

MUNICH, 10 December 1969 (CAA). The following article by R. Waring Herrick appeared in Radio Liberty Research Bulletin CRD 407/69, 2 December 1969.

After over a month of restraint since the Sino-Soviet border talks began in Peking on 20 October, the USSR has again threatened China with the use of its superior force if necessary to end the border incidents. This resumption of the Soviet Union's war-of-nerves against China comes in the form of an article in a military journal signed to the press on the day the Peking talks started, but just distributed this week (1). By use of a favorite Soviet device of historical analogy, the Chinese leaders have been confronted with what is tantamount to a strategic scenario of developments in the border conflict to date and extended to suggest the contingency of China's eventual defeat in a limited war by a "shattering strike" from the USSR. The article amounts to an extensive elaboration of a theme sounded early last August by the long-time Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Soviet Strategic Missile Forces, General Tolubko, in a Red Star article that made it public that he had been appointed as Commander of Forces in the incident-ridden Far Eastern Military District (2).

By taking recourse to the only major episode of open if limited war between the Soviet Union and China -- that in 1929 over the Chinese-Eastern Railway across Manchuria -- the present article (3) is able to tellingly flesh-out the bare-bones threat of the Tolubko article. As outlined in an earlier report on the Tolubko article (4), he portrayed a simple scenario all the more transparently analogous to the present situation for its simplicity. In that case not an island in the Ussuri but the Soviet-leased Chinese-Eastern Railway that shortcuts across the Manchurian hump of northern China was the target of Chinese attack. As Tolubko succinctly expressed it, "all efforts" of the Soviet Government "to settle the conflict by peaceful means having failed," the Soviet Far Eastern Army and Amur Flotilla launched a "sudden and decisive strike" that defeated the Chinese and led them to sue for peace.

The fuller scenario set out in the new, much longer article lends itself to discussion in a series of steps as consecutively presented in the following:

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RUSS (1) -- USSR RESUMES ROCKET-RATTLING WITH SCENARIO FOR
"SHATTERING STRIKE" AT CHINA

1) Negotiations Proposed.-- The Chinese attack of 10 July 1929 was followed by Soviet efforts to settle the matter by peaceful means: "The Soviet Government took all measures for a peaceful resolution of the conflict." In a note on 13 July it declared that 'despite the forcible and provocational action of the Chinese authorities, the Soviet Government expresses its readiness to enter into negotiations with China on the whole complex of problems relating to the Chinese-Eastern Railway'." Similarly, it will be recalled, after the first serious incident at Damanskiy Island in the Ussuri on 2 March of this year, the Soviet Government sent a strong protest note to China on 3 March against the "dangerous, provocational action" of the CPR. A follow-up statement on 29 March added: "The Soviet Government... calls on the CPR to refrain from actions on the border which could cause complications and, if such do occur, to resolve them calmly through negotiations."

2) Use of Force Threatened in a First Protest Note.-- Simultaneously with this sweet reasonableness, the 1929 note from the Soviet Government added that "It disposes of the means necessary for protecting the legal rights of the peoples of the USSR against forcible encroachments by anyone whomsoever." The comparable "stick" portion of this carrot-and-stick approach to the incident four decades later reads: "The Soviet Government has stated, and considers it necessary to declare again, that it emphatically denounces any encroachments on Soviet territory by anyone whomsoever. And attempts to speak with the Soviet Union, with the Soviet people, using the language of weapons will be met by a decisive rebuff."

3) A Military Buildup Effectuated.-- In view of the failure of the Chinese to promptly accept the Soviet bid for negotiations, and alleged further provocations, the Soviet government "took decisive measures for strengthening the security of its Far Eastern borders." Similarly, since the March incident this year, the USSR has been widely reported to have strongly reinforced its forces along the Chinese borders, both in the Far East and along the Sinkiang border in Central Asia (5). Travel in these areas by non-Communist diplomats and military attaches of the Moscow diplomatic colony has been denied, thus ostentatiously confirming that something big is afoot.

4) Military Command and Organizational Changes.-- In the 1929 situation a unified military command was set up under the name of "The Special Far Eastern Army." It included not only all of the ground and air forces but the substantial naval forces of the Amur River flotilla. Appointed to head this command was V.K. Bluecher, a general officer already well known to the Chinese as a protagonist from the unfortunate outcome of his years as the leading Soviet military advisor to Chiang Kai-shek in the early twenties under the pseudonym of General Galen. In the contemporary case, a new Central Asian Military District has been carved out of the southern portion of one or both of the two Soviet military districts bordering on Sinkiang (6). This organizational shift has the obvious intention of permitting improved command and control of the Soviet divisions designated for such further fighting with the Chinese as may be foreseen. Additionally, the significance of the appointment of General Tolubko to head the single most important military district bordering on China was certain not to be lost on the Chinese. Well-known as a top missile troops officer, he was appointed to a command which had been traditionally held by a ground troops officer. This seems clearly to have been intended as a signal to the Chinese that should a limited war break out in the border regions the USSR would resort at least to tactical nuclear weapons if deemed necessary to offset the vast manpower advantage enjoyed by the Chinese Army.

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5) Use of Force Threatened in a Second Protest Note.-- Alleging an increasing number of "provocations" by way of incidents involving attacks on border villages, mining of the Amur River shipping channels, and military reconnaissance overflights, the Soviets sent a second note of protest on 25 September calling for an end of alleged "criminal actions" on the border and threatening that the Chinese government would be held fully accountable for any more. In this year's variation on the theme of forty years ago, there were further incidents particularly that at Goldinskiy Island in the Amur River on July 8, 1969. Also, on 13 June of this year, there was a further Soviet statement of its position on the presumed Chinese border claims which included both an allegation of continued Chinese "provocations" on the border and the further threat of "a crushing rebuff" to "any attempt to cross the Soviet border".

6) A Retaliatory Strike to Induce Negotiations.-- Despite the second Soviet protest note to the Chiang Kai-shek government, the "Chinese militarists continued to aggravate the situation," according to the Soviet version which grows suspiciously vague at this point. The present account goes on to relate: "The Soviet Government was compelled to take measures required to stop the aggression. It was decided above all to destroy the Sungari Flotilla of the enemy with its large garrison...". With the help of the Soviet Amur Flotilla, the eight river boats and 22,000 men of China's Sungari Flotilla were destroyed. This convincing display of the USSR's military capabilities and will to employ them was not as successful as was the border incident of last August 13, almost certainly initiated by the USSR as a retaliatory strike, in persuading the Chinese to negotiate. After a month of minor clashes from June 13th to July 13 in Yumin County, just north of the famed Dzungarian Gates through the Tien Shan mountains between Soviet Central Asia and Sinkiang, a major border clash was reported by both Chinese and Soviet media to have taken place on 13 August. While the USSR admitted to only having killed "several dozen" Chinese (7), Peking reported that "many" of its troops had been killed or injured and charged that the Soviet attack had been premeditated (8). In view of the facts that Chinese military operations on any major scale in this area are considerably handicapped by lack of rail communications and that the Dzungarian Gates are the logical route for any Soviet preemptive strike at the Chinese nuclear developmental and test facilities concentrated in Sinkiang, it seems most implausible that Peking would have been so rash as to have initiated the Yumin County border fighting. Hence, it seems a reasonable conclusion that the USSR precipitated the incident by way of a retaliatory strike aimed at bringing the Chinese to the negotiating table in a suitably intimidated frame of mind. In the 1929 situation, the Chinese are alleged to have failed to draw the correct conclusion from the retaliatory strike: "However, the Chinese militarists continued their provocations." The most important of these are claimed to have been the formation of two separate Army groups in position and preparing to conduct military strikes to interdict the Trans-Siberian Railroad at Lake Baikal in the north and in the East in the Soviet Maritime Province between Khabarovsk and the Trans-Siberian eastern terminus at Vladivostok. The alleged Chinese preparations for such operations were reportedly viewed with alarm as capable of cutting the Soviet Far East off from the rest of the country, which has always constituted the logistics bases for the USSR's eastern provinces.

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7) Limited War Initiated by USSR. -- Using its technological advantage of the era -- its absolute air superiority -- some 8000 Soviet troops supported by fighter and bomber squadrons drove deep into Chinese territory, decimated the two major troop concentrations allegedly preparing to cut the Trans-Siberian Railroad, killing at least 1500 Chinese and capturing well over 8000 more. The Soviet account would have the reader believe that this initiation of limited war on a major scale was undertaken on his own by General Bluecher, but there can be no doubt that the general policy was formulated in Moscow.

It is at this point in the scenario that the Chinese, by agreeing to the current border negotiations in Peking, have altered the scenario by forestalling, for the time being at least, the much-threatened Soviet resort to arms to force a solution of the existing territorial issues between the two countries.

Conclusion: As it may have already occurred to the reader, the parallels between the two incidents, despite their separation by a time span of 40 years, are so uncannily close as to give pause for thought. It may well be that the Chinese were considerably influenced, in their decision to negotiate, by the Tolubko article in August with its allusion to the 1929 precedent. To the extent that this may be the case, Soviet elaboration on this same theme in the present article, at a time when the Peking talks are said to be making no progress and in danger of breaking up, can scarcely be interpreted as other than a renewed threat of force intended to encourage the Chinese to make whatever concessions considered necessary to permit the Peking talks to make progress. The use of the same theme of the 1929 limited war as set forth in the original announcement of missileman Tolubko's appointment to the Far Eastern Military District also seems certain to sound in Chinese ears as a further rattling of Russian rockets.

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FOOTNOTES:

1. Voenno-istoricheskiy zhurnal (Military Historical Journal) No.11, October, 1969, pp. 121 - 126.
2. V.F. Tolubko, "Zhivet slava geroyev" (The Glory of Heroes Lives), Krasnaya Zvezda, 6 August 1969, p. 3.
3. The six-page article, complete with a diagram depicting the Soviet strikes into Chinese territory, is entitled "Razgrom kitayskikh militaristov v rayone KVZhD v 1929 godu" (Defeat of the Chinese Militarists in the Region of the Chinese-Eastern Railway in 1929). Its author is identified only as V. Dushen'kin, Candidate of Historical Sciences.
4. CRD 277/69 of 8 August 1969.
5. New York Times, 31 August 1969; Der Spiegel of 30 June 1969 carried a rare eyewitness account of a Trans-Siberian Railroad transit trip by a Western observer.
6. CRD 394/69 of 21 November 1969.
7. Pravda, 16 August 1969.
8. Reuter from Hong Kong, 14 August 1969, citing Radio Peking.