

Excerpts from
Prosecution Witness JOHN B. POWELL's Book
"MY TWENTY-FIVE YEARS IN CHINA."

(New York, The MacMillan Company, 1945)

China and USSR at War

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Anti-Russian sentiment which developed in Central and South China following the split in the Kuomintang Party in 1927 quickly spread to North China. Here the Russians found their bitterest opponents in Marshal Chang Tso-lin, dictator of Manchuria and leader of the Northern military faction opposed to General Chiang Kai-shek (who became Generalissimo in 1928).

On April 6, 1927, Marshal Chang Tso-lin's police, assisted by guards from the Legation Quarter, which was controlled by the American, British, Japanese, French, Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese Ministers, raided the offices of the Soviet Embassy in Peking. Aside from the Chinese charge that the Russians were using the Diplomatic Quarter as a center for the propagation of communistic ideas, the foreign legations had their own grievances against the Russians through the discovery of a plot supposedly hatched in the office of the Soviet military attache' to secure access to the British Embassy compound. The Soviet Embassy occupied quarters adjoining the British Legation, from which it was separated by a high wall, and it was alleged that an entrance was being made through the wall from the Soviet side, with the aim of attacking the British guards and precipitating an incident. The Soviet Ambassador, then home on leave, was L. M. Karakhan, first diplomatic emissary sent to China by the USSR. A year previously, Marshal Chang Tso-lin had demanded Karakhan's recall.

Large quantities of communist propaganda literature and documents were seized at the raid, and several Russians and Chinese found on the premises were arrested. The Soviet Government denounced the raid as "an unprecedented violation of the elementary rules of international law," but Marshal Chang ignored the protests and circulated to the press and the diplomats of the other Powers photographic reproductions of documents proving the existence of a widespread plot to communize China. The documents also indicated that members of the Soviet Embassy's staff were involved in the plot. This was a serious matter, as it constituted a violation of the stipulations of the Peking agreement of 1924 by which the Soviet Government bound itself not to disseminate communist propaganda in China. As a result of the disclosures the Soviet chargé d'affaires was recalled, and after a brief court-martial the Chinese ringleaders arrested in the raid were shot.

Chiang Tso-lin's animosity toward the Soviet Russians was increased by the discovery of documents showing that the Russians were using the revenue and facilities of the Chinese Eastern Railway, which crosses North Manchuria, for the purpose of spreading communism throughout China. Following the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, the Soviet Government offered to restore the Chinese Eastern Railway and other Czarist Russian interests in North Manchuria to Chinese control. Later Moscow withdrew this offer, and after the relinquishment of Allied administration of the railway at the end of World War I, the Russians took over complete control of the railway. In 1924 the USSR signed an agreement with China for the joint control and operation of the railway, but this agreement was not carried out, according to the Chinese, who alleged that the Russian general manager refused to consult with the Chinese co-manager of the board on matters of important policy.

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Recently large numbers of Russian agents had been sent to Harbin under the guise of engineers and railway technicians, who were devoting their time and energies to the furtherance of communism. Schools operated by the educational department of the railway in Harbin and other cities inside the ten-mile-wide railway "zone" were used to disseminate communist propaganda in violation of the 1924 agreement.

A further cause of Marshal Chang's animosity was the knowledge that his arch enemy Marshal Feng Yu-hsiang was receiving both arms and financial supplies from Russia. Marshal Feng Yu-hsiang, well known Northern military leader, formerly affiliated with Marshal Wu Pei-fu in the Anfu Party, went to Russia in 1926, and studied military tactics for a year. When he returned to China in 1927 he established himself in Kansu Province, adjacent to the area now occupied by the Chinese Communists. With money and arms supplied by the Soviets he built up the so-called Kuominchun or "National" Army, and joined the Nationalists at Nanking. Shortly afterward he broke with General Chiang Kai-shek and organized a coalition against Nanking. He was defeated by General Chiang, and after a period of retirement again rejoined the National Government. Curiously, the rifles which the Soviets supplied to Feng's troops bore the trademark of the Remington Arms Company. The rifles had been manufactured in the United States for the Czarist forces in World War I and had been taken over by the Bolsheviks after the revolution of 1917.

Although General Chiang Kai-shek had established his nationalist capital at Nanking, foreign ministers, including our own, were still accredited to the Peking Government and maintained their headquarters there. They were reluctant to give up the comfort and protection of the old legation quarters, although some of the legations had sent unofficial representatives to Shanghai in order to maintain contact with the new government.

After the death of Marshal Chang Tso-lin, in June, 1928, his son, the "Young Marshal" Chang Hsueh-liang, took command and soon announced his adherence to the new National Government at Nanking. The Young Marshal also continued the anti-communist activities in North China and Manchuria which had been initiated by his father.

Shortly after he assumed office in Mukden the Young Marshal learned that the Communist International had called a secret regional conference to be held in Harbin, North Manchuria, on May 27, 1929. While the meeting was in progress the Chinese police staged a raid and arrested some forty Russian consular officials and practically the same number of Chinese Communists from various parts of Manchuria. The Chinese also seized two truckloads of papers and documents. Claiming that the documents confirmed their suspicions that officials of the Chinese Eastern Railway were taking an active part in the propagation of Bolshevik ideas, the Chinese took drastic action.

On July 10 they seized the railway, dissolved all Soviet unions of railway workers and arrested some 1,200 railway officials and union leaders, whom they interned in abandoned railway buildings several miles from Harbin. It was the first time the Chinese Government had ever acted so energetically and decisively against a foreign Power.

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Accompanied by a number of other correspondents, including Wilbur Forrest of the NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE, Jim Howe, Associated Press, and William Philip Simms of the Scripps-Howard newspapers, I arrived in Harbin about a week later. We found that the Chinese had seized the railway telegraph system and all offices of the Soviet Far Eastern Trading Corporation, the Naphtha Trust, and the Soviet Mercantile Fleet owned a number of large paddle-wheel steamers which operated on the Sungari and Amur rivers, reminiscent of steamboat days on the Mississippi and Missouri rivers.

The Soviet Government acted with equal energy. Minister Karakhan, who had in the meantime been appointed Assistant Foreign Minister in Moscow, denounced the Chinese action as a "gross violation of treaties" and gave China an ultimatum of three days to return a satisfactory answer, failing which the Soviet Government threatened "to resort to other means for the protection of its lawful rights."

Fighting soon broke out along the Chinese Eastern Railway at both the eastern and western borders of Manchuria, resulting in heavy casualties to the Chinese forces at the town of Manchouli, where some 8,000 Chinese soldiers were killed. The Chinese town of Pogranichnaya, at the eastern end of the railway, was badly shattered by Soviet artillery fire and airbombs. A Chinese town known as Lahasusu at the mouth of the Sungari River, opposite Khabarovsk on the Amur, was bombed and burned, and two Chinese gunboats stationed there were sunk by Soviet planes.

The country about the junction of the Sungari and Amur rivers interested me very much, as there are numerous villages in the vicinity inhabited by some of the most primitive races of Northeastern Asia. We visited a village inhabited by a tribe of Tatars, most of whose clothing was made from the skin of the sturgeon, the fish which also produces the famous Russian "black" caviar. This particular tribe was locally known as "Fish-skin" Tatars.

I covered the battle of Lahasusu from the deck of an ancient Chinese paddle-wheel steamer upon which I had traveled down the river from Harbin for about 600 miles. I was accompanied on the trip by Paul Wright of the CHICAGO DAILY NEWS and Baron Taube, a Swedish nobleman, who represented Reuter's. By this time the weather was getting cold and ice had begun to form in the river. We wondered whether we would be caught by the river ice and captured by the Soviet troops. We were anchored at a little river town called Fuchin when a courier arrived stating the Russians were coming, after having captured and burned Lahasusu the preceding night. The captain hurriedly got up steam and we started upstream only five hours before the Reds arrived. The Chinese told us that the Russians always followed the practice, on capturing a Chinese town, of opening all the stores and granaries and distributing their contents free to the populace as a "communist" gesture. Another boat, carrying Chinese officials, which followed us, was badly shot up by Soviet planes. We managed to reach Harbin safely, but with the paddle-wheel and rudder of our steamer so covered with ice that we had difficulty in moving against the current.