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A Note on Transliteration

For transliteration of Russian proper nouns, a simplified Library of Congress system has been used except for commonly known names. In the case of Chinese proper nouns, Wade-Giles has been selected for two reasons. First, it better reflects the historic period, and second, primary sources often proved impervious to Pinyin conversions. Many English-language sources lacked needed diacritics, while both Russian- and Japanese-language transliterations ended in Wade-Giles, making it the viable option. As an aid, Appendix B matches known pinyin place-names with their Wade-Giles versions.



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Abbreviations

CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CEC	Central Executive Committee
CER	Chinese Eastern Railroad
CLC	Chinese Labor Corps
CMNA	Commissariat for Military and Naval Affairs
Comintern	Communist International
FD	Frontier Defense
FER	Far East Republic
GPU	State Political Directorate
IARC	Inter-Allied Railway Committee
IJA	Imperial Japanese Army
KMT	Kuomintang (Nationalist Party)
NEFDF	Northeast Frontier Defense Force
NRA	National Revolutionary Army
NWFDA	Northwest Frontier Defense Army
ODVA	Special Far East Army
OKDVA	Special Red Banner Far Eastern Army
PRA	People's Revolutionary Army
PUR	[Political Administration of the] Red Army
RKKA	Workers' and Peasants' Red Army
RMC	Revolutionary Military Council
RRSC	Russian Railway Service Corps
SMR	South Manchuria Railway
TSRR	Trans-Siberian Railroad
WPA	War Participation Army



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The 1929 Sino-Soviet War



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Introduction

The 1929 Sino-Soviet conflict was a short and bloody war fought over the jointly operated Chinese Eastern Railroad in China's Northeast between two powers mostly relegated to the dustbin of history, the Republic of China and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.¹ A modern limited war, it proved to be the largest military clash between China and a Western power ever fought on Chinese soil. Over 300,000 soldiers, sailors, and aviators served in the war, although only a part participated in the heavy fighting. As a comparison, at the outset of the better-known 1924 Second Fengtien–Chihli War, Chang Tso-lin, the supreme Manchurian warlord, advanced with three armies formed around eleven mixed brigades. In 1929, his son, the Young Marshal Chang Hsueh-liang, arrayed sixteen mixed brigades against the Red Army, the bulk of his army.

The conflict was the first major combat test of the reformed Soviet Red Army—one organized along the latest professional lines—and ended with the mobilization and deployment of 156,000 troops to the Manchurian border. Combining the active-duty strength of the Red Army and border guards with the call-up of the Far East reserves, approximately one in five Soviet soldiers was sent to the frontier—the largest Red Army combat force fielded between the Russian civil war (1917–1922) and the Soviet Union's entry into World War II on 17 September 1939. The 1929 conflict also offered an important look into warfare during the interwar in areas ranging from strategy and tactics to technology. The war is historic.²

Because the conflict is absent from many histories dealing with East Asia, scholars have not framed the war by degrees of significance but by extremes ending in insignificance. Jonathan D. Spence did not mention the war in his highly praised *In Search for Modern China*, nor did Nicholas Riasanovsky in his widely used *History of Russia*. James Sheridan gave it but one sentence in two separate works.³ Unfortunately, this list is both long and impressive. Even scholars who focus on Chinese military history disagree over the war's significance. Bruce A. Elleman, writing in 2001, devoted a chapter to the conflict in *Modern Chinese Warfare, 1795–1989*, while Peter Worthing did not give the war a word of mention in

his 2007 *Military History of Modern China: From the Manchu Conquest to Tian'anmen Square*.

This leads to a telling point: military history is important in its own right, and how the 1929 war has been dealt with to date serves as a cautionary tale for historians. While the presentation may be unattractive, as compilation of forces, orders of battle, and tactical analyses are often seen as stale relics of old school military history, the confused, even misguided place of the 1929 war in today's historical debate shows what can happen when, to use Benjamin Cooling's phrase, "traditional drum and trumpet operational history" is jumped over so quickly as to miss its significance.⁴ The aim of this work is to try to correct that error by presenting the first extensive treatment of the war and to help resolve the significance controversy by addressing three questions: Why did the political crisis over the CER break out into open warfare? Why was the Soviet Red Army able to decisively defeat the Chinese after a few weeks of fighting? Finally, what were the consequences?

Using Russian, Chinese, and Japanese sources as well as declassified US military intelligence reports, the conclusion is that the war destabilized the region's balance of power and altered East Asian history. A path to war was created when Chiang Kai-shek and Chang Hsueh-liang miscalculated, both diplomatically and militarily, as they viewed the Soviets as politically isolated and militarily weak and were convinced that the time was right to reassert full authority over the CER. For the Soviets, Stalin dominated the action, and he saw war, not negotiations, as the preferred option. Once Stalin approved the large-scale offensive, the Soviet Red Army unexpectedly scored a decisive victory, disproving the assumption that it was incapable of fighting a modern war. With first-rate military doctrine, it possessed the ability to execute fast-paced successive operations and rapidly defeated the determined but divided and unevenly led Chinese forces. This led to significant political repercussions: the Kellogg-Briand Pact or Paris Pact for the outlawry of war failed, the Soviet Union emerged a recognized military power in East Asia, causing Japan to reorient its military policy away from the United States and toward Northeastern China and Soviet Russia, and China was forced to accept the reality that it could not militarily confront either of its two regional rivals, curtailing Nanking's militantly aggressive path in regaining full sovereignty.

Telling this story creates a unique set of problems. As noted, the history of the 1929 Sino-Soviet war is often overlooked, and much of it

fits within another obscure subject, the early twentieth-century military history of Northeast Asia. Beyond the 1904–1905 Russo-Japanese War, only the history of the Soviet Red Army in this region has attracted interest, but again, the role of the 1929 war has received scant attention. To help address what Felix Patrikeeff referred to as a “lacunae in our understanding” of this conflict, the book is divided into two parts.⁵

Part I is background. Chapter 1 begins with the 1929 situation in the Northeast, and the chapter’s second half, along with chapters 2 to 4, addresses the causes of the war and provides a military-political history of the CER in Northeast Asia within the context of larger historical events that shaped the region’s history. For subject matter experts, these chapters are optional. The latter half of Chapter 1 addresses the period from the Boxer Uprising to the eve of the 1911 Revolution. The Northeast’s military history from 1911 until 1918, from the dawn of the Republic of China, the 1917 Russian Revolution, and through the World War I is the focus of Chapter 2. The next chapter deals with the period 1919–1924, which saw the rebirth of China’s revolutionary movement, international attempts to sustain peace and stability in East Asia, China’s further decay into warlordism, and the arrival of the Soviet Union on the Northwest’s frontier. The final chapter in Part I explores the changes in the Northeast in the wake of the Second Fengtien–Chihli War and ends in the reunification of China after the Northern Expedition. The role of the CER, the 1929 war’s object, is interwoven throughout the chapters. Given the subject’s obscurity, by integrating both the Chinese and Russian military history of the region during the 1900–1928 period, these chapters should prove usefully informative to a wide audience and provide needed understanding of the causes of the 1929 Sino-Soviet conflict.

The war is the focus of Part II. Part II covers the 1929 war and its consequences and consists of seven chapters. Chapter 5 addresses the rise of Chang Hsueh-liang as the hegemon of the Northeast in 1928, his submission to the Kuomintang regime in Nanking, and the events leading directly to the 1929 crisis and war. An overview of the Chinese and Soviet armies is provided in Chapter 6, while the 1929 Sino-Soviet conflict is covered in detail in the next three chapters, demonstrating that the war was of significant historical importance. Chapter 10 offers a military analysis of a war fought at the midway point between the two world wars, and the final chapter concludes with a discussion of the conflict’s consequences—consequences that often have not been given their due place in the historical discourse.



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