**Stalin Orders the Kuril Operation**

Although the Yalta Agreement stipulated that the Kurils would be “handed over” to the Soviet Union in return for Soviet participation in the war, a precise definition of the Kurils had not been given. At Potsdam, the U.S. and Soviet staffs had agreed that all of the Kurils with the exception of the four northernmost islands was an American zone of operation (14), though the Soviets had acquired a foothold in the Kurils by making the Sea of Okhotsk a zone of joint operations. Thus, Stalin faced a difficult challenge: he had to occupy the islands as quickly as possible while carefully monitoring the American reaction. To achieve his goal, he used both skillful diplomacy and ruthless military action.

On the morning of August 15, Vladivostok time, which was still the evening of August 14, Moscow time, Vasilevskii gave orders to Purkaev and Admiral I. S. Iumashev to occupy the northern parts of the Kuril islands without waiting for reinforcement from other fronts. Whereas the Japanese considered the defense of the northernmost islands crucial to the defense of Hokkaido and mainland Japan, the Soviet leadership thought these islands would provide the USSR with an important entrance into the Pacific Ocean. Purkaev told front commanders: “Japan’s capitulation is expected. Taking advantage of this favorable situation, it is necessary to seize Shimushu, Paramushiru, and Onekotan.”(15) Vasilevskii had most likely received an order from Stalin to initiate the Kuril operation. Washington had learned of Japan’s acceptance of the Potsdam Proclamation at 8 p.m.Moscow time on August 14. Thus it is reasonable to assume that Stalin’s order to initiate the Kuril operation was prompted by Japan’s acceptance of the Potsdam terms.(16) The campaign in Manchuria, Korea, and southern Sakhalin had proceeded as expected, and in most cases faster than originally scheduled, but so far nothing had been done in the Kurils. Japan’s impending capitulation must have convinced Stalin that he had to act immediately to occupy the Kurils before Japan’s surrender. Vasilevskii’s order to carry out the operation “without reinforcement from other fronts” indicated the haste with which this operation was implemented. Stalin was in a hurry.

Following Vasilevskii’s order, Purkaev made only meager forces available for the operation—two regiments of the 101st Rifle Division, two or three naval infantry companies from the Pacific Fleet, and the ships and floating devices the local commander could scrape together in Petropavlovsk. The post-operation report of Major General A. R. Gnechko, commander of the Kamchatka Defense District, vividly described the lack of preparations for the occupation. The Kamchatka Defense District had only two days to prepare for the entire operation. They did not have enough ships, artillery, or weapons to carry out the landing operations. To compensate for the lack of preparations and equipment, they were t rely on an element of surprise by taking advantage of “the political situation” resulting from the impending Japanese capitulation. Gnechko’s plan was to stage a surprise landing operation on the northeastern shore of Shimushu at 11p.m.on August 16, dispatch the main force to Kataoka Naval Base on the south on the island, and occupy the entire island by 11p.m.on August 17. The plan called for occupying Paramushiru and Onekotan using captured Shimushu as the base (17). No further plan was made at this point. Without knowing how the United States would act in the Kurils, Stalin had to be cautious. He ordered his military to occupy the two islands (Shimushu and Paramushiru) that clearly belonged to the Soviet zone of operation, and establish solid bases from which further operations could be launched. It is important to note that this first plan also envisaged the occupation of Onekotan, which fell within the American zone of operation, most likely to test the American reaction. If Stalin met with opposition from the Americans, he would retreat. If not, he would expand operations in the central and southern Kurils.

Gnechko and his commanding staff had numerous tasks to complete before leaving Petropavlovsk. They had to make detailed operational plans, mobilize the necessary forces into battle condition, transfer them to appropriate units, coordinate plans among various units, especially among the ground units, the naval units, and the air force, commandeer fishing trawlers and other vessels, convert them into military vessels, load the artillery, weapons, and communication gear, send written orders for all these actions, and obtain necessary information about enemy forces. And all these complicated preparations had to be made within thirty-six hours. It was an aberration of the usually careful planning of the rest of Operation August Storm. Naturally, many things went wrong. For instance, the Soviets first loaded on the ships the weapons and equipment they would need first at the landing, putting them at the bottom of the heavy load. When the operation began, they had to remove the piles on top to get to the necessary equipment at the bottom of the ship (18). This was only one of many errors.

At 4 a.m.on August 17, two hours later than scheduled, a convoy of Soviet ships left Avacha Bay in Petropavlovsk. Led by the escort ship Dzerzhinskii, the convoy sailed stealthily and slowly in the thick fog from Petropavlovsk to Shimushu, for a distance of 170 sea miles, without using any lights for most of the way. This was the longest journey that any Soviet landing force had to make during the entire Second World War (19). After the twenty-four-hour voyage, the first ship of the convoy approached Shimushu at 2 a.m.(midnight Japan time) on August 18. Two hours later, the rest of the ships lined up horizontally facing the landing zone. The battle of Shimushu was about to begin.

The Battle of Shimushu

At 2:15 a.m. (Japan time) on August 18, the Soviet forces launched a landing operation on Takeda Beach (20) (See Map 5.) Premature firing from

the Soviets provoked ferocious artillery fire from the two batteries installed at either end of the beach. It was not until 7a.m.that the first Soviet echelon completed the landing. The Soviet units moved toward the two strategic points on Mt. Yotsumine but failed to take the hills owing to a lack of firepower. Commander Fusaki Tsutsumi of the 91st Division, still not knowing that he and his men were being attacked by the Soviets, ordered the 11th Tank Regiment and the 73rd Infantry Brigade to repulse the enemy. The tank regiment recklessly pursued the enemy without infantry support and became easy prey for Soviet antitank weapons. It was during this battle that Tsutsumi first learned that the enemy was the Soviets, not the Americans.The second echelon of Soviet troops reached the shore at 9 a.m. The single radio that was saved from the landing was used to communicate with the artillery forces on Cape Lopatka and the warships on the bay, which began to pound the hills. Tsutsumi ordered the 74th Brigade in Paramushiru to join the defense of Shimushu. The major force of the 91st Division was assembled on Shimushu, marching to meet the invaders. Given their superiority of forces, it appeared only a matter of time before the Japanese defenders would repulse the Soviet forces.

But the conflict was decided off the battlefield. Japan’s Fifth Area Army

in Sapporo was panicked by what was happening on Shimushu. At a time

when the Imperial General Headquarters was trying to secure the smooth

surrender of all Japanese forces, a victory of the 91st Division against the

Soviet forces would derail the entire process. Thus, around noon on Au-

gust 18, the Fifth Area Army ordered Tsutsumi to stop fighting except in

self-defense. Tsutsumi sent a team of ten emissaries to negotiate a cease-

fire, but the Soviet fired on the emissaries, who were walking with a white flag. The Soviets began a counterattack and took the hills after two hours of hand-to-hand combat.

On August 19 Soviet forces began unloading the heavy artillery, weapons, and equipment that had been left on the ships, but the Japanese did not obstruct this operation. The Imperial General Headquarters, alarmed at the prospect of continued resistance from the Japanese forces, admonished the Fifth Area Army to stop any military action, even in self-defense, “on order of the emperor.” Cease-fire negotiations were conducted on Takeda Beach that afternoon. On August 20, in accordance with the cease-fire agreement, the Soviet ships sailed toward Kataoka Bay to occupy the naval base, but the Japanese shore batteries began ferocious firing on the approaching ships in the excuse of self-defense. Tsutsumi soon received another strict order from the Fifth Area Army to cease all actions. On August 21, on a Soviet ship off Kashiwabara on Paramushiru, Tsutsumi and Gnechko signed the formal cease-fire agreement (21).

The Battle of Shimushu demonstrates the fatal weaknesses in the Soviets’ Kuril operation. Stalin was concerned that the war might end before he captured what he had been promised at Yalta. Despite the heroic actions of individual Soviet soldiers, the Soviet invasion was poorly planned and poorly executed. The lack of preparation, absence of a well-planned and well-coordinated strategy, shortage of ships, equipment, artillery, and weapons, and the numerical inferiority of soldiers made it almost impossible for Gnechko’s forces to complete the mission to occupy Shimushu by August 18. Gnechko’s invading forces consisted of slightly more than 8,800 soldiers, whereas Japanese troops in Shimushu numbered 8,500—or 23,000

if the troops in Paramushiru are included. If we are to follow the general rule that the attacking side must have numerical superiority of three to one over the defender, we realize how reckless it was for the Soviets to attack the heavily fortified Shimushu with only equal forces (22). The Soviet landing ships carried too heavy a load; they got stuck about 100 to 150 meters from the shore, where the depth was more than two meters. Soldiers jumped into the water carrying heavy equipment and weapons. All twenty-two radios except one were dipped in or dropped into the salt water and ruined. A more serious mistake was that, despite the strict order not to fire, someone from the invading ships began firing prematurely. If the Soviet forces scored a victory on Shimushu, it was largely because the Imperial General Headquarters did not want the 91st Division to win.

The Japanese were not given the opportunity to count the number of casualties at the Battle of Shimushu. According to Soviet sources, the Japanese suffered 1,018 and the Soviets 1,567 casualties. It was the last major battle in World War II. But these men did not die to end the war in the

Pacific; the war had ended before the Battle of Shimushu. Why, then, was

it necessary for Stalin to wage such a costly war when he could have gained possession of Shimushu simply by sending a military emissary to negotiate a cease-fire? In fact, had he done so, he might have succeeded in occupying the island much earlier, on August 18. Was this a miscalculation or just bad judgment rendered in a panic? Perhaps both, but there is also a third possibility. Stalin needed the blood of Soviet soldiers spilled on the battleground in order to justify his claim that the Soviet Union had earned the Kurils—all the Kurils—paid for with the blood of the sons of the motherland. In fact, the bloodshed was a down payment allowing him to take possession of the entire Kurils securely in his hands. The high casualty figures in the Battle of Shimushu—despite the fact that the Japanese fought without the benefit of kamikaze pilots and human torpedoes, and that they were hamstrung by the superior command’s pressure to conclude a cease-fire—provide a cautionary tale for the planners of the American operation, Olympic. When President Truman approved Olympic on June 18, Marshall had not expected the total Japanese forces in Kyushu to exceed 350,000 (four divisions) against a total of 766,700 American troops. By the time the Battle of Shimushu was waged, the Americans watched with horror as Japanese forces increased quickly in Kyushu, far exceeding Marshall’s estimate to a total of 625,000 men and 14 field divisions. Whether American military planners closely watched the Battle of Shimushu is not known, but the resolute determination with which the Japanese fought the invading Soviet troops and the high casualty rate they inflicted on the enemy certainly gave credence to the boast of the Japanese military leaders that they could inflict significant damage on the invading American troops. Had Olympic been implemented, the result would have been an unprecedented bloodbath.

As Richard Frank asserts: “the Japanese buildup on Kyushu was sufficient to threaten to make the cost of invasion unacceptable.” The Battle of Shimushu validates this assertion (23). It is also important to note that Stalin was nervous about the American reaction to his Kuril operation. On August 18 the Imperial General Headquarters in Tokyo, having received the news of the attack on Shimushu, sent an urgent inquiry to MacArthur’s headquarters in Manila: “Some of your forces landed on Shimushu Island....Our forces are

obliged to resort to arms for self-defense. Now that hostilities between both parties have been prohibited, it is earnestly desired that the hostile actions will be ceased.” MacArthur’s headquarters immediately transmitted this telegram to Moscow. Stavka was alarmed by this information, thinking that the Americans had landed on Shimushu in violation of the agreed-upon demarcation line. General Slavin asked Deane if this Allied landing reported by the Japanese Imperial General Headquarters was carried out by American troops. Moscow was relieved only when it received MacArthur’s assurance that no Americans had landed on Shimushu (24).

14. “Meeting of the United States and Soviet Chiefs of Staff, Thursday, July 26, 3p.m.,”FRUS: Potsdam,vol. 2, pp. 410–411.

15. Slavinskii, Sovetskaia okkupatsiia, pp. 73, 81; No. 10542, 15 Aug. 45, MO TsVMA, f. 129, d. 26770, l. 119; Document No. 402, VO, vol 7, pt. 2, p. 24.

16. Marshall to Deane, 14 Aug. 45; “Exchange of Notes between Swiss Charge and Secretary of State,” “Japanese Acceptance of Potsdam Declaration,” Harriman Papers, Moscow Files, 13–16 Aug. 45, Library of Congress.

17. Sakhalinskii kraevedchekii arkhiv, f. Gnechko, Zhurnal boevykh deistvii

voisk Kamchatskogo oboronitel’nogo raiona po ovladeniiu ostrovami severnoi chasti Kuril’skoi griady v period 15–31.8 1945 g. (thereafter Gnechko, Zhurnal), pp. 1–3, 9–11. This is the report of the Kuril operation

written by Gnechko. See also Iumashev’s order, Boevaia direktiva MR/SP,

15.8.45, attached in Gnecko, Zhurnal (no page number).

18. Slavinskii, Sovetskaia okkupatsiia, pp. 83–84; Nakayama,1945 nen natsu, p. 176; Gnechko, Zhurnal, pp. 5–6, 9–11. For the Soviet operation plan, see Glantz, Soviet Operational and Tactical Combat in Manchuria, pp. 286–293.

19. Slavinskii, Sovetskaia okkupatsiia, p. 87; Glantz, Soviet Operational and

Tactical Combat in Manchuria, pp. 293–294.

20. For the battle of Shimushu, see Slavinskii, Sovetskaia okkupatsiia; Nakayama,1945nen natsu; John Stephan, Kuril Islands: Russo-Japanese Frontier in the Pacific (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), pp. 158–164; V. N. Bagrov, Iuzhno-Sakhalinskaia i Kuril’skaia operatsii (Avgust 1945 goda)

(Moscow: Voennoe izdatel’stvo, 1959), pp. 82–101; “Otchetnye dokumenty po zakhvatu Kuril’skoi griady,” MO TsVMA, f. 129, d. 26770; Document 403,VO, vol. 7, pt. 2, pp. 23–32.

21. See Slavinskii, Sovetskaia okkupatsiia, pp. 91–103; Nakayama, 1945 nen natsu,pp. 180–200; Gnechko, Zhurnal, pp. 13–29; Tsutsumi Fusaki,

Kitachishima heidan no shusen (typewritten manuscript, BKSS); Interview

with Iwao Sugino, handwritten manuscript,Chishima sakusen choshu shiryo, vol. 8, BKSS; Interview with Risaburo Takuma, Kyushiro Kawada, Hoppogun, Dai Shomengun Kankei choshuroku, BKSS.

22. Gnechko, Zhurnal, p. 6; Slavinskii, Sovetskaia okkupatsiia, p. 80; Naka-

yama, 1945nen natsu, p. 170. Glantz, who uncritically uses earlier Soviet accounts but ignores Slavinskii, Soviet archival sources, and Japanese sources, provides a rosy picture of the battle that favors the Soviets. For in-stance, he writes: “By 0500 hours the detachment’s main force had completed the landing without firing a single shot or losing a single soldier.”

Glantz, Soviet Operational and Tactical Combat in Manchuria, p. 294.

23. See Richard Frank, Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire

(New York: Random House, 1999), chaps. 8, 11, 13, and 20. The number

of troops comes from p. 203, and the quote comes from p. 343.

24. MacArthur to Deane, 19 Aug. 45, “Japan Surrender 2 of 4,” Truman Pa-

pers, Naval Aide Files, 1945–53, Box 13, HSTL; John R. Deane, The Strange Alliance: The Story of Our Efforts at Wartime Co-operation with

Russia (New York: Viking Press, 1946), pp. 281–282. Deane confuses Shimushu for Shimushiri. This confusion indicates how little the Americans were concerned about the Kuril operation. See MacArthur to Deane,

23 Aug. 45, C35915, War Department Classified Message Center, Incoming Classified Message, “Japan Surrender 3 of 4,” Papers of Harry S. Truman, Naval Aide Files, 1945–53, Box 13, HSTL