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Did a forgotten Japanese journalist turn the tide of World War II?

BY DOUG TSURUOKA

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Most historians agree that World War II's first real turning point occurred in December 1941 when Red Army troops led by Marshal Georgy Zhukov smashed through the German lines encircling Moscow and shattered the siege of the city.

The epic "Breakout from Moscow," spearheaded by 18 fresh divisions, 1,700 tanks and 1,500 planes hastily recalled from the Soviet Far East, spurred a chain of events that literally sent Hitler's forces reeling from the gates of Moscow to the gates of Berlin. Larger Soviet victories at Stalingrad and Kursk, in all likelihood, would not have followed if Moscow had fallen.

"It was the beginning of the end for Germany," John Pike, an intelligence expert who heads military think tank Globalsecurity.org in Washington, D.C. told Asia Times.



Hotsumi Ozaki

As the world this month celebrates the 70th anniversary of Japan's surrender and the end of World War II, it would do well to remember that the crucial intelligence which allowed Zhukov to transfer these desperately needed forces to Moscow came from a now-forgotten Japanese journalist named Hotsumi Ozaki.

Ozaki was a Japanese newspaper correspondent and pivotal member of the legendary Tokyo spy ring headed by Soviet spymaster Richard Sorge.

Sorge's most famous feat involved giving Stalin advance word of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor — a tip his Kremlin master ignored. But arguably, the most critical information he relayed during the war was confirmation, from reliable sources, that the Japanese Army would not relieve Germany by opening a second front against the USSR. The tip allowed Zhukov to redeploy his battle-hardened men and armor to Moscow. The final confirmation of what Japan would do came from Ozaki.

The greatest spy story of all time

“If there is a single piece of intelligence that changed the course of World War II, it was Sorge's report to Moscow that the Japanese would not invade Russia,” said Bob Bergin, a former US foreign service officer who writes on the history of World War II intelligence operations. “Sorge's ring – and Ozaki's role in it — may be the greatest spy story of all time.”



Richard Sorge

Ozaki and Sorge were both arrested for espionage and hanged by Japanese authorities. Ozaki, however, has the distinction of being the only Japanese civilian executed for high treason in World War II.

A chubby-cheeked ladies' man who worked for the Osaka Asahi, Japan's leading newspaper at the time, Ozaki was an unlikely choice for his telling historical role.

He was born on in Shirakawa, Gifu Prefecture on May Day in 1901. He was descended from an old samurai family. But his father made his living as an almost penniless journalist. His family moved during his youth to the new Japanese colony of Taiwan for economic reasons. It was here that Hotsumi, an irrepressibly impulsive and open-minded man, became acquainted with Chinese culture and the awkwardness of being a member of the island's ruling class.

“My connection with the controlling and governing classes was revealed to me as a concrete fact of daily life. This experience later aroused in me an extraordinary interest in the problem of national liberation, and it also gave me an insight into the China problem,” Ozaki is quoted as saying in Japan expert Chalmers Johnson's 1990 biography, “An Instance of Treason: Ozaki Hotsumi and the Sorge Spy Ring.”

Ozaki returned to Japan in 1922 and studied law at elite Tokyo Imperial University. But he soon dropped out, and threw himself into Communist Party activities. His conversion to Marxism and opposition to the Japanese government was shaped in the aftermath of the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 when he watched local police and officials incite mob hysteria that led to the slaughter of more than 6,000 Korean residents of Tokyo.

“Violent mobs seized, tortured, and killed Koreans in the frantic belief that they were using the disaster as an opportunity for rebellion,” Johnson wrote. Authorities also used the quake to arrest or kill many Japanese labor leaders.

The young radical followed in his father's footsteps by becoming a journalist. He was hired by the Asahi Shimbun as a reporter in 1926 and was soon writing stories about Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin. Asahi posted him to Shanghai in 1928 where he became friendly with leftist American reporter Agnes Smedley. Ozaki also began to secretly assist members of the city's Chinese Communist Party.

Fateful meeting



Agnes Smedley as a young woman

It was Smedley who introduced Ozaki to Sorge during one of the latter's trips to China. "Can you introduce me to a Japanese to help improve my knowledge of Japan's policy towards China?" Sorge was quoted as asking Smedley in Robert Whymant's 1996 book, "Stalin's Spy." Smedley introduced Sorge, her then lover, to Ozaki.

The two hit it off. "Ozaki was affable, interesting and ready to help. They recognized each other's intellectual ability and before long discovered shared interests," Whymant wrote of the chemistry between the two men.

Ozaki joined the ring and the pair teamed up in Japan after Sorge, who was posing as a pro-Nazi journalist for Russian military intelligence, was posted to Tokyo. Other key members included Yotoku Miyagi, a Okinawan, Branko Vukelic, a Yugoslav, and Max Clausen, a German wireless operator.

"If I reflect deeply, I can say that I was indeed destined to meet Agnes Smedley and Richard Sorge. It was my encounter with these people that finally determined my narrow path from then on," Ozaki observed after his arrest.

Sorge was a brilliant spy and a man of great courage. But he knew little about Japan. Japanese politics, institutions and culture was a cipher to him. It was Ozaki who schooled him, and it was the chatty Japanese scribe who recruited other anti-militarist Japanese who served as the ring's human sinews in Japan.

While history rightly credits Sorge with relaying key intelligence to Moscow as the brains and guts of the operation, it's doubtful if Sorge (who couldn't speak or read Japanese) could have succeeded without Ozaki's access to the innermost circles of Japanese government.

A leading China authority, Ozaki had charmed his way to become an adviser and confidant of Japanese Prime Minister Prince Fumimaro Kono and other top officials. He met regularly with Kono and his coterie of friends at the prince's residence in Tokyo. It was here that Ozaki gleaned critical information about Japanese military strategy and policy toward the Asian mainland.

Code-name Otto

Ozaki, code-named "Otto," and Miyagi, code-name "Joe," undertook risky missions in Japan, Manchuria and other parts of Asia to report on Japanese troop movements. They also corroborated information Sorge received from German diplomats.

It's ironic that Ozaki managed to evade Japan's coldly efficient wartime security apparatus for so long. In a classic case of cultural blindsiding, no one on the Japanese side suspected that someone who had attended an elite Japanese university could be working for Stalin.

Sorge also was a journalist who used his cover as a correspondent for Germany's Frankfurter Zeitung to win the trust of German diplomats in Japan. Badly wounded in World War I where he won the Iron Cross, Sorge was first swayed to the cause of the Great Proletarian Revolution by a communist-leaning nurse who tended his wounds. An edgy adventurer fond of wine, women and motorcycles, he had a German father. But few knew of a Russian mother who imbued him with

other loyalties. Some of Sorge's biggest intelligence coups were tied to a torrid affair he carried on with the wife of the German ambassador to Japan.

A glorious way to die

Ozaki was a true believer who had chosen his side in the fight against the Axis.

"I would like to go and die splendidly as a communist. I have nothing to regret, and I am fully prepared," Ozaki remarked to a visitor, shortly before he was executed.

Did he know of Stalin's crimes or communism's dark side? It makes no difference. Untold millions were saved because of what he did.

A description of the ruses that the Tokyo espionage ring used to probe the Japanese military's designs toward the USSR's eastern flank could fill volumes. The skinny is as follows: Zhukov had annihilated the better part of two Japanese divisions in a short but vicious war with Japan in 1939 at Nomonhan, along the Russian-Mongolia frontier. "It was enough to convince the Japanese that attacking Russia would be a tough nut to crack," Pike said, stressing that the battle, also known as Khalkhin Gol, was a little-appreciated prelude to Moscow. Sorge, Ozaki and Miyagi also played a critical role at this time by relaying intelligence on Japanese troop movements to Zhukov.

The Japanese continued to mass troops near Russia's border with Manchuria after their humiliating defeat. Berlin, meanwhile, kept pressing Tokyo to reopen hostilities. Stalin feared Japan would attack as German troops invaded Russia from the West in 1941. Encouraged by early German successes against Russia, Japan appeared to mobilize for a strike.

Sorge, however, had heard in casual conversation from a German naval attache in August 1941 that Japan had ruled out war with the USSR. Antsy about a coming clash with the US, Japanese strategists were waiting until Russia's collapse became certain. If true, it meant that hundreds of thousands of Soviet troops tied down in the Far East could be sprung. But this sizzling piece of intelligence needed to be verified before it could be radioed to Moscow – and it was Ozaki who did it.

In late August of 1941, Ozaki traveled to Japanese-occupied Manchuria under the cover of attending a conference sponsored by Japan's South Manchurian Railway company in Dairen. His real purpose was to check the dispositions of Japan's crack Kwantung Army to ascertain if they were preparing for an invasion of Siberia. He also collected statistics on Japanese army and navy oil stocks for clues on military deployments.

Ozaki soon returned to Tokyo with the final piece in the puzzle. "The danger has passed," Sorge recalled Ozaki telling him in a diary entry. The Japanese were withdrawing units from Manchuria and were not moving others northward from China. An invasion of Russia's eastern frontier was clearly not in the offing. All signs were that Japan would strike southward — to the Dutch East Indies and Singapore.

"It was Ozaki who was the real spy in this case," Bergin told Asia Times. "What Ozaki did and how he did it certainly deserves a great deal of credit, perhaps the biggest part of it. He came to

Sorge not as an informant already in place, but as an outsider. It was through his deliberate effort that he worked himself into the upper reaches of the Japanese government and became a confidant of the Japanese PM. This must be what all spies dream of, but almost never achieve. He put himself where the intelligence had to be. Individual acts of spies do make a difference.”



Zhukov's troops attack at the Battle of Moscow

The rest is history. On Dec. 5, 1941, massed formations of Soviet tanks and troops in white winter camouflage (recently disembarked from rail cars that had carried them from Asia) attacked under the cover of a swirling snowstorm. The Germans were taken by surprise and never regained the initiative in the field. Pike notes Zhukov's reinforcements eventually struck southward and broke the back of the German 6th Army at Stalingrad.

What if ...

What if Moscow had fallen? “The western allies were never sure of what the Soviets would do,” noted Pike who has no argument with the view that Ozaki and Sorge changed history. “Given Stalin's track record, there was the clear and present danger of a separate peace with Germany. The Soviets could have said, ‘we've had enough’ and called it a day.” The full weight of the Axis war machine would have fallen on Britain and the US.

One irony is that Stalin acted on Sorge's tip because the ring's earlier information about a Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor had proved accurate. In the earlier instance, Stalin had elected not to warn the US about the attack because if it was true, he preferred the “ABC Powers” (America, Britain and China) to consume themselves in a war with Japan and Germany – to Moscow's advantage.

The Tokyo spy ring was exposed when Japanese police discovered that Miyagi had joined the Communist Party in the US years earlier.

Miyagi, after his arrest, tried to protect his colleagues by jumping out of a window at police headquarters. Unfortunately, he survived the fall and following interrogation, police were able to capture the ring's members.

Ozaki and Sorge were brutally tortured and admitted their “crimes.” Both were made to write long confessions, detailing their espionage.

Sorge would have gone to the gallows regardless of what he had written. But in Ozaki's case, it was possible the court would spare the noose if he recanted the wrongness of his deeds by writing a so-called "tenkosho" or statement of conversion.

Ozaki, however, found it impossible to recant. "It pained Ozaki to beg for his life by disowning the beliefs and principles he had cherished," Whyment says. The court ultimately ruled that his "anti-state" views were unchanged.

Ozaki and Sorge were hung minutes apart on Nov. 7, 1944, in Tokyo's Sugamo prison after prolonged confinement. The date coincided with the 27th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. Ozaki was the first to die.

"(Sorge) was led to the trapdoor set in the floor and stood calmly as his hands and legs were bound. He did not know that shortly after 9:30 that morning, Ozaki Hotsumi, his loyal helper, had stood on this same spot, and been hanged until he died at 9:51," Whyment wrote.

Miyagi and Vukelic died in custody.

Sorge was proclaimed a "Hero of the Soviet Union" and posthumously rewarded with a stone monument in Moscow. There is no monument to Hotsumi Ozaki in Japan today.