

ISSN 1226-4490

*International
Journal of
Central
Asian Studies*

Volume 2 1997

**Editor in Chief
Choi Han-Woo**

**The International Association of Central Asian Studies
Institute of Asian Culture and Development**

Major Hjalmar Front in Mongolia and Manchukuo, 1937–

1938

by

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The name of Major Hjalmar Front is not commonly known in connection with Mongolia. In order to elucidate the Soviet activities in Mongolia in 1937–38 and Front's later career in the Japanese military service in Manchukuo, his account is here summarized. The summary is based on his reminiscences, published in Finnish in 1971 (Neuvostokomennuksella Siperiassa). This account might be of some interest for military historians and ethnographers.

Hjalmar Front was born in 1900 in Sääksjärvi, Mäntsälä, in the southern part of Finland. He joined the Red Guard in 1918 in spite of his father's negative attitude. In fact, he was not so much ideologically interested, but simply eager to get a real gun instead of his risky home-made rifles. Later he became a famous marksman, taking innumerable prizes in Soviet Army competitions with machine gun, rifle and revolver. In the 1930's the battery under his command won the first prize among hundreds of batteries. He was also awarded the Order of the Red Flag for his role in the Russian Revolution and intervention wars.

During the Finnish Civil War the young Red Guard fled in a boat and reached Petrograd at the end of April, 1918. He became a soldier and later an officer in the Bolshevik Army. Starting in 1920, he finished the middle school, a four year course at the International Military School and an additional three years at the Frunze Military Academy, which gave him the final touch to start a military career. He held the position of vice commander of an infantry division shortly afterwards. With considerable effort, requiring different special courses, he progressed from a common member of the Komsomol and the Communist Party to a detachment commissar and member of the Party Committee of his regiment, the Politburo of the Frunze Military Academy, and the district commission of the Central Revision Committee(Ministry) of Workers and

Peasants. In this capacity Front was authorized to revise the functioning of industries and State offices.

Hjalmar Front served as a teacher at several of the political schools of the Party, including the school for international revolutionary activists and agents, named after Lenin and functioning under the Comintern. He belonged to a group of teachers led by "Comrade Walter", i.e., Josip Broz Tito.

In 1937, Major Front's detachment was stationed in Chita near the Mongolian northern frontier. In July he was called to Moscow for instructions. Pushed by the Japanese, the Chinese nationalists were then approaching the southern frontier of Mongolia. The Soviet Union had committed itself to defend the border against intruders. If this was neglected, the Japanese might someday appear as neighbours and clashes would be inevitable. The Soviet Union aimed to stop Chiang K'ai-shek's forces at the southern border.

Hjalmar Front was sent on a special mission to Mongolia to gather military intelligence. In Moscow he first had to read all available literature about local conditions and to interview persons familiar with the country.

Major Front's detachment, the 36th Motorized Infantry Division, was stationed in Central Mongolia. He functioned as its artillery commander, having at his disposal 150 different kinds of cannons and howitzers. In addition, several other detachments from the Trans-Baikalian Military District were moved into Mongolia: a cavalry division under Lt. Gen. Konstantin Rokossovskii, a close friend of Front, brigades of tanks and armoured cars, strong air forces, etc. The last mentioned could be used to support Mao Tse-tung's forces which after the Long March had gathered in the northwest near Mongolia in order to establish contact with the USSR. In February 1936 Stalin had announced that the USSR would assist and defend Mongolia if Japan attacked the country.

The local Soviet troops were under General Ivan Konev (1897-1973), a former farrier and fellow-student of Hjalmar Front's from the Frunze Academy and allegedly behind the mission of Front. Konev had already earlier carried out similar operations on the western borders of Soviet Russia. Officially he was commander of the 2nd Detached Red Banner Far Eastern Army between 1938 and 1940.

Belonging to the staff of Konev, Front had to investigate the practical possibilities for strategic and tactical cooperation between

different arms and their combinations in the vast Inner Asian steppe areas, including the Gobi. Everything pertained to preparing way, in case of war, for the Soviet forces in such alien conditions. He had to crisscross the country with a car on numerous expeditions to find out to what extent roadless terrains were passable by military vehicles.

Front arrived in Ulaanbaatar in August 1937. He met there his old friend General Dashchirib who had got his military schooling partly in the USSR. Front made his first trip serving military intelligence along the old caravan route (*Kitayskaya pochtovaya doroga*) leading to Peking, 250–350 km to the west of the newer Peking route (*Russko-kitayskaya trgovaya doroga / Russkaya pochtovaya doroga*). The old route led southwards from Ulaanbaatar through Sair-Us to the easternmost end of the Altai mountains, the name of which Front phonetically wrote "Solonkker" (Sulankheer), Dornogovi aimag. In the neighbourhood it joins together with the caravan route coming from Uliasutai, then bends to the southeast towards the city of Guihuachen (Hohhot) and Kalgan.

Meanwhile he increased his insights into the life-style, history and modern aspirations of this interesting people and country.

First Expedition

The purpose of the first expedition was to find out whether the route and the terrain in general were suited for long motor columns. To be successful, expeditions crossing the desert had always to be minutely planned in advance. Front purchased a governmental map of eastern Mongolia made on the basis of aerial photographs.

The expedition consisted of a 1927 Ford motorcar carrying Front, a physician, an interpreter and a driver, a light lorry with a driver, a spare driver and four other men, and a tanker with a driver, a mechanic, two tons of petrol, lubricants, spare parts and three pairs of long two-inch boards. All twelve men were heavily armed, because reflections of the Great Power conflicts had reached even these remote parts of the world and, in addition, smugglers and robbers were common at the southern border. Before leaving, Front had visited General Dashchirib and met some army officers and a monk who had travelled much in the country, but the map was more valuable than these men.

The journey started at the beginning of September. Front's long experience of reading maps helped him to visualize the conditions on the route in advance. The greatest difficulty was to keep to the track as it often virtually disappeared for dozens of kilometres. The aerial photos were of great help in this connection.

After 70 kilometres the expedition arrived at a ridge, 300 metres in height, insurmountable by the tanker due to some engine defect. It had to be sent back to be replaced by a new one. At a distance of 104 km from Ulaanbaatar they expected to find the end of the old Peking caravan route, but although it was indicated with a dashed line on the aerial map, it could not be found. It became clear that there was no visible track of the road, although it was indirectly discernible from the somewhat darker and lusher vegetation running along this "ghost road."

The route brought the expedition from one well to another. Hoards of dogs or wolves roamed around during the night. Areas of salty marsh were certainly impassable during the rainy season because they turned into bottomless mud lakes measuring 50 to 200 km in length and 3 to 10 km in breadth. More than a month had elapsed since the rains and the marshes were covered with a salty crust bearing the lighter vehicles, but in some places the tanker needed the long boards under its tires. Digging for water gave a positive result in 60 per cent of the attempts. Water was generally found in the Gobi at a depth of between 0.5 and 2.5 metres.

On the fourth day, having travelled more than 400 kilometres, the expedition observed a group of yurts. The twenty or so inhabitants showed great respect towards the multiple weapons of the guests. A young man pointed out an eagle sitting on a rock at a distance of some hundred metres, and asked Front to shoot it. It would have been more embarrassing to refuse than to fail. He aimed carefully and hit the bird perfectly.

The next day they passed a monastery on a hilltop. The evasive and clearly hostile monks were gathered around a mobile state shop. General Dashchirib had warned them to distrust monks: non-Mongol monks hid in monasteries stirring up hatred towards the government and leading uprisings. The government had emptied the monasteries of monks in a 50 km wide zone at the Inner Mongolian frontier in order to crush their

influence and power. At least some of those expelled monks lived in local monasteries away from the border like this. By isolation, monasteries strived to protect themselves from alien influences, especially such ones brought by westerners, which generally meant Russians.

The expedition lost the track having first taken a southeast direction in order to lead astray the inhabitants of the monastery and it had to make a 50 kilometres long unnecessary turn before with considerable effort finding the road again. After they had camped, Front had a premonition of danger and he decided to shift the place three kilometres further. At three o'clock in the morning, noises indicated that their former camping place really was besieged. Front and his men, everybody provided with 200 cartridges, approached quietly from the back and opened fire. Only stray shots were heard in answer. After five minutes everything was over. The monks had not seen the attackers and could not know who they were. Only one's own power in its different forms could be trusted in the wilderness. Front stated from his own experience that excessive friendliness on the part of Mongols usually covered some insidious plans.

In a nomad yurt Front wished to get familiar with the production process of *kumys*, but soon he regretted it. The old leather bag into which fresh milk was poured already contained ill-smelling sour curd and he believed he discerned something creeping around the mouth of the bag. He got nauseated and could not enjoy this allegedly tasty drink for several days.

On the sixth and last day Front had to decide whether the expedition would return back to Ulaanbaatar the same way or to take a northeastern course to the border village of Zamiin-Üüd, 350 kilometres away, where a Mongolian cavalry regiment was stationed and there were also a telegraph and a state shop.

According to Front, they camped at a spot to the west of the big monastery of "Dalan-Dzagataitui"(Zadgaitiin khiid at Zadgaitiin Bulag to the south of Sulankheer/Sulinkheer). After dinner Front went together with the physician and the interpreter to meet the frontier guards at their post. The Mongolian government thought that the outpost was situated at a distance less than one hundred metres from the border. The authorities of China and Inner Mongolia, for their part, considered it to stand dozens

of kilometres too close to them and, accordingly, on the wrong side of the border line. Front believed that Outer Mongolia at that time *de jure* still belonged to China.

The head of the outpost was a Mongol captain, trained in Tver(Kalinin) and consequently fluent in Russian. Only smugglers crossed the border, but they were not stopped as they brought useful information. This illegal cooperation possibly brought him considerable additional income. The Red Chinese Eighth Army was approaching as were Chinese Nationalist troops under the command of General Fu Tso-yi, pressed by the Japanese from the east and southeast. There was an outsider among the frontier guards, a Russian dressed in a Mongolian uniform. From Ulaanbaatar Front got the order to let this man use the radiotelegraph at will. The expedition's own telegraphist had to leave the radio yurt when this man operated. Front believed that this soldier was appointed to mediate information between the Soviet Union and Mao Tse-tung.

Front relates that in this very same place negotiations between Nationalist China and the Soviet Union were conducted in the autumn of 1937 on the question of Mongolian assistance to Chinese Nationalist forces in the war against Japan and the Chinese demand to be able to penetrate Outer Mongolian territory when necessary. In this conference, lasting only a few hours, the Chinese got a negative answer. The Chinese delegation was led by the chief of the staff of General Fu Tso-yi, the Soviet delegation was headed by the 1st Rank Army Commissar Pyotr Smirnov(1897-1938), especially sent from Moscow - having just entered his post replacing Comrade Gamarnyk who had committed suicide. Outer Mongolia was represented by several generals. The multitudinous and high-ranking Soviet representation was a signal to the partners and to Japan that the Soviet Union considered Mongolia's security and integrity very important.

After a few kilometres the expedition noticed the ruins of a monastery at Khatanbulag. The old caravan route was there only just visible, although it had been abandoned no longer than ten or so years before.

In Zamiin-Üüd, some 250 or 300 km to the northeast, Front immediately went to meet the commander of the local cavalry detachment and handed over a letter from General Dashchirib. Zamiin-

Üüd was the frontier checkpoint of the new caravan route to Peking, or actually the end station, as on the Chinese side the route had not been used for a decade. The road continued towards Peking, but the electric poles, all wires stolen, were decaying on the ground.

When returning, the expedition steered towards Sair-Us. Front planned to stop there for a few days rest and to visit Sainshand, according to him only 12 or 15 km from Sair-Us, although the distance is at least 260 km. Since Sair-Us was a totally desolate place(though Front praised its excellent well), they retreated ten or so kilometres back and encamped in a valley provided with a well.-Front says that "Sair-Us" means "good water"(actually *sain us*), but in fact sair is a dry bed of a stream. Soon they had to change places again, because the hillside was crowded with snakes, some of them quickly intruding into the camp.

In a third place, characterized by the presence of small lizards, the crew started to drill a well while Front left for Sainshand in order to send a telegram to Ulaanbaatar. Why? Had he not said that he had his own radio and a telegraphist along? Sainshand occupied an area of approximately one square kilometre and consisted of three huts: a state shop, the shopkeeper's house and a telegraph getting its electricity from a wind power plant. All local wells contained salty water. On the ground one could detect pieces of coal and fossil seashells.

Back in the camp, Front made several excursions around the neighbourhood in his car, paying special attention to the frontier region(although the border was already left far behind!). Then the telegraphist of Sainshand appeared in the camp saying that Front was inquired after from Ulaanbaatar. The border post had reported the expedition's visit and its planned route back. Front received thanks and congratulations for the successful journey.

The expedition again gathered at Sainshand for travelling to Sulankheer, some 400 km away. Front had planned a route in the form of the figure eight, the intersectional point being at the monastery ruins of Khatanbulag. On the journey they saw a school, according to Front the only one in the whole country outside Ulaanbaatar. The wooden house with its light classrooms and lavatory was a great marvel. Close to the building was a state firewood stock storing approximately 1,500 cubic metres of saxaul.

Some dozens of kilometres north of the Sulankheer mountains, the expedition rejoined the old caravan route to Peking and found its own track. From there they took a more southwestern direction towards the closed monastery of "Dalan-Dzagataitui"(Zadgaitiin khiid). A local half-Buryat lama, who lived in a yurt and had studied in Lhasa for twenty years, was, together with his companions, constructing new buildings near the border, an activity strictly forbidden by the Mongolian government. The defiant monks were here, as well as in many other monasteries, strongly armed.

Front had the opportunity to see the construction site. Fifty monks were quarrying stone with their bare hands at a distance of a ninety minutes horse ride. They tore pieces of stone from the rock face with bleeding fingers. Others were able only to gather loose stones from the ground. Using the rock as the back wall, they piled stones to form small huts, using mud as mortar. Front gave them iron bars, shovels and axes which brought joyful smiles to the earnest faces. The border was only a few kilometres farther. The place could be defended and it was easy to withdraw over the border to Inner Mongolia. The lama explained that the main monastic route to Tibet went through this place. The local monks were ordered to remain there as long as another supply route could be prepared. They were badly needed for assisting pilgrims and clerical travellers.

The lama knew about Sven Hedin's attempts to reach Lhasa forty years before. One of his teachers was at that time close to the Dalai Lama and from him the lama had heard that Buddhist pilgrims from Russia and merchants from India usually informed Tibetan authorities of Hedin's movements. When Hedin had arrived at Kashgar, a Tibetan official was sent to meet him in order to delay the expedition and compel it to depart at a time when the worst spring storms raged in the desert. A Tibetan agent was also among the servants. During the journey he caused so much trouble that the caravan had to turn back. The Tibetans had expected that this severe failure would deter Hedin from further attempts, so their disappointment was great when they learned that he again was planning a new expedition to Tibet.

Front's expedition continued via the Khatanbulag ruins again to Zamiin-Üüd and to Sainshand camping at the same well they had made for themselves some ten kilometres to the east of the village. They had already travelled more than 2,000 km. The next stage was the monastery of "Tzûöiren"(Baruun Choiriin khiid near the present-day Sümber) on the caravan route. There was a state shop, petrol tanks and a service station(consisting of a mere wooden box containing a pair of axes, an iron bar and a couple of shovels). The monastery, known for its anti-state activities, stood on a hill one kilometre farther on. Accordingly, the monks showed hostility even towards the expedition. On a later journey ten or so shots were fired after Front, some of the bullets piercing his car. Westerners were blamed for the anti-religious policy.

Front's old Ford could manage in ten hours the distance between Ulaanbaatar and Sainshand, according to him 515-525 km. He made this journey several times back and forth. Once he got in a spring storm near Sair-Us. Against the hard wind his car could only move at 15 km/h.

On arriving he heard that General Dashchirib had died in a car accident. This was the official version, but different kinds of rumors were heard. Front became wary on his own behalf because he was a foreigner and seemingly unpopular in certain circles.

The demanding journey and writing the necessary report took two months time. Front was very depressed to learn that his expedition physician, always helpful and capable, had died of the hardships of the journey.

Second Expedition

In early December 1937, Commander Konev's chief of staff asked about Front's next expedition, planned to run in the direction of the Gobi Altai, 600 to 800 km southwest of Ulaanbaatar. A new important question was to find out whether these mountains could be crossed by car. This pertained to movements meant to support Mao Tse-tung's troops. No maps were available of that area.

Before leaving, Front had to participate in the New Year feast of the Mongolian Army. The high officers were headed by General Damba, acting Minister of Defence. The Soviet Union was represented by

Ambassador Ivanov,¹⁾ Brigadier General Litvinov and the head of the Soviet officers in Mongolia. Front was met by a member of the government with the phrase: "We both belong to the same ancient Blue Mongols and thus in a way we are kin," obviously referring to the erroneous conception of the Mongol origins of the Finns.

Front had tried to avoid participating, giving illness and the coming expedition as a pretext. General Damba came on visit bringing a Tibetan doctor with him. Front went to the feast in preference to strange medicines. A colonel, according to Damba one of the most eminent in the Mongolian security police, tried to discuss Great Power politics with Front who, however, was well aware of this kind of entrapment and held his revolver ready in his pocket in case signs of his immediate arrest appeared.

The second expedition, Front's motor car, a light lorry and six men, set off on 4th January 1938, returning after three weeks on the 23th. The first stage was the aimag centre Dalanzadgad. The 620 km long route was covered in one single day. Pyotr Kozlov's account of this region was of some help, but Front wondered how half a century ago explorers had found densely populated areas here where only scattered yurts now could be seen. The distance from Dalanzadgad to the border was still approximately 200 km.

No actual border could be found at the alleged frontier line. The local nomads had no idea of a border and cared nothing for the whole concept. Front noted that Mongolia obviously also tried to push the border forward all the time. The expedition proceeded in the direction of the town of "Din-Juan-I" (Yinchou), situated deep in Inner Mongolia. The increasing sand dunes when approaching the Alashan desert were no hindrance for the motor car.

Back in Dalanzadgad the next day, they took a course towards the northwest proceeding some 300 kilometres to a place between the mountains Baga Bogd and Arts Bogd. Following the northern slopes of Arts Bogd, the expedition returned to Dalanzadgad after a week. They needed a two day rest because the more than 2,000 km long continuous journey in roadless terrain and the necessity of staying on guard by night had been very exhausting.

Front awoke at the noise of a motor in the morning. Fearing that the car would be stolen, he rushed out only to see that an aeroplane had landed some kilometres away. The telegraphist said that aircraft often used this airfield. Front concluded that this was one of the connecting routes between the Soviet Union and the headquarters of Mao Tse-tung.

The expedition returned in one day to Ulaanbaatar and added to the records the important result that the Gobi Altai range with its branches really could be crossed by motor car, at least in some places.

Third Expedition

The purpose of the third journey was to find out what movements the troops were making in the area between the two caravan routes leading to China. It lasted from the 18th to the 26th of February, 1938, and measured over 2,000 km. The route would lead from Ulaanbaatar to Dalanzadgad and Sainshand, from well to well. In spite of many risks, Front set off with only a Mongol acquaintance. He agreed to send a telegram from Dalanzadgad and if a second message did not arrive within a week, a friend would send a rescue patrol from Ulaanbaatar. He aimed to hide a piece of paper in a hole in the ground made with a knife ten steps from the water source towards the north at each well.

The old Ford was heavily loaded, resembling a laden camel. Guns, lots of ammunition and hand grenades completed the equipment. The frozen marshes offered no obstacles. Generally, cars would not be much dependant on roads or traditional routes, as the terrain allowed driving almost everywhere. The only problem off of the routes was orientation. Front does not give any details of his military observations on this expedition.

Journey to Kyakhta

The fourth expedition, in the company of an engineer captain, was carried out within a couple of weeks, at the beginning of March 1938. The purpose now was to solve some purely technical problems not

described in greater detail. The journey was caused by the increasing gravity of the situation at the southern frontier. Small groups from the Japanese Army were mobile close to it. Therefore it was necessary repeatedly to check the possibilities for different arms to move from the Siberian railway via Kyakhta to Ulaanbaatar. The road and its numerous bridges had been improved, but there was no reliable picture of camping facilities, water supplies, etc.

The forests north of Ulaanbaatar had been felled along the heavily trafficked road to Kyakhta at the northern border. Thousands of Russian settlers had been brought here from Siberia. Front tried to find out whether the slave labourers working on the road were brought from the notorious Soviet forced labour camps or whether they were local Europeans, mainly Russian emigrants. When he once tried to speak with them, the armed guard ordered him harshly to get away.

These labourers lived in inferior tents and worked in small groups guarded by armed men. Front threw provisions and tobacco to them clandestinely. He heard that these road works were in connection with the railroad construction from Ulan-Ude in Soviet Buryatiya to Ulaanbaatar. Another road, leading from Ulaanbaatar through Öndörkhaan to Chita, was some kind of a strategic secret. Front wished to see this first class construction, but was informed by Major Svets, serving in the Soviet tank troops, that the road was closed and guarded by Soviet soldiers.

The staff of the Soviet frontier guard was situated in Kyakhta. These troops were commanded by Major Yakhnin, Front's fellow student from the Moscow Military Academy. For some reason Front had no permission to cross the border, but due to this friendship it could be arranged and he stayed with the major overnight.

Escape

Front had noticed signs pointing towards increasing difficulties already at the above-mentioned New Year celebration. A friend of his had warned him that if he stayed in the country, his activities would be interrupted by force. Some of his acquaintances and whole families had

disappeared one after another. No explanation could be obtained. Stalin's terrible blood-thirsty purges had escalated. Front felt the noose tightening around his neck: if he now made something which could be interpreted as an attempt to escape, he would immediately get into serious trouble, the outcome of which was highly uncertain. No new expedition could be made, either, as it would be seen in the same light.

Front set about his normal everyday life, but was inwardly reflecting upon his options. He kept his car ready and well-provided. Accidentally, the solution came sooner than he had expected. Strolling about one evening in the dark he happened to hear two men from the security police discuss his case: "How is Front behaving? Are you sure that he will not slip out from our hands?" The decision concerning him was to be made within three or four days. Already prior to his arrival in Mongolia, Front had heard that lots of Finnish civilians and military persons had been killed in Karelia. Russians were mainly sent to prison camps, but other nationalities were shot without much ado.

The only possible direction to go was towards China along the routes familiar to him from his expeditions. He had also once forgotten a 50 litre drum of petrol at the border. Front had gained reputation as an excellent cook in preparing the so-called "robber's steak," a meal of a whole antelope cooked in an earth pit. Now he could use an antelope hunt as a pretext in case his moves caused curiosity. He invited lots of guests to a banquet to be given after a couple of days. Even one of the above-mentioned two representatives of the secret police accepted his invitation.

At five o'clock in the morning on 26th May 1938, he took his loaded automatic rifle and twenty or so hand grenades and slowly moved to the car. He started in the wrong direction in order to lead possible pursuers astray. Then he took the actual course and put all his eggs in on basket - if the old good Ford made it, he would make it!

According to his calculations, the petrol would last until only 150 kilometres were left before the first Chinese settlements. He passed Zamiin-Üüd being not much bothered by a possible encounter with the frontier guards, as they moved on camels and horses only and he would definitely not hesitate to use his arms if necessary. It was, however, reasonable to try to avoid Chinese and Japanese soldiers, often seen

near the border at Zamiin-Üüd. It would be impossible to use arms against them but premature to give himself up.

Instead Front chose to drive in the roadless desert 140 km towards the southwest to the more southern border. He hid the car behind a ridge for the night and camped on top of it to keep watch. It would have been dangerous to fall asleep. However, he woke up at four o'clock having in fact slept for two hours. He poured cold water on his head and neck and set off in the first rays of the rising sun. He crossed the frontier on May 28th at a place where a monastery was situated on the shore of a desert lake on the Chinese side.

After a few kilometres he heard a loud bang which he believed to be from a rifle. A rear tire had exploded and, being exhausted and excited, it took him half an hour to replace it. Hardly up from a depression he noticed a military patrol on the Mongolian side on the road leading to the Kalgan highway. It stopped at the frontier just at the place where he had crossed it. The patrol consisted of a motor car, two light armoured reconnaissance cars and a lorry with twenty or so soldiers. Front looked at them with his binocular from a distance. As the patrol could not decide who had crossed the frontier, it dispersed and went into hiding awaiting the return of the vehicle.

Front continued his escape, being sure that nobody would follow him. By the afternoon he arrived at a dilapidated Chinese inn consisting of two houses made of mud and open shelters for animals. Two startled men came out and offered tea. They had a good stock of petrol which provided Front for a further good distance. Mongolian currency was not accepted, so he gave them his excellent German artillery binoculars.

Towards night he discerned the mountains where the northernmost parts of the Great Wall run. The car succeeded in climbing the altitude of 400 or so metres with great effort. A building stood on the southern slope, allegedly a police station, out of which some men rushed giving signs to stop and firing a shot after him. After a further ten kilometres the falling darkness made driving difficult. He placed the car on a slope so that he could easily put it into motion only by releasing the brakes. He immediately fell asleep, waking up early in the morning at the howling of a wolf. He drove an additional ten kilometres or so, stopped at a well and

tidied himself up. From there it was around fifty kilometres to inhabited regions.

Driving in the morning towards Kalgan, Front was convinced he would encounter Japanese soldiers. Soon he noticed one coming from a house. He stopped and spoke to the man in English in order to find out his nationality. Captain Oshima answered in English, but having noticed the visitor was a Soviet officer, he ran away quickly. He shouted something and immediately around fifty more soldiers rushed out, encircling the car. They pointed to Front with their bayonets and continued to scream. He explained that he had come of his own free will, handed over his arms to the captain and asked this man to take him to the headquarters.

In Manchukuo and Japan

Front was brought to Kalgan some hundred kilometres further the same day and then taken by air to Hsinking (Ch'angch'un), "the New Capital" of Manchukuo. He told them he was a Finn and gave the reason for escaping from the Soviet Union. The Japanese checked his account through their embassy in Finland. Front succeeded in sending a letter to the Finnish legation in Tokyo and to Finland. Both recipients admonished him to return home as soon as possible. The only route would have been from Japan to the USA or Canada and to Norway, but when he finally was ready to leave, the Germans had occupied Norway in early April of 1940. The same year Front visited the Finnish legation in Tokyo and spoke with Alexander Thesleff, the First Secretary. Ambassador Karl Gustaf Idman happened to be absent.

In the winter of 1943-44 Colonel Kaila, the Finnish Military Attaché in Japan and Manchukuo, and his assistant Captain Laine²⁾ arrived at the headquarters of the Kwantung Army.³⁾ They tried to meet Front, but the Japanese did not allow this. Therefore, Front decided not to inform the Japanese when early in 1944 he for a second time visited the legation. However, he was photographed at the gate by someone tailing him and a couple of months later the Japanese asked him why he had not reported this visit in advance and what were the subjects he had discussed there.

Ambassador Idman immediately gave him an audience and stated that Front had achieved some sort of a special position in the Japanese Army. He wished to hear an analysis of the situation in China, especially of matters concerning Japan and the Soviet Union. Front started to cough loudly, asking about alleged bugging devices. Yes, they had been searched for, but so far in vain. The military attaché was called in, but refused to participate in the discussion as otherwise the Japanese authorities would demand a thorough report on it. Front's account of the situation in the Far East was in clear contrast to that current in Tokyo and in Finland. Years later Idman said to him that the information then received was very valuable and taken seriously.

Front travelled together with his adjutant and interpreter in the spring of 1944 through the Korean peninsula and then from Pusan to Shimonoseki on board a small vessel, despite patrolling American and British submarines. The Japanese army was preparing at that time a decisive blow towards the Kuomintang Army. Front was appointed to make a strategic plan for the manoeuvre. In this two-week-long war on the map he matched wits with Japanese generals from the General Staff and other officers coming from troops active in China, altogether more than one hundred persons. After the exercise Front's plan was praised as excellent. Later he saw a demonstration at the headquarters of the Kwantung Army showing the operations the Japanese Army had carried out in Central China. It corresponded in principle to the war on the map played out in Tokyo at that time.

The leaders of the Japanese Army asked for Front's opinion concerning its strategy towards the Soviet Union, which had withdrawn the greater part of its 37 divisions from the eastern front and moved troops to the western front to meet the Germans. The Japanese also had left only remnants of their former 27 divisions stationed at the Mongolian and Soviet frontier. Front advised the Japanese to attack the back of the weak Soviet troops immediately. However, relying on the superiority of the German forces, Japan decided to wait. In the opinion of Front, this was a major error both in respect to Japanese interests in general and in respect to the outcome of World War II.

The battle of Khalkhiin Gol in 1939 was a Japanese attempt to test the effectiveness of the Soviet Army. However, the four-month summer

battle ended in the complete defeat of Japan's 6th Army. Lt. Gen. Michitarô Komatsubara, commander of the 23rd Division, arrived at the headquarters of the Kwantung Army after the battle searching for Front.⁴⁾ He wanted to know Front's opinion of the reasons why Japan was defeated. After two days of discussions the general arranged a fine dinner and said he had to compensate for the mistakes made during combat and the losses of men and arms. Only later Front did understand this to mean a ritual suicide.

Front was convinced that without the unnecessary Khalkhiin Gol battle, Japan would have attacked the Soviet Union sometime during the Stalingrad battle. In the light of this one can say that the fate of the Soviet Union was determined already in Mongolia in 1939.

During the winter of 1944-45 the Japanese finally concluded that the defeat of Germany was imminent. At the same time the Soviet Union transported troops to the Far East by the Trans-Siberian Railway. Also the USA was approaching close to the Japanese mainland. Two questions bothered Japan: (1) Would the Soviet Union break the Matsuoka & Stalin non-aggression pact, made before the war and if, in that case, (2) when could Soviet operations against Japan be expected?

Japan obviously thought that no attack would come, as they had not taken advantage of the situation at Stalingrad. In March 1945, Front was asked to investigate this matter and hand his statement in. Two officials from the Foreign Ministry also arrived from Tokyo to discuss it. According to Front's transport calculations, operations were to be expected in the first half of August - the war broke out on 9th August, 1945.

Soviet propaganda has later related that the Kwantung Army, the best and most effect troops of Japan, were annihilated in just five days. In reality, the former Kwantung Army units were at that time scattered around in the Pacific archipelago fighting Americans. When the leaders of the Japanese Army in early May realized that the Soviet Union was obviously preparing an attack, Japan started with conscriptions to put together a new Kwantung Army of Japanese citizens living in Northern China. This resulted in a weak and unexperienced ghost army of 880,000 men, according to Soviet information. The much more able Soviet army numbered 1.5 million men.

On the first day of the Japanese–Soviet war the headquarters of the Kwantung Army moved to a newly chosen place near the Korean border. Front and his wife were invited on the 13th of August to the old place, having only the most necessary things with them. At the headquarters he had to listen to the Voice of America and Moscow Radio. On the 14th America reported that Japan had surrendered unconditionally. This led to numerous harakiris among the headquarters. Thus ended Front's almost seven year career as an instructor of strategy and tactics for the Japanese Army. Later he lived in Stockholm, Sweden.

The Valley of Death

Front relates several interesting reminiscences from his time in Mongolia. One of them is described in the following.

When a child is born, a monk is invited to forecast or determine how long the life of the newborn will be.⁵⁾ When a person has reached the age thus predicted, he or she is without much ado brought to die to a place called by foreigners "The Valley of Death." To die at home is out of question as it would be unacceptable to the gods.

Front asked General Dashchirib, in passing, the way to Ulaanbaatar's cemetery. The General answered briefly and with reluctance: "Go, if you wish!" The place was situated six or seven kilometres to the west of the city. Some European friends had heard horrible stories about it. They said the best thing that could happen Front was to become mad or be eaten by dogs. In order to be well equipped he provided himself with a couple of guns and hand grenades. Having driven about six kilometres on the westward road he and his driver turned to the right towards a ridge running near the road in the same direction. From the car, now standing on top of the ridge, they saw a beautiful and gently sloping valley. With his binoculars Front discerned a hill in the middle of the valley, its form resembling a saucer turned upside down, measuring approximately a kilometre in diameter. Some twenty holy dogs seemed to roam there nourishing themselves. Even vultures hovered around. Front asked his driver whether he had any interest in coming along to that valley where corpses and skeletons lay scattered on the ground and whitened skulls looked like billiard balls on green baize. After

some hesitation the driver agreed, after arming himself with additional hand grenades.

Their precautions were, however, unnecessary, as the dogs and vultures immediately dispersed when the men approached. Fresh traces of camels and cart wheels were visible when descending into the valley. According to hearsay, there would be naked, half-dead people crawling on the ground with the last of their energy, having their eyes already picked out by vultures. Would they encounter such a "living corpse"? The mere idea shocked them. They stopped at the first skull, seemingly very old. There were numberless bones and skulls and they drove forward trying to avoid them. Soon it became impossible to continue the ascent of the hill because of the abundance of human bones. They set forth walking. By now Front had not seen a single whole skeleton, only hands, legs, skulls, etc.

Higher up on the hillside lay whole skeletons, corpses in different positions and almost all without clothes. The main question bothering Front in this horrible place was the above mentioned allegation: were people really brought here alive?

On the hilltop the reddish soil was furrowed by innumerable ditches or something like that, perhaps formed by running water. Carriages had been driven over them without much care, obviously in order to drop the corpse. Front found the spot where a recent visitor had dropped his load, a woman in her thirties. Was she still alive? No such signs were to be seen and they had no intention of examining her closer. If she was brought there yesterday, she hardly could be alive anyway as the nights were cold, Front reasoned.

Front observed during his visit that the dead bodies, generally looking like being in a peaceful sleep, here lay curled up on their sides, the head drawn between the shoulders, the knees bent and drawn up towards the chest as much as possible, the arms tightly pressed to the sides, etc., in a foetal position. Had this woman taken this posture while still alive here?

Another female corpse had a knife in her back. Practically all the dead bodies were lacerated by dogs, vultures and other beasts. Vultures seemed to have first picked out the eyes and thereafter penetrated through the throat to the tongue and the lungs. Nauseated by this view

they had to turn away. Front had a strange feeling for several days, his appetite gone.

This can be compared with the following account (JAGCHID & HYER 1979, 102)⁶:

"In northern and western Mongolia, strongly influenced by Buddhism, it has been common to perform one last act of grace or compassion by giving one's body to famished animals as a demonstration of the high ideal of selflessness or non-ego. This disposition of the body, considered very barbaric among Chinese and Westerners, is held in high esteem by Buddhist Mongols. The dead person is dressed in new clothing and placed on a cart, which is then carried to the public burial grounds, a forbidden place not ordinarily visited by people, and here both the body and the cart are left for the wild animals. Since the turn of the century and the decline of Buddhism, this form of disposition is less common and may have even ended with Communist influence in Inner Mongolia. With the establishment of the Mongolian People's Republic, it was forbidden by law in former Outer Mongolia."

According to the Finnish archaeologist Axel O. Heikel, when one of the beggars living in rag huts by the market place of Urga died, the others competed in getting the miserable rags, and dogs immediately took care of the "burial." It was horrible to see corpses thrown literally out on the city roads to be torn up by dogs which were said to live solely on this kind of food.(HEIKEL 1918, p.115)

The Mongol Messenger(July 23, 1997) reported that some of the Mongols have adopted the European style burial, but the majority still favoured the traditional Buddhist custom. In Ulaanbaatar deceased persons were usually buried in cemeteries, whereas in the countryside corpses were wrapped in cloth and disposed of on a hillside or in the open steppe. There should be a medium sized solid stone under the corpse. The dead body was placed on a clean white sheepskin. According to Mongolian belief, a deceased person who during his or her lifetime had been good, disappeared quickly from the burial ground. On the contrary, the corpse of person with lesser merits vanished only slowly. In remote

parts of the country dead bodies may even be put in a river rich in fish. In recent years cremation has been urged, but so far with negligible results.

B. I. Imshenetskii wrote in his book *Mongoliya*(p.30) that the population had a straightforward relationship to dead bodies, which were simply thrown on the ground, the road or in a ravine where dogs immediately devoured it. When a chronically sick person became a burden to the family and a lama declared him or her a hopeless case, the sick one lay down on the ground awaiting the end. If there are merciful people who bring this person food as alms in the summer, the sufferings still continue for some time. Dogs go round him or her and, licking the wounds, patiently waiting for the moment when the dead body is lying in front of them. After the last breath they tear up the corpse in wild competition.

Newborn children, considered a burden to a poor family, are thrown in willow baskets without much ado. Very often childless Mongols or even Russians or Chinese adopt them—otherwise their small corpses are devoured by hungry dogs. On religious grounds it was forbidden to kill dogs and puppies and as a consequence their number had increased immensely.

Front also maintained that according to an ancient law every foreigner, who in some way or another maltreated a dog, must be expelled, because the Mongols venerate dogs as sacred animals. This also was one of the first official announcements he heard upon arrival in Ulaanbaatar. Another was that an evil spirit is inherent in fish. Because it might intrude into a human being, fish is not to be caught or eaten.

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