

Phoney War, Phoney Peace: Sugihara's Shifting Eurasian Context

David Wolff

The years 1938 to 1941 were terribly disconcerting in Europe, as realism, ultranationalism and cynicism led to a cycle of violence and shifting borders. In spring 1938, Hitler's ultimatums and England's appeasement condemned Czechoslovakia to dismemberment. In the fall, Kristallnacht brought violence, arson and arrests to a Jewish community that had long prided itself on its excellent relations with its German neighbors. Hundreds of synagogues burned. Hundreds of Jews were murdered. Thousands were sent to concentration camps. Hundreds of thousands fled Germany.¹

The year 1939 would be worse. Returning from Moscow with a treaty signed by Vyacheslav Molotov in hand, Joachim Ribbentrop, the former wine merchant turned Foreign Minister, was hailed by Hitler as his "genius" diplomat and a "second Bismarck." A week later, Hitler launched his first "Blitzkrieg" (lightning war) and overwhelmed the Western part of Poland. The secret protocols to the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact (August 23 and September 28) had a map attached that divided the lands lying between Russia and Germany between the two hegemons.

Stalin, the Soviet dictator, did not sign the protocols, but he did

1. Those who fled far enough survived the Holocaust.

sign the map (twice!). On September 17, Soviet troops marched into “their” piece of Poland. By month’s end, interwar independent Poland was extinct, except for the government-in-exile. Again, the map had been re-written to reflect a world in flux.

Then came the period known as the “Phoney War.” Between the end of the Polish campaign and the April 1940 invasion of Denmark, neither the British nor the French were in a position to take the war to Germany, so the declared belligerents saw little fighting (on land), only frenzied preparations. Not until Germany had digested Poland would it turn back to the West.

And to go with the “Phoney War” in the western reaches of Europe, in the East there was “phoney peace” as the Soviets and Germans toasted their “friendship” and held a victory parade together at Brest-Litovsk where in 1918 the Germans had forced the fledgling Soviet state to sign away a third of European Russia. Stalin, acutely aware of the surreal scene and strange bedfellows, toasted himself as, “the new anti-Comintern man — Stalin” as he reached across the ideological divide to encourage Hitler, already set on aggression, to strike elsewhere first.² The two great dictators never met in the flesh, but by the late 1930s they were locked in psychological battle.³

For the Japanese Empire, seven thousand kilometers away, this was not just confusing, but painful, for they had received no warning that their German ally was about to perform a *volte face*. Japanese diplomats and military personnel would also have known that the Soviets were at that very moment devastating Japanese troops near the Mongolian-Manchurian border at a place called Nomonhan or Khalkin-Gol.⁴ Hundreds of Japanese infantry boys were dying in the climactic “Deep Battle” combined artillery barrage and aerial bombardment on the very day when Stalin and Ribbentrop clinked champagne glasses. Sur-

2. Feliks Chuev, ed., *Sto sorok besed s Molotovym* (Moscow, 1991), 19.

3. The title of the second volume in Stephen Kotkin’s Stalin trilogy catches this mood perfectly. Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin: Waiting for Hitler* (New York: Penguin, 2017).

4. In Russian, the whole border conflict is known as Khalkin-Gol after a nearby river. In Japanese, the final crushing battle is called Nomonhan after a local village.

rounded and without air support, their officers nonetheless refused to surrender, precipitating the slaughter. Georgii Zhukov, soon to be the military architect of German defeat, cut his teeth first on the Japanese.

How could Germany be part of an anti-Comintern pact and be clinking with Stalin? No one was more disturbed than General Oshima Hiroshi, the Japanese ambassador to Berlin, whose close ties to Hitler and Ribbentrop had guided Japan into the anti-Comintern pact. His superiors in Tokyo wanted to know how it was possible that he (and they) could have been blindsided, if his connection to the top German leaders was indeed so close. Oshima, a firm believer in Fascism and the Thousand-Year Reich, again asked and received secret re-assurances from the Nazi top brass that Hitler would soon attack Moscow. But when? Oshima needed to answer this question to keep his job.⁵ On July 20, five Russia-hands were reassigned with this in mind. Among them, Sugihara Chiune was posted as Acting Consul to Kaunas, the capital of interwar Lithuania, a city with no history of Japanese diplomatic representation, nor any Japanese residents.⁶

Sugihara had been living in Helsinki since November 1937, collecting intelligence on the USSR from the Russian-emigre community, and

5. On Oshima, see Carl Boyd, *Hitler's Japanese Confidant: General Oshima Hiroshi and Magic Intelligence, 1941-45* (Lawrence, Kansas: Kansas UP, 1993). On 3 June 1941 Oshima talked with Hitler about Barbarossa and received a more detailed briefing from Ribbentrop the next day. On June 4 he wired the concrete plans to Tokyo, but still without a date. The US cipher operation MAGIC had broken the Japanese encryption "Purple" on 16 April 1941 and learned of the operational details together with Tokyo. On 6 June 1941 Oshima not-so-cryptically indicated the immediacy of the attack by telling Tokyo "to postpone the departure of Japanese citizens to Europe via Siberia. You will understand why," In spring 1941, Oshima was also receiving telegrams from Sugihara Chiune stationed in Koenigsberg that indicated the increasing tempo of war preparations, including troop and ship numbers, locations of fuel dumps and the evacuation of children from the frontline areas. (See Documents 74-76)

6. Shiraishi Masaaki, *Choho no tensai: Sugihara Chiune* (Tokyo: Shinchosensho, 2011), 104-107. Shiraishi Masaaki is the top specialist in Japan on Sugihara with an unparalleled knowledge of the Foreign Ministry Archive materials related to Sugihara.

observing first-hand Europe's descent from crisis into war. This work was a natural European continuation of his earlier activities in Manchuria/Manchukuo. (See article by Takao Chizuko in this publication.) Sugihara's role in Kaunas was to become Oshima's "new eyes in Lithuania." Twenty-six years later, Sugihara remembered:

To establish as quickly and as accurately as possible the date of the German attack [on the USSR] was the main task for the ambassador, as I later learned, and exactly for that goal, the Army Staff acted on the Foreign Ministry to open a consulate in Kovno." (Document 43)"

But the unexpected announcement of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact put Poland in the crosshairs and the Sugiharas expedited their departure. Sugihara's wife Yukiko remembers the "whirlwind move." (*awata-dashii hikkoshi*) in her memoirs.⁷ They left Helsinki on August 25 for Berlin traveling on to open the consulate in Kaunas on August 28, The ink was not yet dry on the Soviet-German Non-Aggression Agreement that condemned Lithuania to follow in the footsteps of Poland and Czechoslovakia, but not until Sugihara Chiune had his year there.

Thus, in the late summer of 1940, as Sugihara moved into Kaunas, Japanese-German relations were in a period of uncertainty, as Japan licked its wounds after the defeat at Nomonhan and Hitler's apparent betrayal. As Molotov put it many years later:⁸

Stalin was a great tactician. Hitler indeed signed a non-aggression treaty with us without talking it over (*soglasovanie*) with Japan! Stalin forced him to do it. After that, Japan felt insulted (*obidelas' na*) by Germany and nothing came of their alliance.

Even at the operational level, there was a sense of betrayal with German agents withdrawing from joint counterintelligence operations agreed on in May 1937.⁹

7. Yukiko Sugihara, *Rokusennin no inochi no visa* (Tokyo: Taisho Shuppan, 1993), 9.

8. Chuev, 29.

9. H. Kuromiya and G. Mamoulia, "Anti-Russian and Anti-Soviet Subversion: The Caucasian-Japanese Nexus, 1904-1945" *Europe-Asia Studies*, 61,8 (October 2009), 1427, 1430.

In such a period, especially after the recall from Berlin of Ambassador Oshima, there was little reason for Sugihara to provide even lip-service to Nazi ideology, since the anti-Comintern pact had been abandoned by the German side for more immediate benefits that only Stalin could offer. Instead, Sugihara worked with Germany's sworn enemies, with the remnants of Polish military intelligence, to sound out both Soviet and German positions in Poland. As in Helsinki and Harbin, refugees were the core of his network.¹⁰

Ilya Altman's preceding essay makes clear the magnitude of Sugihara's good deed, granting visas for life to thousands, although he knew full well it contravened the orders of the Japanese Foreign Minister. Sugihara's wife Yukiko remembers the sleepless nights this occasioned, but Sugihara quickly determined what he would do with the support of his family and staff.¹¹ Most of his time and energy during his final month in Kaunas went into saving lives.¹² As Altman relates above, even after Sugihara left Lithuania, hundreds of "Sugihara" visas were produced and hundreds more among the refugees escaped almost certain death. This continued all winter until the Soviet secret police investigated and terminated the forgery network.

Meanwhile, all winter, Sugihara worked and waited, first in Berlin and then in Prague, now the crushed capital of "The Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia." And while he waited, Inturist set up a temporary office in Kaunas and Jewish philanthropies from several countries deposited hundreds of thousands of dollars in various currencies into Inturist's account to cover thousands of third-class tickets and

10. Ewa Palasz-Rutkowska and Andrzej T. Romer, "Polish-Japanese Co-operation during World War II" *Japan Forum*, 7, 2 (Autumn 1995), 285–316. According to Rutkowska, Polish contacts in Helsinki put Sugihara in touch with the Polish underground in Kaunas, 288. Sugihara continued to use his Polish sources and contacts when relocated to Prague in Fall 1940 and Koenigsberg in March 1941, but when he left for Romania, the Japanese-Polish connection continued under General Onodera Makoto, military attache in Stockholm.

11. Sugihara Yukiko describes this in chapter two of her memoirs called "My Husband's Mental Agony" (*Fu no Kunou*).

12. Although other Japanese diplomats also granted visas, none were as prolific as Sugihara. For the comparative perspective, see Pamela Rotner Sakamoto, *Japanese Diplomats and Jewish Refugees: A World War Two Dilemma* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishing, 1998).

thousands of hotel nights in Moscow and Vladivostok, waiting for the biweekly departures of the Trans-Siberian, and in Vladivostok, waiting for the biweekly departures of the ferry service to Japan. By late December 1940, a steady and increasing flow of refugees on the Trans-Siberian created a hotel shortage in Vladivostok, alarm at the Japanese port of Tsuruga, and sharp questions at the Japanese Foreign Ministry.

The Soviet Foreign Ministry probably set off the first warning bells with its February 1 request to route some of the transiting refugees via the railway line to Manchukuo and Dairen, rather than to Vladivostok. The mention of “unexpired transit visas from the former Japanese consul at Kaunas” told the Foreign Minister exactly where to turn next. On February 4, Matsuoka Yosuke, the Foreign Minister, wrote to Sugihara asking for details on the number of visas issued in Kaunas. Sugihara replied the next day with an exact count, the 2132 that appears in the telegram on the cover of this volume and in Doc.58. He had clearly been waiting, probably dreading that such a query would eventually come. On February 8 Consul Nei was also writing to Matsuoka about the “sharply increasing” number of Jews with 140–150 on board every ship to Japan.

But matters really came to a head on the day that the boat arrived in Tsuruga bringing thirty Polish citizens, all bearing forged Sugihara visas with the same name, Jakub Goldberg. The Japanese officials were enraged and sent them back to the USSR, but the refugees did not have Soviet entry permits, so were forced to remain on the boat. Many years later, the Polish Ambassador, Tadeusz Romer, still at his post despite the occupation of his country by Nazi and Soviet troops, recalled how he had been summoned to the Japanese Foreign Ministry and told to solve the matter.¹³

With hundreds of forged visa-holders underway and the very real concerns voiced by Nei in his telegram that there might be spies among the refugees, the potential for a full-fledged crisis in Soviet-Japanese relations had suddenly and unexpectedly appeared. The timing could

13. Rutkowska and Romer, 295.

not have been more inopportune for Matsuoka who, in preparation for a Japanese attack to the south, aimed at concluding a non-aggression treaty with the USSR, a Molotov-Matsuoka pact. On February 11, with the refugee issue in the background, Matsuoka called in the Soviet Ambassador K. A. Smetanin and announced his plan to visit Moscow in March to have talks with the top Soviet leaders. He would also visit Berlin to hear Hitler's intentions face-to-face. On February 28, Sugihara was ordered to Koenigsberg to continue his surveillance of the German rear in the supposed future warzone. He arrived at his new post on March 6. Even as Sugihara moved from Prague back to the Baltic, the number of refugees on the March 2 *Amakusa-Maru* departure from Vladivostok increased to 416, almost triple the situation described by Consul Nei three weeks earlier. This time 74 passengers were sent back for presenting incomplete, dubious, and downright fake visas.

But by this time, Matsuoka was on his way for a relaxing 11-day voyage across Siberia, every few days passing eastbound trains bearing the last batches of Sugihara visa holders. During two days in Moscow, March 23–25, Matsuoka suggested that further negotiations and rapprochement take place on the return trip from Berlin and Rome, while also telling Stalin that Japan was already a “morally” Communist country. Stalin, with a very different vision of Communism, played down ideology in the name of practicalities. Agreement, he implied, was possible, if mutual interests dictated. On this positive note, Matsuoka departed.

Once in Berlin on March 26, Matsuoka must have been impressed both by the likelihood of the German attack, as hinted at by Hitler and Ribbentrop in several successive meetings, but also Hitler's hubris in encouraging a Japanese attack to the south, rather than keeping the Soviets occupied in the north. But this suited Matsuoka completely, as his goal was to protect Japan's northern flank by treaty as the Imperial Army moved south. And Matsuoka, while in Berlin, does not seem to have voiced his intentions clearly, either. Now would come the payback for Nomonhan, as the Japanese Foreign Minister traveled back to Moscow to conclude a “neutrality” pact with Stalin that could be a surprise

for the Germans. If Germans had “made friends” with the USSR, while the Japanese army was being hammered at Nomonhan, why couldn’t the Japanese do the same just before the German attack?¹⁴

There is no clear reference to the refugees in the Molotov-Matsuoka and Stalin-Matsuoka stenograms, but several hints suggest how the impasse at Vladivostok might have been solved. On April 9, during the second conversation after Matsuoka’s return from Berlin, Molotov stated that “...the USSR’s and Japan’s common interest amounts to not obstructing each other, at least where those interests do not clash.” The refugees at Vladivostok might well fit this definition. Even more *à propos* was Molotov’s statement that “Once both sides have expressed their desire to improve relations with a major political step, that it is necessary to remove all secondary matters that could create difficulties.” And, in fact, on that very day the last refugees with Japanese transit visas left Vladivostok with permission to land in Japan. Only Matsuoka could have made this decision.¹⁵

After two conversations with Molotov, the Soviet side remained uncommitted and Matsuoka went off to Leningrad to see the sights. On his return, a final meeting with Molotov resulted in no further progress. Only in the evening was Matsuoka summoned from a performance of Chekhov’s “Three Sisters” to Stalin in the Kremlin, where Stalin made clear that he had decided to help Matsuoka’s “diplomatic blitzkrieg.” A neutrality pact would be not only a “first step, but a serious one, toward future cooperation on big questions.”¹⁶ But most immediately it would send the Japanese army and navy south to attack Singapore where they could not harm the Soviet Union.

Matsuoka, ready to depart in failure, had succeeded! On the following day, he signed the agreement and was then taken drinking by correspondents, who delivered him drunk to his departing train, the reg-

14. My telling of the Matsuoka trip follows B. N. Slavinskii, *Pakt o neitralitete mezhdu SSSR i Iaponiei* (Moscow, 1995), especially Chapter 3.

15. Slavinskii, 83, 89.

16. Slavinskii, 92.

ularly scheduled trans-Siberian with the Japanese delegation already aboard in a special first-class car. And then, the unthinkable occurred. In front of the whole world, i.e., the correspondents and diplomats who had accompanied Matsuoka onto the platform, Stalin showed up at the Iaroslav station. Stalin, who never awaited arrivals, and never saw off departures, had come to honor Matsuoka's achievement. The train's departure was delayed for an hour. Stalin plied the Japanese diplomat with more champagne and then he and Molotov "all but carried him [Matsuoka] aboard."¹⁷

It is this Moscow negotiation, Matsuoka's grand initiative and Stalin's dramatic agreement, that provides the high-level backdrop to the final success of Sugihara's scheme to save lives. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact moved Sugihara, the intelligence officer, from Helsinki to Kaunas, on the larger chessboard of Eurasian war and peace. This set off the visa-granting episode, Sugihara's moment of truth. Seven months later, the Japanese bureaucracy reasserted itself, refusing to complete Sugihara's deed. At that moment, it was the Soviet side that insisted on the migrants departure to Japan and safety. Matsuoka, in need of a positive atmosphere in which to negotiate an agreement with Moscow, gave in. What was begun with Molotov-Ribbentrop was finished by Molotov-Matsuoka. Such is the context of Sugihara's meeting with history and memory. In between two duplicitous, cynical documents filled with the intent to make war, Sugihara established a space in which to save lives. This is his accomplishment, a breath of fresh air from a better world.

In conclusion, we should keep in mind the unusual circumstances of 1939–41. When Japanese-German relations cooled as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, the door opened to the conclusion of its Asian twin, the "Molotov-Matsuoka pact". Tension with Germany made it possible for Sugihara to issue the visas he granted to Poles and Jews alike, all Germany's enemies. Rapprochement with the USSR

17. Chuev, 30.

made sure that Moscow would and could insist on Tokyo's accepting the unwanted refugees who had made it as far as the Sea of Japan. Matsuoka's ambitions guaranteed that Tokyo would accept, at least until the ink dried on the Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact of 13 April 1941. It is within these larger machinations of Eurasian diplomacy that the causes, effects, planning and completion of Sugihara's righteous act can be situated.