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From the Khalkhin Gol Events to the Neutrality Pact: Relations Between the USSR and Japan in the Reports of Soviet Diplomats in Tokyo (1939–1941)

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Abstract

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Soviet-Japanese relations were going through difficult times. The Mongolian issue and border incidents continually worsened bilateral contacts. In a state of hostility and open confrontation, the authorities of both countries detained and rummaged fishing vessels, artificially whipped up spy mania, increased pressure on left-wing elements (Japan) and arrested those who were associated with the enemy side through scientific or other work (the USSR). Limiting himself to two events from Soviet-Japanese history of this time, the author analyzes how Soviet-Japanese relations and the atmosphere of mutual perception changed in the period between the end of the Khalkhin Gol River conflict (1939) and the signing of the Neutrality Pact (1941).

Using reports from employees of the USSR Plenipotentiary Mission in Tokyo as an example, the author examines how Japan's attempt to begin building "new relations" with the USSR affected the position of Soviet diplomats and influenced the degree and quality of interaction between them and the Japanese.

Keywords: the USSR, Japan, Khalkhin Gol, Soviet-Japanese relations, Soviet diplomats, Neutrality Pact.

In 1939, Japan made a final decision to reconsider its views on the nature of its relations with the Soviet Union. Several circumstances contributed to this: the conclusion of the Soviet-German Non-Aggression Pact, the defeat of the Kwantung Army during the battles on the Khalkhin Gol River and the outbreak of war in Europe. All three events had an impact on the transformation of Japan's foreign policy, and while the declaration of war on Germany by Great Britain and France caused a much less severe shock, the deal between the German leadership and Moscow was perceived in Tokyo as an unequivocal and unforgivable betrayal [Molodyakov 2012, p. 425]. Having received reports of the upcoming signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Japanese press almost immediately lashed out at the government and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Newspapers wrote about the failure of Japanese diplomacy and called for a change in its course. The temporary chargé d'affaires of the USSR in Tokyo, N. I. Generalov, noted that the conclusion of the Soviet-German treaty not only changed the international situation, but also upset all the plans of Japan's military circles.[1] The diplomat concluded that, in connection with what had happened, the question of the desirable direction of the empire's policy was actively discussed: either to improve relations with the USSR, or to negotiate with Great Britain on the delimitation of spheres of influence in China.

A similar picture was painted at the American embassy in Tokyo. Temporary chargé d'affaires Eugene Dooman wrote that everyone, from government officials to ordinary subjects, were stunned by the actions of the Germans.[2] Anger and indignation prevailed, and the resentment due to the fact that Germany had given Japan no prior notice of its negotiations with the USSR, in fact, put an end to the further strengthening of the Anti-Comintern Pact and the coordination of policy with Berlin.[3] Through its ambassador, Ōshima Hiroshi, Japan

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1 AVP RF. F. 0146. Op. 22. Pap. 192. D. 13. L. 170.

2 FRUS, 1939. Vol. III, the Far East. Washington: United Press Government Printing Office, 1955. P. 51.

3 Ibid. P. 66.

expressed an official protest to Germany, declaring a serious violation of the secret protocol to the Anti-Comintern Pact, namely, the second article.[4] "The alliance of Japan with Germany and Italy and the Anti-Comintern Pact are turning into empty paper," as V. I. Belokurov, Secretary of the USSR Military Attaché in Tokyo, telegraphed to the head of the Fifth Directorate of the Red Army [Voennaya razvedka informiruet 2008, p. 163]. A similar idea was expressed in the reports to the U.S. State Department written by the American Ambassador to Moscow, Laurence Steinhardt. He noted that one of the chief advantages which the Soviet Union obtained through the non-aggression pact with Germany was the weakening of German-Japanese cooperation directed against the USSR.[5]

In an atmosphere of mistrust towards the Third Reich, the authority of the supporters of a military-political alliance with the Germans fell sharply, and the Axis faction began to disintegrate. With the conclusion of the Soviet-German Pact, the Japanese Army Ministry, which was considered the core of Japanese-German cooperation, even temporarily banned discussion of the project of a trilateral alliance along the Berlin-Rome-Tokyo line [Hosoya 1976, p. 193]. Taking responsibility for the Japanese government's failure to foresee the conclusion of the Soviet-German Pact and symbolically demonstrating the "end" of the policy of collaboration with Germany, Prime Minister Baron Hiranuma Kiichirō announced the resignation of his cabinet.

The task of forming a new cabinet was entrusted to General Abe Nobuyuki, whose candidacy was expected to attract the support of all sectors of society, including the army. Surprisingly, the circumstances that led to the resignation of the Hiranuma government aroused much more interest than Abe's appointment. The reasons given by the baron were received with great satisfaction by the Japanese press, and his

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4 DGFP. 1918–1945. Series D. Vol. VII. Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1956. P. 278.

5 FRUS, 1940. Vol. I, General. Washington: United Press Government Printing Office, 1959. P. 654.

determination to "scrupulously [...] fulfill his obligations to the Emperor" was presented by commentators in laudatory terms.[6]

Following the attack on Poland, on September 4, 1939, the Abe government issued a statement on Japan's non-intervention in the European war, and, on September 13, it was announced that the country would maintain an "independent position" in international affairs [Istoriya voiny na Tikhom okeane 1957, p. 307]. In an effort to achieve a balanced foreign policy, the Japanese leadership chose to resolve the "Chinese Incident" and improve relations with the United States, Great Britain, France, and the USSR.

Unwilling to take responsibility and commit themselves to specific, primarily military, obligations to the Germans, the Japanese took steps to normalize relations with the USSR. Of course, they were largely prompted to do so by the situation in China and the desire to resolve the issue of Moscow's political and economic support for the Chiang Kai-shek's regime. Informing the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, Generalov wrote that some leaders of right-wing organizations were considering the possibility of concluding a non-aggression pact with Moscow [Dokumenty vneshnei politiki 1992, p. 111]. In their opinion, a restoration of relations and a rapprochement with the USSR were necessary to counter Great Britain. On the other hand, according to reports from the Soviet intelligence resident in Tokyo, Richard Sorge, it was most difficult to push through this point of view in the ranks of the Kwantung Army, whose leadership was reluctant to take such a step [Russkii arkhiv 1997, p. 160]. Despite the disagreements and factional struggle that existed within the Japanese political elite, a course was adopted to change policy towards the USSR. "On the issue of ending the adventuristic policy against the North," Sorge concluded on September 27, 1939, "there is currently a general agreement of all factions" [Ibid, p. 161].

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[6] FRUS, 1939. Vol. IV, the Far East, the Near East and Africa. Washington: United Press Government Printing Office, 1965. P. 459.

The Reestablishment of Soviet-Japanese Relations

After the suspension of hostilities at Khalkhin Gol and the conclusion of an armistice in Moscow, the situation in Soviet-Japanese relations was gradually changing for the better. An agreement was reached to create a quadripartite commission to clarify the border between the Mongolian People's Republic and Manchukuo, and a draft trade agreement was discussed. In response to the Japanese government's proposal to improve trade and economic ties between the two countries, the Soviet authorities declared their full readiness for negotiations. Towards the end of 1939, in the Kremlin, the USSR Foreign Commissar Molotov and the Japanese ambassador to Moscow Tōgō Shigenori signed a new protocol on the extension of the fishing convention. "After the signing, as a sign of the completion of the negotiations that lasted all night within the walls of the Kremlin," Tōgō recalled, "on Molotov's orders, some *hors d'oeuvres* [snacks. – *I. D.*] and drinks were served, and he raised a toast to the improvement of Soviet-Japanese relations, in which he also expressed gratitude for my efforts. In response, I raised my glass, saying that it was significant that I was meeting the first day of the year 1940, which would be memorable for the entire world, in the Kremlin" [Togo 1996, p. 205].

The changes that were taking place at the official level naturally affected the position of Soviet diplomats and influenced the nature of the Japanese interaction with them. Based on the obvious reasons for maintaining peaceful and good-neighborly relations with the USSR, it was important for the Japanese authorities to show that the "new relations" with the Soviet Union were developing in all directions, including through interaction with its representatives in Tokyo. Anti-Soviet propaganda in the press was reduced, posters and slogans that had hung on the streets of Tokyo not so long ago were removed from all places.[7] Similar measures were taken on the Soviet

[7] AVP RF. F. 0146. Op. 22. Pap. 192. D. 13. L. 174.

side. U.S. ambassador Steinhardt, analyzing rumors about a possible improvement in the Soviet-Japanese relations, reported to Washington on September 8, 1939, that public attacks on Japan in the press had subsided. According to his observations, this was confirmed during the celebration of the 25th International Youth Day on the Red Square, where "comparatively few anti-Japanese slogans and banners" were displayed.[8] Although the Soviet leadership did not pursue the goal of a profound transformation of Japan's image, as relations were restored, it nevertheless went so far as to soften the language on the Land of the Rising Sun and reduce the negative connotations of it in the media [Korshenko 2018, p. 121]. The same was done by the Japanese.

"Malicious and anti-Soviet articles," as K. A. Smetanin, the new USSR plenipotentiary representative in Tokyo, wrote to Molotov on November 25, 1939, "have been replaced in a significant number of newspapers by more or less balanced, calm ones that pose questions in a businesslike manner."[9] "Now the life of the Plenipotentiary Mission will proceed in better conditions," claimed Nomura Kichisaburō, the Japanese Minister of Foreign Affairs, during the first unofficial meeting with Smetanin.[10] The Soviet Plenipotentiary Representative admitted that he was glad to hear these words, but did not fail to remind his partner of the "far from satisfactory state" in which the work of the Plenipotentiary Mission and its staff had been all this time. Nomura's words reflected the new course of Japanese diplomacy, and the impatience with which the country's public awaited the arrival of the new Soviet ambassador to Tokyo only confirmed this. "Everyone is showing great interest in the arrival of Comrade Smetanin," summarized Chargé d'Affaires Generalov at the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, "the newspapers are trying to connect his arrival with some kind of 'new' policy of the USSR towards Japan, and his

[8] FRUS, 1939. Vol. III, the Far East. Washington: United Press Government Printing Office, 1955. Pp. 62–63.

[9] AVP RF. F. 0146. Op. 22. Pap. 191. D. 3. L. 150.

[10] AVP RF. F. 0146. Op. 22. Pap. 192. D. 13. L. 254.

delay in leaving is explained by the ongoing discussion of this 'new' policy."[11]

Having left Moscow on October 22, Smetanin arrived in Tokyo on November 6, although the Japanese capital was ready to welcome him long before that. At the time, when even the Soviet embassy did not know the date of Smetanin's arrival, various rumors were actively spreading in Japan on this matter. According to a number of Japanese newspapers, Smetanin was supposed to leave Moscow on October 10 and go to the Land of the Rising Sun a month earlier than expected. "Smetanin," wrote *Nichibei Shimbun* on September 23, citing *Hōchi Shimbun*, "has advanced his scheduled date of departure by one month reportedly to conduct negotiations with the Japanese for the readjustment of relations of the two countries side by side with the Moscow conference now going on between Ambassador Togo and Foreign Commissar Molotov in accordance with the decisions of the Supreme Council."[12] "The arrival of the new ambassador in Japan," reported *Teikoku Shimpō* on October 8, "attracts the attention of all circles, since it has a serious bearing on the issue of relations between Japan and the USSR. Although the Foreign Ministry has not yet received the telegram about Smetanin's departure, there are nevertheless rumors that he will leave for his destination in the coming days."[13]

In the wake of these rumors, a delegation from the "Association of Fishing Interests," headed by Count Kabayama Sukehide, planned to meet Smetanin on October 13. Having learned of this news from Kabayama's secretary, Generalov said that if they knew that Smetanin was coming, then let them meet him, "we have no information about his arrival yet."[14]

The politeness which the Japanese showed at home accompanied Smetanin throughout the entire journey to Tokyo. "On the morning of

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11 AVP RF. F. 0146. Op. 22. Pap. 192. D. 13. L. 227.

12 *Nichibei Shimbun*. 23.09.1939.

13 AVP RF. F. 0146. Op. 22. Pap. 202. D. 101. L. 122.

14 AVP RF. F. 0146. Op. 22. Pap. 192. D. 13. L. 227.

October 29, we crossed the border in Otpor (Zabaykalsk. – *I. D.*) and arrived at the Manzhouli station. An unusual meeting took place (or rather, Soviet diplomats had not had such meetings for a long time): a solid number of all sorts of official representatives, excessive courtesy and attentiveness, extremely polite treatment. <…> Despite the fact that we arrived in Seoul at three o'clock in the morning on November 2, we were met here quite honorably."[15] Upon arrival in the city, Smetanin gave an interview to Japanese journalists, and his phrase that "there is no question between Japan and Soviet Russia which cannot be peacefully solved" flew around and was placed on the front page of many newspapers.[16]

The change that occurred in relation to Soviet diplomats in Tokyo could not have happened without the negotiations then underway in Moscow and the improvement of the political climate between the two capitals as a whole. Even foreign diplomats were wondering about the extent to which police pressure had decreased against the backdrop of the turning point in Soviet-Japanese relations. "When I asked him," the plenipotentiary noted in his diary, commenting on a conversation with the German ambassador Eugen Ott, "if he knew about this regime, he literally exclaimed: 'Oh, very good'."[17] Having received the answer that the regime had weakened, Ott, according to Smetanin, "with some boasting reported that he had personally talked more than once with the right people about changing this regime, proving that an improvement in the regime would be one of the measures that would improve relations between Japan and the USSR."[18] However, Ott did not inspire confidence, and later Smetanin gave him the following description: "Ott, having dealings and conversations with us, holds a branch of 'peace and friendship' in his left hand, but in his right one [he holds] a well-sharpened dagger, which he uses from time to time, inciting some of his Japanese friends against us. <…> Pretending to be

15 AVP RF. F. 0146. Op. 22. Pap. 192. D. 13. L. 252.

16 *Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail*. 04.11.1939.

17 AVP RF. F. 0146. Op. 22. Pap. 192. D. 13. L. 258.

18 AVP RF. F. 0146. Op. 22. Pap. 192. D. 13. L. 258–259.

a friend and fawning over us, he can always do us harm. Caution and more caution [is needed] with such a subject."[19]

Through its ambassador in Tokyo, Germany sought to act as a mediator in relations between the USSR and Japan. The Japanese partners were informed about this long before the signing of the Soviet-German non-aggression pact, although when negotiations on it were already underway. On August 21, 1939, before the trip of the Reichsminister of Foreign Affairs of Germany Joachim Ribbentrop to Moscow, the Japanese ambassador in Berlin was once again told about the advisability of a speedy normalization of Japanese-Soviet relations: first at a reception with the State Secretary of the German Foreign Ministry Ernst Weizsäcker, who reported on the "forced" German-Soviet rapprochement due to provocations by Poland, the British-French encirclement and the lack of success in the negotiation process on an alliance of three powers, and then during a personal conversation with Ribbentrop. The Germans sought to convince the Japanese that Britain was the "number one enemy" for Japan and Germany, and therefore the treaty with the USSR was concluded in the interests of both countries [Mileev 2017, p. 109]. After the signing of the pact, Ribbentrop also offered his country's mediation services to I. V. Stalin. The Soviet leader considered Germany's assistance useful, but he did not want the Japanese to get the impression that this initiative had come from the USSR. Agreeing with Stalin's words, Ribbentrop emphasized that he would simply continue the conversations that had taken place with the Japanese ambassador and that no initiatives would be made on this issue by either the Soviet or German side [1941 god 1998, p. 579].

"New Relations" With the USSR

In order to emphasize the progressive nature of Soviet-Japanese relations and create a favorable atmosphere around them, the Japanese authorities used various means.

[19] AVP RF. F. 0146. Op. 23. Pap. 206. D. 14. L. 94.

On the one hand, they used politicians and entrepreneurs who presented themselves as "friends" of the USSR and talked about the "good will" and "friendly intentions" of the Japanese authorities. The Soviet embassy treated such speeches with distrust and often called them nothing more than "verbal demagogy" and "idle talk" that were not believed to be backed by concrete actions.[20] "We, Russians, are materialists," as G. G. Dolbin, First Secretary, told Andō Yoshirō, an employee of the Japanese Foreign Ministry, "and for us, deeds and facts are more important than verbal assurances, even from high-ranking persons."[21] These "assurances" were usually given at ceremonial events, breakfasts, lunches and dinners, to which Soviet diplomats were invited and where calls for cooperation and the establishment of good-neighborly relations between the two countries were often heard. "The purpose of this 'rout' that the Japanese arranged for us," concluded Y. A. Malik, a counsellor to the plenipotentiary mission, in his diary on July 2, 1940, "was obviously to test the possibility of communicating with us. It is quite obvious that all of this was done with the sanction and on the instructions of the leadership of the so-called 'renovation' movement from Japan, of which Vice-Admiral Sakonji Seizō, chairman of the North Sakhalin Oil Company, is an active participant.

It is clear from newspapers and from personal conversations with individual representatives of this movement that a number of active figures of this movement, who are striving to rebuild Japan along 'totalitarian lines,' support the idea that it is necessary to somehow come to an agreement with the USSR."[22] "Passivity in the north and activity in the south," Sakonji had previously convinced Smetanin.[23] "It is becoming incomprehensible to me," the vice-admiral asked at a meeting with the Soviet plenipotentiary envoy, "why the Soviet Union is creating a reinforced defensive line in the Far East, thereby keeping the Kwantung Army in suspense. It would be better if the Soviet Union understood

[20] AVP RF. F. 06. Op. 6. Pap. 58. D. 803a. L. 193.

[21] AVP RF. F. 0146. Op. 23. Pap. 206. D. 14. L. 47.

[22] AVP RF. F. 0146. Op. 23. Pap. 206. D. 14. L. 73.

[23] AVP RF. F. 0146. Op. 23. Pap. 206. D. 14. L. 63.

the point of view of Japanese sailors and established friendlier relations with Japan."[24]

Although Sakonji had visited the Soviet envoy before, his visits took on special significance during the period when the position of the Prime Minister of Japan was occupied by Admiral Yonai Mitsumasa. Yonai was known for his moderate and friendly views on the Soviet Union and opposed an alliance with Germany. It follows from diplomatic documents that, in the context of the discussion of the choice of the direction of aggression, it was primarily representatives of naval circles who sought dialogue with the USSR, having strengthened their positions in the country's political leadership and believing that Japan's interests lay in the South Seas region.

On the other hand, there were attempts to recall the existence of Soviet-Japanese cultural ties, which, however, as the international situation worsened and political mistrust between the countries grew, came to naught by the end of the 1930s. Being in a state of hostility and open confrontation, the authorities of both countries detained and rummaged fishing vessels, accusing each other of poaching and border violations, artificially whipped up spy mania, increased pressure on left-wing elements (Japan) and persecuted those who, by virtue of their service, were associated with the enemy side (the USSR) [SSSR i strany Vostoka 2010, p. 76].

In Japan, with the appointment of Suetsugu Nobumasa to the post of Minister of Internal Affairs in December 1937, mass arrests of representatives of the left-wing movement began. Those who disagreed with government policy were arrested and sentenced to prison. "The left-wing and liberal-minded intellectuals quickly felt the pressure from the ruling clique," Smetanin wrote in his review to the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs. "No sooner had the military begun the war against the Chinese Republic in 1937 than the Minister of Internal Affairs began to carry out a large-scale crackdown on trade unions, leftist organizations of journalists, writers, and artists: arrest radically minded professors,

[24] AVP RF. F. 0146. Op. 23. Pap. 206. D. 14. L. 63.

impose a ban on the sale of 'seditious' books, limit the publication of journals, and implement strict censorship of the printed word, films, and stage performances."[25] For attempting to create a popular front movement against Japan's war in China, two Diet members, the leaders of the Japan Proletarian Party and the All-People's Peasant Union, Katō Kanjū and Kuroda Hisao, were sentenced to several years in prison, and their organizations were banned. In parallel with the events in Japan, in the USSR, at the height of mass repressions, a persecution of famous Japanologists from Moscow, Leningrad, and Vladivostok was underway. D. M. Pozdneev, E. D. Polivanov, N. A. Nevsky, K. A. Kharnsky, N. P. Ovidiev were accused of espionage and promptly and secretly shot. N. I. Konrad, E. M. Kolpakchi, A. L. Kletny, M. S. Tsyn, I. L. Ioffe remained alive, but were unable to avoid arrest and punishment in the form of labor camps [Filippov 2021, p. 105].

In a situation where Soviet-Japanese relations were being restored, Japan decided to play the cultural card and turn to those organizations in the country that were not yet closed, whose tasks included maintaining interaction with the USSR. Among such structures, the Japanese-Soviet Society stood out. Being the successor of the Japanese-Russian Society, founded in 1902, the current organization had as its main goal, like its predecessor, "the study of Russia and the promotion of friendship between the two peoples" [Samoylov 2015, p. 32]. Throughout its history, the society enjoyed the support and patronage of high-ranking figures in Japanese politics: Prince Kan'in Kotohito remained its permanent president, and the military commander Terauchi Masatake and the famous politician Gotō Shimpei served as chairmen and vice-chairmen at various times.

Having resumed its work in 1926, the society continued to study its new and at the same time old neighbor: it encouraged research into Soviet culture, science, and art, and was also involved in holding lectures and welcoming meetings for distinguished guests from the Soviet Union. However, in an era of ubiquitous images and stereotypes, when

[25] AVP RF. F. 0146. Op. 22. Pap. 191. D. 3. L. 79.

every step or sign of attention from the Japanese was questioned, the activities of the Japanese-Soviet Society could not help but be viewed in a suspicious light. In addition, in April 1939, "completely unnoticed by public attention," its reorganization took place.[26] "Only a note we accidentally found," Smetanin wrote to Molotov in June of that year, "placed in the *Nichi-Nichi* newspaper somewhere in the back, informed us of this fact."[27] The essence of the reorganization was as follows:

"1) to change the goal of the society so that it would have the goal of studying the situation in the USSR, thereby assisting the state policy of Japan;

2) to ask Prince Kan'in to resign from the post of chairman of this society;

3) to accept a collegial system of advisers (managers) of this society from among the Japanese members of this society.

The following eight people are appointed as advisers (managers) of the new body: Ōhashi Shintarō, the old vice-minister of foreign affairs Kurachi Tetsukichi, retired Lieutenant General Hashimoto Toranosuke, the former Japanese ambassador to the USSR Tanaka Tokichi, honorary professor of the Tokyo Institute of Foreign Studies Yasugi Sadatoshi, the former Japanese consul general in Vladivostok Watanabe Rie, and then, from among the members of this society, Numata Masajiro and Sekine Seiichi."[28]

After meeting with the new chairman of the society, Kurachi, at the USSR Plenipotentiary Mission in Tokyo, Malik made the following conclusion: "I have the impression that this dummy society exists only on paper and is essentially nothing more than one of the anti-Soviet cells in Japan, which aims to carry out intelligence activities in relation to the USSR. In the appropriate political situation, this society quickly disguises itself as a 'Japanese-Russian' and even a 'Japanese-Soviet Society,' through which the Japanese try to carry out one or another

[26] AVP RF. F. 0146. Op. 22. Pap. 191. D. 3. L. 127.

[27] AVP RF. F. 0146. Op. 22. Pap. 191. D. 3. L. 127.

[28] AVP RF. F. 0146. Op. 22. Pap. 191. D. 3. L. 127.

event requiring contact with the USSR Plenipotentiary Mission in Tokyo."[29] According to Malik, the purpose of this society was not to improve cultural relations between the USSR and Japan, as Kurachi stated, but to "study the situation of the Soviet Union and the regions in its immediate vicinity in order to promote the development of Japanese state policy."[30] Smetanin gave a similar assessment of the organization, calling it a "long-dead society" that the Japanese decided to revive in light of the "new relations" with the USSR.[31] At the same time, neither Malik nor Smetanin completely rejected the idea of cooperation with the society, at least on the grounds that it could bring some benefit to the Soviet embassy, namely, to obtain additional information about certain people and distribute printed materials about the USSR.

The change in rhetoric towards the USSR and the desire to maintain good-neighborly relations with it influenced the public activities of Soviet diplomats in Japan. While in February 1939, as was the case at the farewell banquet given in honor of the Belgian ambassador Albert de Bassompierre, a number of foreign diplomats tried to avoid public conversations with Soviet representatives,[32] as the USSR became more and more actively involved in European and Far Eastern affairs, contacts between the two groups of people gradually expanded. Now, not only the Japanese (for obvious reasons), but also foreigners sought to attract their attention. One such telling incident occurred at the funeral of Kitashirakawa Nagahisa, a cousin of Emperor Hirohito, who died, as the press reported, in an airplane crash while on duty in Inner Mongolia in China.[33] At the official farewell ceremony for the prince, the Soviet side was represented by Smetanin and Counselor D. A. Zhukov. The envoy reported that, among the foreigners, only two or three people "turned away" from him, while the other diplomats "willingly greeted and

[29] AVP RF. F. 0146. Op. 23. Pap. 206. D. 14. L. 172.

[30] AVP RF. F. 0146. Op. 23. Pap. 206. D. 14. L. 172.

[31] AVP RF. F. 0146. Op. 23. Pap. 206. D. 14. L. 151.

[32] AVP RF. F. 0146. Op. 22. Pap. 192. D. 13. L. 19.

[33] *Shin Sekai Asahi Shimbun*. 06.09.1940.

conversed."[34] The Japanese expressed similar courtesy: "Today Matsuoka (Yōsuke – *I. D.*) is with me, and Nishi (Haruhiko – *I. D.*) and Zhukov greeted us with an emphatic courtesy."[35]

A major symbolic expression of the changed attitude towards Soviet diplomats can be seen in the appearance of the managing director of the Kabuki theater on the territory of the USSR embassy in October 1940. The purpose of his visit was to invite Plenipotentiary Smetanin to one of the productions dedicated to the celebration of the 2600th anniversary of the founding of the Japanese Empire. In the history of the Soviet embassy, this situation was unique. "This fact in itself," wrote Malik, "is obviously unprecedented in the history of the Soviet embassy, when a director of a theater personally invites an ambassador."[36] Despite diplomatic acts of politeness and the desire to emphasize the normal course of development of Soviet-Japanese relations, Soviet diplomats continued, however, to believe that the Japanese authorities, due to the current international circumstances, were thus trying to "flirt" with representatives of the USSR.

The pinnacle of Japan's "friendly" policy towards the Soviet Union and its diplomats was the signing of the neutrality pact in Moscow in April 1941. The Japanese press, according to TASS, paid great attention to this document and wrote that the political agreement would be followed by the signing of a trade agreement.[37] This was not the only news that the press discussed. Foreign agencies eagerly reported on the alleged proposal made to Molotov at the Yaroslavsky railway station by Matsuoka to visit Tokyo in return and on the fact that this proposal was accepted by the Soviet People's Commissar.[38]

The conclusion of the Soviet-Japanese pact caused an ambiguous and sometimes even negative reaction in the world. According to the

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34 AVP RF. F. 0146. Op. 23. Pap. 206. D. 14. L. 150.

35 AVP RF. F. 0146. Op. 23. Pap. 206. D. 14. L. 150.

36 AVP RF. F. 0146. Op. 23. Pap. 206. D. 14. L. 174.

37 GA RF. F. P-4459. Op. 27. D. 590. L. 1.

38 GA RF. F. P-4459. Op. 27. D. 590. L. 149.

Associated Press, the Soviet-Japanese treaty did not affect the current situation in international relations, but, in the future, under certain circumstances, it could cause serious changes.[39] The Washington Post newspaper linked the signing of the pact with the expansion of Japanese aggression in Southeast Asia and, at the same time, expressed dissatisfaction with the participation and role of the USSR in it. "Thus," the publication wrote, "Russia becomes an accomplice to future Japanese aggressions in the same way as in August 1939 its treaty with Germany contributed to German aggression. The Soviet Union kindled a great fire and has now apparently decided not to weaken it."[40]

At the time when newspapers wrote about the Soviet-Japanese rapprochement that followed the conclusion of the pact, representatives of the USSR became the main heroes of public life in Japan for some time.[41] A mention in the press, a special invitation to Kabuki theater, an acquaintance with one of the famous actors of our time, Onoe Kikugorō VI [Dokumenty vneshnei politiki 1998, p. 619]. On April 29, at the military parade in Tokyo, organized on the occasion of the Emperor's birthday, Smetanin, following the German ambassador Ott, found himself in the same row with Japan's main allies in the Tripartite Pact: Germany and Italy. The arrangement could have been different if not for the absence of the American, British, and French ambassadors – the most senior in terms of time spent as the heads of their diplomatic missions. The reasons why they did not come could have varied. Perhaps their absence was due to instructions from their capitals: Great Britain and France were at war with Germany, and this, in turn, forced the ambassadors to demonstratively avoid meetings with the Germans. It is possible that the U.S., maintaining neutrality but at the same time "morally" and economically supporting Britain, made the same arrangements and sent corresponding instructions to its diplomats. The special attention of the members of the diplomatic corps, the

39 GA RF. F. P-4459. Op. 27. D. 590. L. 6.

40 GA RF. F. P-4459. Op. 27. D. 590. L. 6.

41 *Nippo Jiji*. 29.04.1941.

Dōmei News Agency reported, was riveted on the Soviet envoy: it was all because, over the past few years, the USSR representative had never appeared at military parades.[42]

Conclusion

The reestablishment of relations between the USSR and Japan, which began in the second half of 1939, was to a large extent a reaction to the Soviet-German rapprochement and the results of the military border conflicts of 1938–1939. As a result of the clashes at Khasan and Khalkhin Gol, Japan realized its vulnerability to the Soviet Union in terms of preparation, logistics, and coordination of actions. The economic difficulties caused by the war in China and related to the general situation in the world economy in connection with the outbreak of World War II also pushed Tokyo towards reconciliation with Moscow [Ermakov 2022, p. 28].

Having gone from open military confrontation to normalization of political dialogue, Soviet-Japanese relations acquired a new dimension. One of the consequences of the improvement in relations was a change in the position of Soviet diplomats in Japan. Police pressure decreased, and the quality and degree of interaction between the Japanese and the diplomats changed. In addition to official contacts with the leadership of the USSR, the Japanese authorities sought to develop relations with the Soviet embassy in Tokyo – this helped to emphasize the progressive nature of Soviet-Japanese relations and create a "friendly" atmosphere around them. The manifestation of Japanese "sincerity," which diplomats encountered in various forms throughout 1939–1941, was questioned; the embassy called on its employees to "be on guard"[43] for every step or sign of attention from the Japanese: both the experience of past relations and the idea that changes in Japan's position towards the USSR were temporary and situational were at play. The diplomats' distrust was also due to their own view of the Japanese, which was not devoid of racial,

[42] GA RF. F. P-4459. Op. 27. D. 590. L. 339.

[43] AVP RF. F. 0146. Op. 23. Pap. 206. D. 14. L. 151.

physical, and everyday stereotypes. “My impression of Abe himself was not good,” Chargé d’Affaires Generalov once said after a meeting with the Prime Minister of Japan. “<…> The manner of conversation and the vague, senile, but typically Japanese flattering smile reveals in him a dodger and a not entirely smart trickster.”[44]

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