the military operations of Japan was not directed at only China and its main target was the Soviet Union, so the Soviet had long expected the outbreak of this incident. Litvinov even indicated that the Soviet Union had been doing military preparations at the Far East region for as long as three years and would be fully capable of handling any border issues.⁷ Nevertheless, the real situation is completely opposite to the public opinions of the Soviet Union—The outbreak of the incident was totally out of

6 In fact, from the 1920s to the early 1930s, the Soviet Union had maintained favorable cooperation with Germany. In 1926, the Soviet Union signed the non-aggression pact with the Weimar government. Afterward, the Soviet side commented that this pact made the relations between the two countries transcend beyond "usual trade relations."

7 "Wang Ruihua Reports to Zhang Jianghui Concerning the Issue that the Soviet Union Is Believed to Have Anticipated Japan's attack on China and Have Made Considerable Considerations (September 23, 1931)," *Zhang Xueliang Archive (5) Reserved by Liaoning Provincial Archives—Zhang Xueliang and the Mukden Incident*, vol. 1, pp. 349-350.

expectations of Moscow and Moscow had no idea how the situation of the Northeast China would go.

On September 20, 1931, two days after the incident, the Politbureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) (Bolshevik) held an urgent meeting listening to the report of the Deputy People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs Karakhan concerning the situation of the Northeast China and discussing the countermeasures. Though the situation was urgent, yet due to a lack of accurate intelligence, the Political Bureau of the CPSU (Bolshevik) could not make any decisions rapidly, nor could they tell the nature of this event. Was it a regional armed conflict like the Chinese Eastern Railway event or a full-scale conflict between the Japanese Army and Zhang Xue liang Did the Japanese Army simply want to give a lesson to Zhang Xueliang or would overthrow him at one stroke? Would the Japanese Army advance towards northern Manchuria and then threaten the Chinese Eastern Railway?

When the meeting was over, the Political Bureau of the CPSU (Bolshevik) did not arrive at any conclusion but was forced to delay the decision-making. Soon afterwards, the Politbureau requested Karakhan and related departments to search for the up-to-date intelligence about the situation of the Northeast as soon as possible.⁸ However, until September 22, Moscow still couldn't make clear the actual situation of the Northeast region, let alone knowing anything about whether the Japanese Army would attempt to aggravate the situation. Kaganovich and Molotov had to directly ask for specific countermeasures from Stalin who was having a rest cure at Sochi.⁹ They honestly stated in the telegraph that they had no single clue about the operations of Japan and the situation of the Northeast China.¹⁰

Normally, as the interested party at the Northeast region, the Soviet Union should take action swiftly to safeguard its own interests. However, after the incident broke out, Moscow's decision makers became stalemated at the earliest time. They knew nothing about the whys and wherefores of the local situation and could not foresee the possible development of the event, so that no effective decisions were made at the earliest time. What had on earth led to the Soviet embarrassment at the beginning of the incident? This might be answered from many perspectives, but the collapse of the Soviet intelligence network in China around 1930 was undoubtedly one of the major reasons.

As is well known, to safeguard national security, the Soviet Union had operated numerous and complex underground intelligence networks at its neighboring countries for a long time. Besides diplomatic organizations and professional intelligence agencies, the

8 "No. 63 Record, Meeting of the Political Bureau of the CPSU (Bolshevik) (September 20, 1931)," *CPSU (Bolshevik), Comintern and China's Soviet Campaign (1931-1937)*, p. 31.

9 According to the content of the "Log of Visitors of Stalin's Kremlin Office," Stalin should have left the Kremlin Office for Sochi for a vacation on August 7, 1931 and returned to Moscow until October 11. C.f. *Selected Historical Archives of the Soviet Union*, vol. 14, pp. 78-79.

10 "Telegram from Kaganovich and Molotov to Stalin (September 22, 1931)," *CPSU (Bolshevik), Comintern and China's Soviet Campaign (1931-1937)*, p. 34.

Communist International (Comintern) was also a major component of the entire Soviet foreign intelligence network.¹¹ In November 1922, a series of resolutions were passed at the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, which enhanced the centralization of the Communist International and vassalized the various member parties.¹² At the Congress, the Executive Committee passed resolutions indicating particularly that “defending the Soviet Union should be put at the center of eliminating military threats and struggles.”¹³ After Stalin rose to power in 1924, the role of the Communist International was no longer limited to the output of revolutionary “missionaries,” but shouldered more responsibility of “standing guard” for the Soviet Union.¹⁴ Besides, Stalin further requested that the organizations of the Communist International stationed in various countries should all serve for Soviet foreign intelligence work.¹⁵ During the following years, the Comintern organizations scattered around the world gradually changed into “the suppliers of cadres for sabotage and intelligence work.”¹⁶ They were transformed from the pure “sower” of communist revolution into one of the most important intelligence gathering organizations in Moscow.¹⁷ There was no exception for China. The Northeast region even became the top priority in the construction of the Soviet intelligence network.¹⁸

Since 1926, the power of Fengtian clique Zhang Zuolin and Nanjing authorities had successively carried out a series of strikes against the various Soviet organizations in China. During 1926 and 1927, the Soviet intelligence agencies stationed in Peking, Guangzhou, Shanghai and Hankow covered in the name of diplomatic organizations had also been attacked one after another, leaving the “intelligence work paralyzed. Only intelligence in cities

11 The Soviet intelligence network in China was mainly composed of three systems: Объединённое государственное политическое управление при ЦК СССР (OGPU), General Intelligence Directorate of the Workers-Peasants Red Army, and the Communist International. What is noteworthy is that the networks of the various intelligence agencies of the Soviet Union were often established based on the CPC organizations at various levels, sometimes overlapping.

12 For relevant descriptions, refer to Helmut Gruber, *Soviet Russia Masters the Comintern: International Communism in the Era of Stalin's Ascendancy*.

13 Victor Usov, *Soviet Intelligence Agencies in China: The 1920s*, p. 23.

14 For the specific effects of the Communist International on China's situation during this period, please refer to Yang Ruoyun and Yang Kuisong, *The Communist International and Chinese Revolution*.

15 For relevant studies, see Christopher Andrew and Julie Elkner, “Stalin and Foreign Intelligence,” pp. 69-94.

16 Victor Usov, *Soviet Intelligence Agencies in China: The 1920s*, p. 28.

17 For studies on the Communist International and the Soviet international intelligence networks, see Kevin Mogan, Gidon Cohen and Andrew Flinn, eds., *Agents of the Revolution: New Biographical Approaches to the History of International Communism in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*.

18 The domestic environment of Japan was very unfavorable to relevant intelligence work, so the Soviet agencies in Harbin collected the intelligence on Japan mainly in the Northeast area. However, for rather a long period of time prior to 1927, Japan seriously underestimated the capabilities of the Soviet agencies in Manchuria. C.f. Vitaly G. Pavlov, *The Tragedy of Soviet Foreign Intelligence Agencies*, p. 66.

could be provided and the situation was terrible.”¹⁹ To reduce unnecessary losses, Moscow had sent an urgent telegram to the Soviet diplomatic organizations to examine the stored archives as quickly as possible and destroy the documents that might ruin the reputation of the Soviet Union. Later, with the worsening of situation, Moscow even advised Blyukher (V.K. Блюхер, namely Galen) and other high ranking cadres to destroy their own archives as soon as possible²⁰ and further requested various diplomatic agencies to destroy all the records of contacts timely and only keep correspondence of the last month.

At the beginning of 1928, to protect the Soviet embassies in China from “being totally destroyed,” People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs Litvinov had to request the Politbureau of the CPSU (Bolshevik) to prohibit the Communist International from engaging in intelligence activities in Soviet embassies overseas.²¹ Meanwhile, the Soviet Union also suspended all the activities of other Soviet intelligence agencies besides the Communist International. The intelligence teams in Peking, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Harbin suspended activities according to Moscow’s instructions, going instantly underground. As the Soviet intelligence agent in Peking Vinarov said: “Long before the advisory group of Blyukher left China, the intelligence team had been ‘dissolved’ and vanished.”²² Many Soviet intelligence teams could only be disguised as various kinds of import and export companies or business associations so as to secretly lurk around the cities in China. As the supreme leader of the Soviet Union and the Communist International, Stalin’s foreign policy always relied on the message transferred by the secret intelligence networks at various levels. The embarrassing situation of the Soviet intelligence organizations in China made Stalin extremely pessimistic about China’s situation back then. He once said to Molotov not without worries that “China will have trouble.”²³ When its intelligence organizations are destroyed, Moscow once placed its hopes on the CPC organizations at all levels which were an important component of the Communist International intelligence network.

However, with the deterioration of the nationwide environment, the CPC organizations, particularly those in Northeast region, that could originally coordinate with the Soviet intelligence networks to carry out work received a severe blow. After multiple crackdowns, the CPC organization in Northeast had to stay in the “abyss to shy away from struggles.” “They could not stand the strikes, nor the struggles.”²⁴ At the end of 1928, CPC’s MPC

19 “Letter from Semenov to Someone (mostly Berzins)” (June 25, 1927), *CPSU (Bolshevik), Comintern and China’s National Revolutionary Movement (1926-1927)*, vol. 4, p. 355.

20 “Record No. 118, Meeting of the Political Bureau of the CPSU (Bolshevik) (July 21, 1927),” *CPSU (Bolshevik), Comintern and China’s National Revolutionary Movement (1926-1927)*, vol. 4, p. 415.

21 Christopher Andrew and Julie Elkner, *Stalin and Foreign Intelligence*, pp. 69-94.

22 Victor Usov, *Soviet Intelligence Agencies in China: The 1920s*, p. 236.

23 “Letter from Stalin to Molotov” (October 7, 1929), *CPSU (Bolshevik), Comintern and China’s Soviet Campaign (1931-1937)*, vol. 8, p. 187.

24 “Announcement No. 5 of the CPC MPC,” *Revolutionary Historical Files in the Northeast Area (March 1929-October 1929)*, a, vol. 3, p. 44.

was almost completely destroyed, and “what remained were only the restricted few.”²⁵ The makeshift provincial committee established later could not carry out the work effectively. “The party organization was so weak, the masses of the major industries most likely had no party organizations, though they had, most party organizations might flinch or were inactive,”²⁶ The rebuilt party organizations with great efforts were in the “era of primitive groups of small degree.”²⁷ The CPC organization in the Northeast area was frail, which objectively had further weakened the intelligence information sources of the Soviet Union. As a result of multiple oppressions, the Soviet “information sources were almost lost.” The intelligence work in most places needed to be reestablished and all the information channels should be redredged.²⁸ However, the intelligence networks in China’s Northeast area had been hardly rebuilt all along. It was not until 1929 when the Chinese Eastern Railway Incident broke out that a ray of hope emerged.

Having witnessed the decline of Soviet power in the Northeast, Zhang Xueliang mistakenly believed that Moscow had no resolution and ability to safeguard its interests in the Far East.²⁹ The direct consequence of his misjudgment was that the Northeast Army suffered a crushing defeat in the battle against the Soviet Red Army and the indirect consequence was that chances were given to rebuild the Soviet and CPC powers in the Northeast. During that time, Stalin began to think that the focus of China’s work would be immediately shifted to “organizing the revolutionary movement of a Manchurian uprising.” He even considered establishing and dispatching two infantry brigades composed of Chinese to head for the Northeast region, enlarged the troops, occupied the cities and then built the revolutionary regime.³⁰ Besides this rather risky strategy of armed struggle, the Soviet intelligence networks hidden for long resumed activity. To enhance relevant work, the Communist International decided to send “a responsible Chinese comrade to set guidelines for the CPC Central Committee concerning the mission of CPC Manchuria not long after the outbreak of “Chinese Eastern Railway Incident” and requested to “mobilize

25 “Letter from the CPC MPC to the Central Committee,” *Revolutionary Historical Files in the Northeast Area (April 1928-February 1929)*, a, vol. 2, p. 334.

26 “Report on the Party work of the CPC MPC (April 1929),” *Revolutionary Historical Files in the Northeast Area (March 1929-October 1929)*, a, vol. 3, p. 60.

27 “Draft plan for the work of the CPC MPC,” *Revolutionary Historical Files in the Northeast Area (March 1929-October 1929)*, a, vol. 3, p. 87.

28 On January 6, 1928, Adolf A. Joffe wrote to Leonid Vasilyevich Solovyov in a letter, saying that “the incidents one after another showed that we were very ill-informed. Currently the information sources were almost completely lost. The most important mission was to get the intelligence work back on track.” Victor Usov, *Soviet Intelligence Agencies in China: The 1920s*, p. 240.

29 Before the Chinese Eastern Railway incident, Zhang Xueliang revealed in private that he would not bother much about the Soviet strength in the Far East. The information he received always wishfully described the inside of the Soviet Union as a sea of troubles, which enabled him to take the initiative to provoke conflicts, c.f. Vi Kyuin Wellington Koo, *The Wellington Koo Memoirs*, vol. 1, p. 404.

30 “Letter from Stalin to Molotov (October 7, 1929),” *CPSU (Bolshevik), Comintern and China’s Soviet Campaign (1931-1937)*, vol. 8, p. 187.

50 Chinese comrades in various kinds of schools in Moscow and send them to the East to help with the work of north Manchuria and meanwhile absorb the Chinese and North Korean comrades in the Soviet Far East to participate in the work.”³¹

Upon request of the Communist International, the CPC's Manchuria Provincial Committee (MPC) began to secretly develop organizations among the Fengtian soldiers captured by the Soviet Union.³² When these soldiers were released, they attempted to continue maintaining and expanding the newly established communication networks among them.³³ Furthermore, to launch more movements around the issue of Chinese Eastern Railway, the Far East Bureau of the Communist International issued orders, requesting the personnel lurking underground in Harbin to resume activity, connect with the CPC and work through cooperation.³⁴ The MPC was no longer satisfied with demonstration, shouting empty slogans, but actively responded to Soviet instructions and was ready to practically carry out various kinds of secret missions.³⁵ The MPC once optimistically believed that around the Chinese Eastern Railway event, the situation of struggle in Northeast area developed rapidly due to the effect of the warfare, and the party organizations successfully infiltrated into different places, including even the previously weak south Manchuria.³⁶ However, the whole situation surprisingly took a sudden turn and became worse rapidly after March 1930.

At that time, due to the outbreak of the internal struggle against the liquidators of Trotsky opportunism within the MPC, the Chinese Eastern Railway strike movement was not successfully launched and thus missed the best time for the Manchurian revolutionary

31 “Record No. 4, Meeting of Political Committee and Political Secretariat of Communist International Executive Committee (September 13, 1929, in Moscow),” *CPSU (Bolshevik), Comintern and China's Soviet Campaign (1931-1937)*, vol. 8, p. 164.

32 “Letter from the CPC MPC to the Far East Frontier Committee of the CPSU (Bolshevik) (January 11, 1930),” *CPSU (Bolshevik), Comintern and China's Soviet Campaign (1927-1931)*, vol. 9, p. 28. “Letter from Pyatnitskiy to Perepechko (April 4, 1930),” *CPSU (Bolshevik), Comintern and China's Soviet Campaign (1927-1931)*, vol. 9, pp. 89-90.

33 “Letter from Liu Shaoqi to Huangping (January 11, 1930),” *CPSU (Bolshevik), Comintern and China's Soviet Campaign (1927-1931)*, vol. 9, p. 24. “Report from the CPC MPC to the Central Committee” (March 14, 1930),” *Revolutionary Historical Files in the Northeast Area (November 1929-April 1930)*, a, vol. 4, pp. 267-268.

34 “Telegram from the Far East Bureau of the Communist International Executive Committee to the Communist International Executive Committee (October 24, 1929),” *CPSU (Bolshevik), Comintern and China's Soviet Campaign (1931-1937)*, vol. 8, p. 190.

35 “Letter from the CPC MPC to Harbin Municipal Party Committee (December 28, 1929),” *Revolutionary Historical Files in the Northeast Area (November 1929-April 1930)*, a, vol. 4, pp. 87-88.

36 “Currently the situation of Manchurian conflict is developing rapidly. This includes not only the changing situation with Chinese Eastern Railway and the struggles in Harbin, but also the South Manchuria and Beining Railway that are usually left with nobody to care for, the Southern Manchuria Railway, the arsenals in Fushun and Shenyang and servants in government offices. Many struggles constantly break out or are fermenting. The most important cause for such a situation is the warfare,” see “Report from the CPC MPC to the Central Committee (January 22, 1930),” *Revolutionary Historical Files in the Northeast Area (November 1929-April 1930)*, a, vol. 4, p. 119.

movement to “break out with full force.”³⁷ Right after, the MPC suffered another more serious blow on April 9, nine members of the MPC were all arrested. Within the following several days, over 30 people in different places were arrested too. The MPC of the party and league was almost completely collapsed. This made the MPC crumple for a long time and hardly recover from the setback.³⁸ At the end of 1930, having been suppressed for many times, the Manchurian organization of the Party couldn’t coordinate with the Soviet Union to carry out any work in the Northeast. Besides, there was also a lack of personnel who had a good command of Russian language. The channel for Moscow to obtain intelligence was again blocked.³⁹

Faced with the dilemma of Manchuria, due to the lack of other information sources (particularly those of the Japanese side),⁴⁰ Moscow was anxious to rebuild information channel in the Northeast and planned to connect with the MPC directly so as to coordinate with the Soviet underground activities in the Northeast area. The emergently rebuilt MPC also pointed out that “It was extremely urgent to establish direct relations with the Soviet Union” because “the Soviet Union had their military work in Manchuria and they all took the secret agent path” and lacked the most direct military assistance.⁴¹ However, the majority of local organizations of the MPC were unable to be rebuilt within a short time, but further contracted in areas like the south Manchuria.⁴² In early 1931, the MPC even could not choose a representative to attend the National Soviet Congress.⁴³ Two months after the “Wanbaoshan Incident” took place, due to the collapse of grassroots organizations, the MPC could only obtain the relevant information from newspapers. Therefore, delivering

37 “A General Report on the Struggles of the Chinese Eastern Railway Workers by Liu Shaoqi (March 13, 1930),” *Revolutionary Historical Files in the Northeast Area (November 1929-April 1930)*, a, vol. 4, pp. 207-264; also c.f. *Comrade Liu Shaoqi in MPC*, ed. by Liaoning Academy of Social Sciences.

38 “No. 58 Report from the CPC MPC to the Central Committee (April 24, 1930),” *Revolutionary Historical Files in the Northeast Area (November 1929-April 1930)*, a, vol. 4, pp. 359-360.

39 “A Survey of the Local Party Branches of the CPC Manchuria Province (August 1930),” *Revolutionary Historical Files in the Northeast Area (May 1930-October 1930)*, a, vol. 5, pp. 294-296.

40 The Soviet intelligence networks in Japan and Korea were not truly established prior to the Mukden Incident, at least in the initial stage of personnel selection, training and preparation. In 1927, the head of the Soviet intelligence department in Seoul Ivan Andreevich Chichayev recruited a Japanese military officer, but the intelligence squad established around this person did not provide intelligence to Moscow until 1932. Within a rather long time, this Japanese military officer was also the only Soviet spy with Japanese nationality inside Japanese territory. Keenly feeling the ineffectiveness of the intelligence work in Japan, Moscow dispatched Richard Sorge to Japan responsible for establishing a real organized intelligence network, see Vitaly G. Pavlov, *The Tragedy of Soviet Foreign Intelligence Agencies*, pp. 297-300.

41 “No. 2 Report of the General Executive Office of the CPC MPC to the Military Committee (October 7, 1930),” *Revolutionary Historical Files in the Northeast Area (October 1930-December 1930)*, a, vol. 6, pp. 19-20.

42 “Work Outline of the CPC MPC on Southern Manchuria (December 1930),” *Revolutionary Historical Files in the Northeast Area (October 1930-December 1930)*, a, vol. 6, p. 365.

43 “Report from the CPC MPC to the Central Committee (January 7, 1931),” *Revolutionary Historical Files in the Northeast Area (January 1931-April 1931)*, a, vol. 7, pp. 11-12.

any valuable information to the CPC Central Committee or Moscow was totally out of the question.⁴⁴

Under the severe situation, the Soviet Union had to put aside the plan of rebuilding the Northeast region for the time being and began to shift the focus to the *Guannei* (关内 inside the Shanhai Pass) communist movement, particularly the development of Soviet area in Jiangxi, in hopes of containing the anti-Soviet forces of various factions within Chinese territory through establishing the communist revolutionary regime in China. As the Ruijin Soviet government was about to be founded, the outbreak of the Mukden Incident again messed up the strategic deployments of Moscow and forced Stalin to reconsider the Soviet diplomatic policies in the Far East area.

III. "Let the Imperialists Brawl Up": The Soviet Union's Misjudgment of the Situation in Northeast China

Under the circumstances of lacking accurate intelligence, the Politbureau of the CPSU (Bolshevik) formed a special committee consisting of Molotov, Kaganovich, Litvinov and Karakhan, studying the real attitude of various countries towards the incident. Nevertheless, the committee could only understand the development of situation through reading the relevant reports regarding the incident from the worldwide newspapers and magazines.⁴⁵ Two days later, Molotov and Kaganovich submitted a briefing about the situation to Stalin.⁴⁶ By analyzing the media reports of different countries, they believed that the Western powers took a passive attitude toward the incident and Japan was likely to find pretexts for dispatching troops to northern Manchuria.⁴⁷ Though Karakhan's intelligence gathering was still ongoing, the strained situation forced Moscow to make diplomatic decisions as soon as possible.⁴⁸ On September 23, only one day after receiving the briefing from Molotov and Kaganovich, Stalin immediately arrived at his judgment and issued instructions.

First, Stalin didn't think that the Japanese authority planned to completely occupy the whole Northeast China by means of force. He even suspected that the acts of Japan were most likely "based on expanding or enhancing spheres of influence in China as agreed with

44 "Letter from the League MPC regarding the Issue of Imperialist Japan's invasion of Manchuria and preparation for attacking the Soviet Union (July 10, 1931)," *Revolutionary Historical Files in the Northeast Area (April 1931-July 1931)*, a, vol. 8, p. 291.

45 "Record No. 63, Meeting of the Political Bureau of the CPSU (Bolshevik) (September 20, 1931)," *CPSU (Bolshevik), Comintern and China's Soviet Campaign (1931-1937)*, p. 31.

46 Melbourne Gateway to Research on Soviet History (<http://www.melgrosh.unimelb.edu.au/>).

47 "Telegram from Kaganovich and Molotov to Stalin (September 22, 1931)," *CPSU (Bolshevik), Comintern and China's Soviet Campaign (1931-1937)*, p. 34.

48 Up until October 2, Karakhan submitted the newest report to the Politbureau of the CPSU (Bolshevik) according to the observed intelligence provided by the Soviet frontier forces at the Manchurian borders. However, Moscow had already made the diplomatic decision.

all or some great powers.”⁴⁹ Second, he even thought that Japan might not only get the tacit permission from the imperialists, but also the consent of some influential warlord cliques such as Feng Yuxiang or Yan Xishan cliques or the old Fengtian members of Zhang Zuolin or all of these warlord cliques for the armed intervention.”⁵⁰ Based on this judgment, Stalin further indicated that “The Soviet Union should not launch military intervention, diplomatic intervention was also not appropriate at the moment.” He was afraid that the strong reaction of the Soviet Union might cause the dissatisfaction and attention of the European and American powers because this “could only allow the imperialists to join up. Making them brawl up would be more favorable to us.”⁵¹ To implement this policy, Stalin specially required that on the one hand, the *Pravda* should denounce the Japanese act of aggression; on the other hand, *Izvestia* should use a “gentle and very cautious tone” to avoid irritating Japan and other countries.⁵² Though Stalin still had little idea of the actual situation in Northeast area and the real intentions of Japan, he had already set the tone of neutrality and non-intervention for the Soviet Union to handle the issue.

On September 25, the Politbureau of the CPSU (Bolshevik) passed relevant resolutions based on Stalin’s opinion, and instructed the People’s Committee on Foreign Affairs to make it clear, again, to the Soviet diplomats in China and Japan that: they must timely notify Moscow of the developments of the incident. No actions should be taken or interpretations given without instructions of Moscow.⁵³ The Politbureau further indicated that all actions around the Chinese Eastern Railway should proceed from the existing treaties, and that no opinions should be arbitrarily voiced about the Sino-Japanese conflicts.⁵⁴ Though having made the decision of “non-intervention,” Stalin still created a false impression that the Soviet Union might intervene while facing the Chinese side to avoid the cards in Moscow’s hands being discerned by China and Japan too early. A Soviet diplomat in Harbin once said to the Fengtian army in private that “In case of escalation, we will resort to forces to solve the problem. The Chinese Eastern Railway is under such close watch that the Japanese will have

49 “Telegram from Stalin to Kaganovich and Molotov (September 23, 1931),” *CPSU (Bolshevik), Comintern and China’s Soviet Campaign (1931-1937)*, p. 36.

50 *Ibid.*

51 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

52 “Telegram from Stalin to Kaganovich and Molotov (September 23, 1931),” *CPSU (Bolshevik), Communist International and China’s Soviet Campaign (1931-1937)*, pp. 36-37. News reports about the incident in *Pravda* and *Izvestia* also caught the attention of Chinese media, saying “the Japanese invasion of the Northeast China will provoke International warfare, posing great threat to the Soviet Union and we have to pay attention to that,” “The League of Nations Cannot Resolve, China Urgently Needs Self-determination,” c.f. “Two Soviet-Russian Newspapers Denounce Japan,” *Central Daily News*, October 9, 1931, p. 3.

53 “Record No. 64, Meeting of the Political Bureau of the CPSU (Bolshevik) (September 25, 1931),” *CPSU (Bolshevik), Comintern and China’s Soviet Campaign (1931-1937)* p. 38.

54 *Ibid.*

no room to parade their ability.”⁵⁵ After knowing the Japanese Army suspended marching towards Harbin and notified the Soviet Union that its actions were only confined to southern Manchuria and eastern Mongolia, Chiang Kai-shek affirmed right away that this was “the result of the Russian People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs Litvinov giving an oral warning to the Japanese envoy.”⁵⁶

As of the end of September, the Japanese Army had occupied Shenyang, Changchun, Fushun, Yingkou, Fenghuangcheng, etc. In early October, regardless of the opposition of Britain, the United States and other countries, the Japanese Army began to continually bomb Jinzhou. At the end of October, the Japanese Kwantung Army intended to dispatch troops to northern Manchuria in the name of sending armed forces to suppress Ma Chan-shan (马占山), seeking to occupy Qiqihar. To occupy Qiqihar, the Japanese Army had to pass the Chinese Eastern Railway and might encounter head-on confrontation with the Soviet Union. The U.S. consul in Changchun also believed that if the Japanese Army continued to advance northward after occupying Kuanchengzi, it would certainly provoke the Soviet Union.⁵⁷ However, confronted with the Japanese Army pressing ahead, Moscow was still sticking to the previous judgment, acting in accordance with the policies made by Stalin. Interestingly, under Stalin’s instructions, the Communist International called upon the communist parties of various countries to denounce Japan publicly for stirring up the incident, while emphasizing that “the entire movement should be combined with the opposition to the threat of war” rather than become simply an anti-Japanese war.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, the Communist International also pointed out that we should study and analyze the Japanese acts of invading Manchuria from the perspective of “the escalation and intensification of imperialist conflicts.”⁵⁹

On November 14, the day before the Japanese Army occupied Qiqihar, Litvinov reassured the Japanese ambassador to the Soviet Union Koki Hirota that the Soviet Union would pursue a strict policy of non-intervention and would not assist the Chinese army. The German ambassador to China Oskar Trautmann, while passing by Siberia on the way to his appointment, also confirmed that there seemed no sign of military mobilization on the side

55 “Wang Ruihua Reports to Zhang Jianghui concerning the Issue that the Board of Directors of Chinese Eastern Railway Held Talks with Important Soviet Figures on Japan’s Dispatch of Troops to Northeast China (September 23, 1931),” *Zhang Xueliang Archive (5) Reserved by Liaoning Provincial Archives—Zhang Xueliang and the Mukden Incident*, vol. 1, pp. 351-352.

56 “September 26, 1931,” *Archives of President Chiang kai-shek: Biographical Sketch Manuscript*, vol. 12, p. 103.

57 “The Minister in China (Johnson) to the Secretary of State” (Peiping, October 8, 1931, 1 p.m.), *United States Department of State Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1931. The Far East*: vol. 3, 1931, pp. 140-141.

58 “Record No. 187, Meeting of Political Committee and Political Secretariat of the Comintern Executive Committee (October 13, 1931),” *CPSU (Bolshevik), Comintern and China’s Soviet Campaign (1931-1937)*, pp. 43-44.

59 “Shorthand Record of the Special Meeting regarding the Manchurian Issue from the Political Secretariat of the Comintern Executive Committee (October 21, 1931),” *CPSU (Bolshevik), Comintern and China’s Soviet Campaign (1931-1937)*, p. 60.

of Russia.⁶⁰ Having observed the Soviet reaction recently, the Japanese consulate general in Harbin reported to Tokyo that the Soviet Union had no resolution to directly confront Japan. The next day, in the instructions to the communist parties in various countries concerning the issue of Manchuria, the Communist International emphasized again that it was not only the Japanese imperialism that should take responsibility for the warfare, but also the imperialist Britain, France and the United States that intended to redivide China and agreed to launch this war through the league of imperialist robbers, i.e. the League of Nations. Therefore, the Soviet Union would not act rashly at this moment.⁶¹ On the 19th, the 2nd division of Japanese Army attacked and occupied Qiqihar. Till then, Moscow still believed that the Mukden Incident was not the military adventure provoked unilaterally by Japan and insisted on the so-called “non-intervention policy.” On the 23rd, the Politbureau of the CPSU (Bolshevik) established a special committee on foreign affairs with Stalin as the Chairman to deal with the threat of international imperialism that might come at any time.⁶²

Moscow also made a further attempt to improve diplomatic relations with Japan, and even took an attitude of compromise and tacit consent on the issue of Northeast China. In early December 1931, Litvinov requested a special meeting with Kenkichi who stopped over in Moscow and was returning from France to Japan to replace the Cabinet Minister of Foreign Affairs Inukai Tsuyoshi, proposing to sign a *Japanese-Soviet Nonaggression Pact* to prevent the Soviet-Japanese relations from being worsened by the Western powers through various means.⁶³ For this issue, many scholars thought that this proposal of the Soviet Union corresponded to an indirect recognition of the Japanese actions in Northeast China after the Mukden Incident, in hopes of freeing the Soviet Far East area from the direct threat of Japan. Such a view was primarily based on the recognition that the Soviet military power in the Far East was still very weak at that time, maintaining that they would gain the security of Far East borders by means of compromise.⁶⁴ However, such an interpretation is skewed by hindsight. As for the actual strengths of the Soviet Union and Japan in the Far East when the Mukden Incident broke out, we might reassess them from the following two respects.

60 “German Ambassador Trautmann Met with Journalists Yesterday,” *Ta Kung Pao*, October 4, 1931, p. 4.

61 “Instructions from the Standing Anti-war Committee of the Organization Department of the Comintern Executive Committee to the Central Committee of the Communist Parties in Various Countries regarding the Manchurian Issue (November 15, 1931),” *CPSU (Bolshevik), Comintern and China's Soviet Campaign (1931-1937)*, p. 73.

62 The members of this committee also included Molotov, Voroshilov, Kaganovich and Ordzhonikidze.

63 Before then, the Soviet Union had offered Japan to sign the Japanese-Soviet Non-aggression Pact in August 1926 and May 1927 respectively, but was both rejected.

64 In *The Manchurian Myth: Nationalism, Resistance, and Collaboration in Modern China*, Rana Mitter also adopted such a viewpoint, believing that the reason why the Soviet Union sat by and watched Japan's invasion into Heilongjiang was that it had extremely weak military strength in the Far East.

First, when the incident broke out in 1931, were the Soviet forces in the Far East so weak that they could hardly respond to the possible invasion of Japan? This may not be the case.⁶⁵

Early before the Chinese Eastern Railway event, the Soviet forces in the entire Far East area should not belittled. They had roughly 3 infantry divisions, 2 independent cavalry brigades, amounting to over 20,000 people.⁶⁶ In August 1929, to deal with the military conflict with Zhang Xueliang, the Soviet Union reorganized troops to establish the “Special Far East Army Group.” Two infantry divisions were newly added to the original 3 ones. The total forces were up to over 40,000 people.⁶⁷ Compared to this, before the Mukden Incident, the Japanese Kwangtung Army stationed in the Northeast area comprised only 1 division. Besides, Japan also had a special garrison unit stationed in Southern Manchuria Railway, whose major task was to safeguard the “Kwangtung Leased Territory” and the South Manchuria Railway. The number of field forces was limited.⁶⁸ According to the investigation made by the Fengtian Army at the end of 1929, the number of permanent Japanese forces in the Northeast area was about 12,000, stationed in Lyushun (Port Arthur), Liaoyang, Changchun, Haicheng, Tieling, Fengtian, Lianshanguan, Gongzhuling, Dashiqiao, and Liushutun respectively.⁶⁹ After the incident broke out, even though the Japanese Army in North Korea trespassed on the Northeast to reinforce, the total Japanese forces were only over 30,000 people.⁷⁰ In addition, the Politburo of the CPSU (Bolshevik) Central Committee had redeployed the Far East Red

65 Even the high-level officers of the Japanese Army did not dare to underestimate the military strength of the Soviet Union. According to the report of the Imperial Japanese Army General Staff Office in January 1931, Japan estimated that the Soviet Union's resident military forces comprised 71 infantry divisions, 3 armored divisions and 12 cavalry divisions and anticipated that at the beginning of the war, the Soviet Union could mobilize up to 6.5 million enormous troops. c.f. “Reference Table of Arms of Land and Air Forces of the Soviet Federal” (Big Day Record of the Army General Staff of the Ministry of War of Japan, Concern of Reducing troops, confidential, No. 1 Appendix 100 sections, No. 7, reference of arms of land and air forces in various countries, reserved by Tokyo Ministry of Defense, the National Institute for Defense Studies. C08052037900).

66 Шталя Александр Викторович, Малые войны 1920-1930-х годов, Terra Fantastica, Город Санкт-Петербург, 2003, pp. 171-173.

67 When the incident broke out, the Soviet Far East special forces were 21st Infantry Division, 35th Infantry Division, 36th Infantry Division, Pacific Ocean 1st Infantry Division, Amur 2nd Infantry Division, 5th Independent Cavalry Brigade and 9th Independent Cavalry Brigade. For actual deployments, c.f. Robert G. Poirier and Albert Z. Conner, *The Red Army Order of Battle in the Great Patriotic War: Including Data from 1919 to Postwar Years*.

68 Before the Mukden Incident, according to the regulations of the Japanese government, the divisions garrisoned in the “Kwantung Leased Territory” took turns every two years, and the troops were limited to one division. The immobilization and expansion of the Kwantung Army formation took place after 1932. Before the incident, it was the 2nd Division that was garrisoned in the “Kwantung Leased Territory,” c.f. Li Hui et al., eds., *Evolution of the Japanese Invading Army Series*, pp. 15-19.

69 “A Survey of the Number of Japanese Garrison Locations in China's Northeast (November 1929),” *Zhang Xueliang Archive (5) Reserved by Liaoning Provincial Archives—Zhang Xueliang and the Mukden Incident*, vol. 1, p. 37.

70 Prior to December 31, 1931, the Japanese troops reinforced in the Northeast China comprising the

Army for combat preparation as early as October 2.⁷¹

In the early period of the incident, the military capability of the Soviet army in the Far East was not weaker than the Japanese Army stationed in the Northeast area.⁷² In mid-October, the Soviet army had deployed 2 infantry divisions and 1 infantry brigade (namely 5 infantry regiments, 3 cavalry regiments, 2 artillery regiments, as well as 50 aeroplanes and 13 tanks) in the border areas of Liaoning and Jilin.⁷³ At that time, the Japanese field forces in the same area was only a division not at full strength (5 infantry wings).⁷⁴ Mover, the swift and violent attack launched by the Soviet army in 1929 during the Chinese Eastern Railway event greatly impressed the Japanese army, who believed that it was “no different from the army of great powers.” The military capability should not be underestimated and it was believed that the slow moving Czarist Russian Army was no match for the well trained Red Army.⁷⁵ Besides, the Japanese Army still had to confront the remnants of the Northeast army. Within a short period of time, at least, they would not pose substantial threats to the Far East area of the Soviet Union.⁷⁶

Second, though the Japanese Army rapidly attacked and occupied large areas of the Northeast area after the Mukden Incident, the overall situation was not clear until the end of 1931.

At that time, the Japanese Army had approximately over 30,000 people in the Northeast, yet the main forces of the Northeast Army inside the Shanhai Pass were still over 100,000.

29th Brigade (subordinated to the 20th Division), 4th Blended Brigade (subordinated to the 8th Division) and the 38th Blended Brigade (subordinated to the 19th Division), adding up to about 28000 men. c.f. Staff Division of the Beijing Pacification Office, ed., “Summary of the Actions of the Japanese Troops in Northeast China since the Mukden Incident” (July 1, 1932), and *The Mukden Incident* edited by the Central Archives, The Second Historical Archives of China and Jilin Academy of Social Sciences, 1988, pp. 112-115.

71 “Решения ПБ от 02.10.31Г,” Протокол N 67 заседания ПБ от 5 октября 1931 г, Melbourne Gateway to Research on Soviet History, Номердела: Ф. 17. Оп. 3. Д. 852.

72 Шталь Александр Викторович, Малыевойны 1920-1930-х годов, Terra Fantastica, Город Санкт-Петербург, 2003, pp. 191-193.

73 c.f. “Outline of Operations Plan Against China and the Soviet Union (November 16, 1931),” *Chronicle of Japanese Aggression Towards China, vol.1, Selected Translation by the Supreme Headquarters of the Department of the Army*, compiled by the Center of Military History, Department of Defense, trans. by Tianjin CPPCC Committee for Compilation and Translation, pp. 203-204.

74 “Wang Ruihua Reports to Zhang Jiahui concerning the Copied Report on the Situation of the Coastal Areas within the Soviet Territory after the Japanese Army Invaded Liaoning and Jilin (October 28, 1931),” Liaoning Provincial Archives, ed., *Zhang Xueliang Archive (6) Reserved by Liaoning Provincial Archives—Zhang Xueliang and the Mukden Incident*, vol. 2, pp. 32-33.

75 Rinzaburo, *Kwantung Army and the Soviet Far East Army*, trans. by Center for Japanese Studies, Jilin Provincial Institute of Philosophy and Social Sciences, pp. 21-22. Actually, with the rearmament for almost a decade, the Soviet Red Army had witnessed a great improvement in personnel quality and combat readiness. For relevant studies, see Шталь Александр Викторович, Малыевойны 1920-1930-х годов, Terra Fantastica, Город Санкт-Петербург, 2003.

76 For the situation of the assigned Soviet forces in the Far East during this time, readers can also refer to Советско-китайский военный конфликт (1929г.), Россия и СССР в войнах XX века, Г.Ф. Кривошеева, Москва: Олма-Пресс, 2001.

Meanwhile, Ma Chan-Shan's 10,000 troops in Heilongjiang were very active, posing great threat to the flank and rear of the Japanese army. From October, the Japanese Kwantung Army entered into confrontation with the Northeast Army along Jinzhou and could not advance as frantically as previous days. While within the Japanese government, there was no final conclusion regarding how the incident would end up. There was a rising voice about resolving the issue through negotiations.⁷⁷ Even the Kwantung Army that "disregarded Tokyo Instructions" was divided too, because a large part of high-ranking officers of the Kwantung Army believed that the major objective of launching the incident was to solve the problem of leasing Lyushun and Dalian, rather than occupy the whole Northeast with armed forces.⁷⁸ Therefore, at this moment, the situation in the Northeast was still rather delicate. Japan was far from controlling the whole region, let alone posing direct threat to the Far East borders of the Soviet Union. The sharp turn and sudden change of the whole situation did not come until January 1932 when Zhang Xueliang declared to give up Jinzhou and withdrew all troops of the Northeast Army within the Shanhai Pass,⁷⁹ Prior to this, neither Moscow nor Tokyo anticipated that the Kwantung Army could occupy the northeastern provinces of China with no difficulty and successfully established the puppet regime—"Manchukuo"—within such a short period of time.⁸⁰

On December 1, at the request of Stalin, Karakhan and Litvinov communicated the situation

77 Many Japanese government officials were afraid that if the incident was not settled quickly, it might become increasingly out of hand. Moreover, "just in case the Japanese troops advanced toward the north Manchuria, there would be conflicts between them and the Soviet Russia and the situation would become worse," see Shigemitsu Mamoru, *Inside Story of Japanese Aggression toward China*, p. 37.

78 The "Kwantung Leased Territory" occupied by Japan was just the area of Lyushun and Dalian. According to the "Treaty of Issues of the Three Northeast Provinces at the Sino-Japanese Conference" signed after the Japanese-Russian War, the lease of Lyushun would expire by 1932. It was widely believed by Japan that the Nationalist Government pursuing the policy of nationalism and the local authorities of the Northeast might not agree with renewing the lease, so part of the Kwantung Army officers supported the Kwantung Army to launch the incident in order to secure the right to lease Lyushun and Dalian.

79 Zhang Xueliang's decision of actively giving up the defense of Jinzhou was totally out of the expectation of the Kwantung Army. Prior to this, inside the Kwantung Army, it was generally believed that without a bleeding war, they could hardly attack and occupy Jinzhou which was defended by the main forces of the Northeast Army. They even gathered large number of tank troops for launching the attack. Therefore, if the Northeast Army could have symbolically resisted in Jinzhou, the outcome would be completely different. If the Kwantung Army encountered a large-scale armed resistance at the frontline of Jinzhou, then they would be very likely to beset with troubles internally and externally. Since the Kwantung Army was sticking to the actions against government orders, to continue fight, they must achieve victory unceasingly. If met with sturdy resistance, the Kwantung Army might lose the legitimacy of actions and the whole battle would be difficult to continue.

80 For the circumstances at that time, even the Japanese government supposedly would not be able to conjecture the next actions of the Kwantung Army. The Mukden Incident had always been self-directed and self-performed by the Kwantung Army, the Wakatsuki cabinet was not informed beforehand. Later, the Inukai Tsuyoshi cabinet took over as the prime minister. When he took office, he had dispatched a secrete envoy to China for peace negotiations. However, the Japanese government at that time was unable

since the Mukden Incident at the Political Bureau Meeting, but made no mention of the danger of Japan's total and long-term occupation of Manchuria.⁸¹ Due to Moscow's serious misjudgment about the situation previously, it might not have anticipated the final outcome of the Mukden Incident when proposing to sign the non-aggression pact with Japan in December 1931.

In fact, the Soviet military forces in the Far East were not so weak that could hardly defend the security of national borders. They could deal with the invasion at short notice and even deter the actions of the Japanese forces in northern Manchuria. For instance, before attacking Qiqihar, the Imperial Japanese Army General Staff Office issued special orders to the frontline troops before the incident that for the sake of overall situation, the Chinese Eastern Railway should not be used during the combat to avoid provoking the Soviet army to intervene.⁸² On November 2, it issued strict instructions again to the Kwantung Army that considering the overall situation at home and abroad, the troops would not be allowed to cross Nen River and march northward for whatever reasons.⁸³ Also according to Wang Ziheng, who at that time served as a consultant to the Fengtian Provincial Government: "Because of the Soviet Union, the Japanese troops might have difficulty marching towards northern Manchuria for the moment. They once secretly met Zhang Jinghui in 1931, asking him to quickly return to Harbin to safeguard local order and protect Japanese nationals."⁸⁴ Thus it can be seen that even when sweeping the Northeast, the Japanese Army still attempted to avoid unnecessary armed conflicts with the Soviet Union.⁸⁵

To sum up, before 1932, the Japanese Army was insufficient to constitute a direct threat

to control the military actions at the frontline, nor implement its political policy. It became totally passive in handling the incident. For relevant studies, see Huang Zijin, "Inukai Tsuyoshi and the Mukden Incident," pp. 311-335.

81 Протокол N 78 Заседания Пб от 1 Декабря 1931Г, Melbourne Gateway to Research on Soviet History, Номердела: Ф. 17. Оп. 3. Д. 863.

82 General Staff Office of the Japanese Government, ed., *Summary of the Operations Process of the Manchurian Incident*, vol. 1, p. 20.

83 *Chronicle of Japanese Aggression towards China, vol.1: Selected Translation by Supreme Headquarters of the Department of the Army*, p. 202.

84 "Materials for Wang Ziheng to Inform against Zhang Jianghui (May 14, 1954)," in Central Archives, ed., *Reign and Inside Story of the Puppet Manchukuo: Confessions of the Manchurian Officials*, p. 47.

85 At that time, not only were the Japanese Army worried about the intervention of the Soviet Army provoked by the incident, Zhang Xueliang was also worried that the Soviet troops might "stir up trouble to serve their own ends" and was afraid that they might take action along the Chinese Eastern Railway. He sent a telegram ordering "Not only should we avoid conflicts with Russia but also help achieve their great mission with sacrifice in a small degree." "Having actual connection with the Russian side was the most important," see "The telegram from Zhang Xueliang to the East District Executive Office regarding the Issue of Suspending the Withdrawal of Troops that Defended the Railway after Getting the Exact News that Japanese Army Had Stopped Advancing toward Harbin (September 23, 1931), *Zhang Xueliang Archive (5) Reserved by Liaoning Provincial Archives—Zhang Xueliang and the Mukden Incident*, vol. 1, pp. 355-356.

to the Soviet borders. Worrying about the security of the Far East could not serve as a good reason why Moscow was anxious to sign the Soviet-Japanese Non-aggression Pact with Tokyo. On the contrary, Moscow yet took the initiative to coordinate with Japan about their interests in Manchuria.⁸⁶ It is noteworthy that at the time when the Soviet Union offered Japan to sign the Soviet-Japanese Non-aggression Pact, presided over by Stalin, the Politbureau of the CPSU (Bolshevik) had made the newest resolution on December 23, i.e. “the threat of warfare in the Far East area should be eliminated by any means.”⁸⁷

Were there any other factors that led to Stalin’s decision apart from the misjudgment due to a lack of intelligence?⁸⁸ Before answering the question, it might be necessary for us to review the historical background of the Soviet foreign policy and the existing model for Stalin to handle relevant issues.

IV. Being Alert and Avoiding Warfare: Stalin’s Decision-making Logic and Diplomatic Behavior

In 1929, the day before the Chinese Eastern Railway Incident, the officials of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs on an informal occasion warned Vi Kyuin Wellington Koo in France that the Soviet Russia would strive to avoid direct conflict with the Western countries, yet might take a completely different stance on the issue of Manchuria. Also, according to the intelligence from the French side, “the existing strength of the Soviet Russia is more than enough to create any unexpected situation in the Far East, particularly in Manchuria.” Therefore, “if Moscow was provoked and forced to take actions, it would make a clear and powerful response without hesitation.”⁸⁹ The analysis from France accurately pointed out the two key aspects of the Soviet foreign policies at that time. First, Moscow wished to avoid direct conflicts with the Western powers, dealing with them mainly through non-military means. Second, the Soviet Union had always been greatly concerned about its own national security and remained on high alert all the time.

As is well known that having gone through the brutal Civil War and foreign armed intervention, since the beginning of having seized political power, the Soviet Authority had always been afraid that the imperialist powers would again join to suppress the new-born revolutionary regime. To defuse this danger, after the Polish-Soviet War, the Soviet Union

86 Boris Slavinsky, *The Japanese-Soviet Neutrality Pact: A Diplomatic History, 1941-1945*, pp. 13-15.

87 Российский Государственный Архив Социально-политической истории (RGAS-PI), Номердела 17/162/11, 10, 101.

88 It should also be noted that when trying to offer Japan to sign the non-aggression pact, the Soviet Union also got in touch with China about the issue of reestablishing diplomatic relations. There seemed to be the consideration to stabilize the situation in the entire Far East area through the diplomatic endeavors of these two aspects. As early as mid-October, the Soviet government already indicated clearly to the Nanjing authorities, “extremely hoping them to make policies for discussing together ways of coping.” c.f. relevant accounts on October 17, 1931 from *Diary of Shao Yuanchong*, p. 785.

89 Vi Kyuin Wellington Koo, *The Wellington Koo Memoirs*, vol. 1, pp. 401-402.

began to gradually give up the idea of launching “world revolution” by means of war and instead resorted to relatively moderate diplomatic means to get rid of isolation. During the entire 1920s, the Soviet Union had established diplomatic relations with the neighboring countries like China, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Turkey, Finland, Persia, Afghanistan, etc. Meanwhile, it also secured the diplomatic recognition of the capitalist powers like England, France, Germany, Italy and the United States.

Thereafter, though the intense international environment had been eased, the Soviet leaders with Stalin as the representative still held steadfastly to Lenin’s “Theory of Imperialism”—considering that the basis for peace between imperialist countries would inevitably be extremely vulnerable.⁹⁰ Stalin believed that after World War I, the conflicts between capitalist countries might have been eased, appearing to be quite peaceful on the surface. However, the great imperialist powers around the world “cannot look on calmly at the development of a country that is building socialism.”⁹¹ The international issue he talked about most had always been how to keep away from the possible joint attack launched by the imperialist countries at any time and how to avoid the full-scale warfare with the imperialist countries.⁹² In handling the concrete issues of national security, Stalin had displayed a very prudent political strategy. During the outbreak of the Mukden Incident, many relevant decisions made by the Soviet Union had revealed such decision-making style.⁹³

At the beginning of the incident, due to the collapse of the intelligence information networks, Moscow was unable to get the latest news about China’s northeast at first time. Under this circumstance, the judgments on the situation would naturally tend to follow the usual practice of past policies.⁹⁴ Having long been worried about the national security, the Soviet decision-makers were prone to consider such acts as the prelude to a joint threat from imperialist countries to the Soviet Union and might give rise to a direct military attack to the Soviet Union. They believed that French and British imperialists were trying to evolve the war in China into a war with the Soviet Union through military provocation.⁹⁵ Besides, Stalin’s consistent caution also aggravated Soviet authority’s serious misjudgment on the nature of the

90 Douglas W. Blum, *The Soviet Foreign Policy Belief System: Beliefs, Politics, and Foreign Policy Outcomes*, pp. 373-394.

91 Stalin, *Collected Works of Stalin*, vol. 11, p. 46.

92 For relevant analyses about Stalin’s diplomatic thoughts and theories, refer to Li Yujun, “On Soviet Diplomatic Policies in the 1920s,” pp. 69-76.

93 For instance, while dealing with the civil war between the Communist Party-led troops and the Kuomintang-led troops after 1945, Stalin also had ideological relapses concerning whether to support the Chinese Communist Party. However, under the surface of seeming being uncertain was his clear, definite and consistent aim, i.e. to safeguard the Soviet security and interests in the Far East.

94 Douglas W. Blum, *The Soviet Foreign Policy Belief System, Beliefs, Politics, and Foreign Policy Outcomes*, pp. 373-394.

95 “Instructions from the Standing Anti-war Committee of the Organization Department of the Communist International Executive Committee to the Central Committee of the Communist Parties in Various Countries regarding the Manchurian Issue (November 15, 1931),” *CPSU (Bolshevik), Comintern and China’s Soviet Campaign (1931-1937)*, p. 73.

incident. Instead, they firmly believed that this was not a unilateral act of Japan and did not anticipate that the Kwantung Army indeed had the intention to invade and occupy the whole Northeast China. Consequently, he made the decision of giving up armed intervention. On the other hand, it might also be out of the consideration of preventing Japan from being the daring vanguard for the great imperialist powers to siege the Soviet Union that Moscow anxiously offered to sign the Soviet-Japanese Non-aggression Pact at the end of 1931. In January 1932, having occupied Jinzhou, the Japanese troops marched northward trying to defeat utterly the anti-Japanese armed forces and attack Harbin. Confronted with the advancing of Japanese Army, the Soviet Union not only did not intervene, but also allowed the Japanese Army to carry soldiers using the Chinese Eastern Railway. This might also be the sincerity showed to the Japanese party for signing the pact.⁹⁶

However, the diplomatic concessions of the Soviet Union did not get the cooperation from Japan in return, but instead further provoked its ambitions. When the Japanese government found that the great powers including the Soviet Union had no intention to counterbalance Japan, there was no reason to restrain the trespassing of the Kwantung Army. The stance also shifted from opposition to tacit consent and then to open support. As the puppet Manchukuo was officially established, Moscow gradually began to realize the serious consequences of not interfering with the Japanese actions in China's northeast. Having completely controlled the Northeast China, the Japanese Army began to send more troops immediately. Up till April 1932, the Kwantung Army had been enlarged from the permanent establishment of 1 division to 5 divisions, and also had 5 independent garrison units, 3 blended brigades and regiments and 2 cavalry brigade regiments under its command. The total forces rapidly increased to about 100,000. Meanwhile, the Japanese Army also secretly prepared for a war against the Soviet Union and actively collected relevant intelligence.⁹⁷ By contrast, having missed the opportune time, Moscow did not send a single soldier to the Far East during this time.⁹⁸ It can thus be seen that because of its misjudgment of the development of the situation, the Soviet Union was unable to carry out full-scale political mobilization and military preparation on time and missed the prime time for intervention. Until 1932, the balance between the Soviet and Japanese forces in the Far East area had been gradually broken. The practical threat posed

96 Apart from the above actions to show sincerity, Stalin in his letter to Kaganovich even required the OGPU and General Intelligence Directorate of the Workers-Peasants Red Army to stop their "malfeasance" while carrying out underground special task in Manchuria, since this might give rise to the outbreak of new conflicts with Japan. c.f. "Letter from Stalin to Kaganovich," quoted from A.M. Slautskaya: *Harbin-Tokyo-Moscow: The Memories of the Daughter of a Soviet Diplomat*, pp. 56-57.

97 "Instructions and orders delivered from the North Manchurian Secret Service Officerに与える" (北満特務機関長に与える指示、訓令送付の件), Manchurian Confidential Big Day Record 1932, vol. 14, reserved by Tokyo Ministry of Defense, the National Institute for Defense Studies, C01002762800.

98 Up until April 1932, the Japanese divisions stationed in the Northeast China were the 2nd Division, 8th Division, 10th Division, 14th Division and 20th Division, respectively. Also the 1st to 5th Independent Garrison Units, the 4th, 8th and 38th Blended Brigades, 1st and 4th Cavalry Brigades. For details, please refer to Li Hui *et al.*, eds., *Evolution of the Japanese Invading Army Series*, pp. 19-20.

by Japan to the Soviet Union became really imminent now.

If we say that the appeasement of the Soviet Union toward the military operations of the Japanese Army previously was mainly to avoid being the target of the great powers for attack, then the concessions of the Soviet Union after that were then forced to be made due to the established facts in the Northeast area and selling the Chinese Eastern Railway became a choice with no other alternative. At the end of 1932, speaking of the issue of selling the Chinese Eastern Railway, the German ambassador to Japan Von Dickson pointed out that the Soviet Union would rather bear the diplomatic disadvantages, i.e. of provoking the United States, France, China and so on, in order to get rid of the pressure from the increasingly powerful Japanese military. Moscow was willing to negotiate regarding the issue of selling the railway, which also indicated that the poor and weak management of the Chinese Eastern Railway. Litvinov believed that it was worthwhile for the Soviet Union to give up the Chinese Eastern Railway to avoid being sieged by Japan in Manchuria, even though it might reveal the weakness of the Soviet Union and would be unfavorable to the long-term diplomatic policies of the Soviet Union.⁹⁹

V. Conclusion

This paper believes that the “non-intervention policy” adopted by the Soviet Union regarding the situation of Northeast China after the Mukden Incident, to some degree, was caused by the lack of intelligence back then. Of course, the lack of intelligence, as the real-time factor, was not the only reason for the “non-intervention policy.” The diplomatic features of the Soviet Union over time also played a vital role. To probe into the real attitude of the Soviet Union towards the Mukden Incident and its consequences is not only for reconstructing the historical context that is closer to reality, but also for reviewing the fundamental diplomatic strategies of the Soviet Union back then and the international environment through this case. While analyzing the attitude of the Soviet Union towards the issue of Northeast China, our views should not be confined only to the Sino-Soviet or Japanese-Soviet relations, but should take into account the overall international situation at that time and the diplomatic features of the Soviet Union over time.

What Stalin pursued, from beginning to end, was always the national security. He wished to create favorable diplomatic situations in the surrounding areas as far as possible. However, he knew well enough that this objective would not be achieved with the strength of the Soviet Union itself. He could only take advantage of the conflicts between the imperialist powers to create a favorable international environment.¹⁰⁰ It was just based on this consideration that the Soviet Union proposed to sign the Non-aggression Pact with Japan immediately after the outbreak of the Mukden Incident. Years later, while handling the Soviet-German relations,

99 Guo Hengyu and Luo Meijun, eds., *German Foreign Office Archives: Sino-German Relations, 1928-1938*, p. 154.

100 Jin Zhongyuan, “Soviet Diplomacy and the Second World War,” pp. 2-7.

similar diplomatic thinking still dominated the decision-making level of Moscow.¹⁰¹ Before 1939, to counter against the rise of Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union had always pursued the collective security path and tried to cooperate with the Western countries. However, when Stalin thought that the collective security would not practically secure the Soviet Union from the threat of warfare, he suddenly turned to Germany waving the olive branch and eventually signed the Soviet-German Non-aggression Pact.¹⁰² In the Far East, the Soviet diplomatic strategies were by and large following about the same routine. This is why the Soviet Union had adopted a flexible policy in the Far East, sometimes vigorously assisting China, while compromising with Japan at other times.

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101 Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928-1941*, pp. 223-225.

102 For studies on the evolution of Soviet-German relations before World War Two please refer to Chen Hui, *Soviet-German Relations: 1933-1941*.

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