



When Intelligence Made a Difference

<<< WORLD WAR II >>>

Richard Sorge

Moscow's Spy in Tokyo

by Peter C. Oleson

BARBAROSSA

At 3:15 a.m. on Sunday, 22 June 1941, German forces attacked Russian forces in the Russian zone of Poland. Operation Barbarossa, the Nazi invasion designed to crush the Soviet Union had begun, despite Germany having agreed on 23 August 1939 to the Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression pact, which divided Poland into Russian and German zones. Despite many warnings, Stalin was caught by surprise. Soviet army forces, the leadership of which had been diminished by the purges of the late 1930s, crumbled in the face of the onslaught of the two million Wehrmacht troops and the Luftwaffe. Despite some delays, the Germans by late November were within sight of Moscow. But German forces after five months of combat were depleted and suffered from logistics and weather challenges.¹ And new Soviet forces were being organized and reinforced from units in the east. By January 1942 the tide had turned – the German offensive stalled, and Soviet counterattacks threatened to destroy entire German armies.

The Soviet divisions from the east were known as the “Siberian” divisions. “An individual examination of the history of each Red Army division that existed on 22 June 1941 reveals that from 23 June to 31 December 1941, a total of 28 divisions were transferred west”

1. The winter of 1941-42 was the coldest of the 20th Century. (Harald Lejenäs. “The Severe Winter in Europe 1941-42: The large scale circulation, cut-off lows, and blocking,” *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society*. 70 (3), 1989, pp. 271–81.

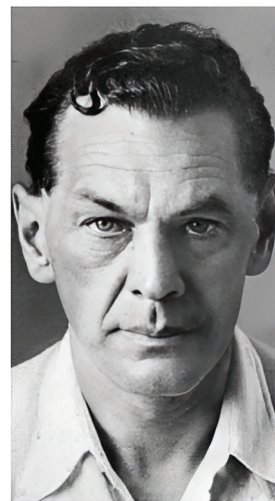
from the Urals, Siberian, Central Asian, and Trans-baikal military districts and the Far Eastern front.²

Many historians have held that Stalin’s transfer of so many divisions to oppose the Nazi invasion was the result of clandestine reports from a GRU spy in Tokyo, Richard Sorge.³

RICHARD SORGE

The *New York Times* succinctly described him:

Richard Sorge, Ph.D., political science, University of Hamburg; representative of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* and senior German correspondent in Tokyo; member of the Nazi party; regular contributor to the most influential strategic journal in Germany, *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik*, and, most important of all, personal political adviser and confidant of the German Ambassador to Tokyo, Gen. Eugen Ott... at the same time, member of the Communist party of the Soviet Union and agent of Department Four (Intelligence) of the Red Army.⁴



Richard Sorge (Wikipedia)

Sorge’s father was German; his mother Russian. Sorge, born in 1895, was influenced by the Bolshevik revolution and in 1919 joined the German Communist Party. He earned a PhD in Political Science from the University of Hamburg in 1919 after having been wounded twice while in the German army. About to be arrested by the German police as a communist activist, in 1925 he fled and joined the Comintern, and in 1929 was recruited by the GRU.⁵

2. “The ‘Siberian’ Divisions and the Battle for Moscow in 1941-42,” *Operation Barbarossa*, <https://www.operationbarbarossa.net/the-siberian-divisions>.

3. See, for example, the *Economist’s* review of Owen Matthews’ *An Impeccable Spy: Richard Sorge, Stalin’s Master Agent*. Apr 20, 2019. Owens wrote “His intelligence on Operation Barbarossa may have proved decisive for the outcome of the second world war.” (www.economist.com/books-and-arts/2019/04/20/a-rollicking-biography-of-richard-sorge-a-master-soviet-spy).

4. “Again the Sorge Case,” *The New York Times*, October 11, 1964. <https://www.nytimes.com/1964/10/11/archives/again-the-sorge-case.html>. Department Four was the GRU.

5. *Ibid*; also, “Sorge, Richard.” *SpyPedia* database. www.cicentre.com.

In 1930 he was sent to China, posing as an agricultural researcher, as part of a plot to foster a communist revolution. Recalled to Moscow in 1932, Sorge then moved to Germany, worked for two newspapers and obtained a German passport. He joined the Nazi Party, probably at the direction of the GRU.

In September 1933 he went to Japan. There, ostensibly as a German correspondent, Sorge developed his spy ring. His writ was to “give very careful study to the question of whether or not Japan was planning to attack the USSR.”⁶ Previously in China he had met Hotsumi Ozaki, a boyfriend of American left-wing journalist Agnes Smedley.⁷ Ozaki, a well-respected expert on China, became a member of Japanese Prime Minister Prince Konoe Fumimaro’s “brain trust” and a trusted advisor to the Royal Family, thereby gaining access to much of the secret plans of the government.⁸ Ozaki also became Sorge’s principal agent. Sorge also recruited others to provide him information.

Most significantly, Sorge befriended the German ambassador to Tokyo, General Eugen Ott. As a Nazi Party member and influential journalist, Sorge became a trusted source and often worked out of the German Embassy.⁹ He “cooperated in the intelligence activities of the Embassy... [and] while cooperating, ...also drew information from them.”¹⁰



Hotsumi Ozaki (Wikidata)

6. Christopher Andrew & Oleg Gordievsky. *The KGB: The Inside Story of its Foreign Operations from Lenin to Gorbachev*, New York: Harper Collins, 1990, p. 138. Russo-Japanese relations had been hostile since before the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05.

7. Agnes Smedley in China supported the Chinese Communist Party. During World War I, financially supported by Germany, she advocated for India’s independence from Britain. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agnes_Smedley).

8. Prince Konoe Fumimaro served as Japanese prime minister from June 1937 to 1939 and from July 1940 to October 1941. He was succeeded by wartime prime minister, General Hideki Tojo.

9. *SpyPedia*.

10. Testimony of Mitsusada Yoshikawa, former procurator to the criminal courts in Tokyo before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, August 1951. Cited in *SpyPedia*.

Sorge provided Moscow critical intelligence on at least four occasions.

Soviet-Japanese Border Disputes

By the Spring of 1932 the Japanese Kwantung army¹¹ had occupied all of Manchuria, which brought it into direct contact with elements of the Soviet Far Eastern army along the poorly defined borders of the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo with Korea, Mongolia and the USSR. “Predictably, ‘incidents’ and ‘provocations’ resulted” and tensions remained high.¹² After a clash at Changkufeng in July 1937, Ozaki’s sources “told Sorge the Japanese did not want the conflict to escalate.”¹³ A ceasefire ended the clash.



Manchukuo (also showing Korea as annexed by Japan (Wikimedia))

11. The Kwantung Army was formed in 1906 after the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 as a security force for the Kwantung leased territory and the South Manchurian Railway Zone. It grew into an army group that supported Japanese interests in China, Manchuria, and Mongolia. The Kwantung Army became the most prestigious command in the Imperial Japanese Army, and many of its personnel won promotions to high positions in the Japanese military and civilian government, including future wartime Prime Minister Hideki Tojo. The Kwantung Army backed the establishment of the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo in Manchuria and was one of the major Japanese army units during the 1937–1945 Second Sino-Japanese War. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kwantung_Army).

12. Paul W. Doerr. “The Changkufeng/Lake Khasan Incident of 1938: British Intelligence on Soviet and Japanese Military Performance,” *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 5, Issue 3, 1990. Doerr cites one source numbering the border incidents at 185.

13. Steven McClure. Review of Owen Matthew’s “An Impeccable Spy – Richard Sorge, Stalin’s Master Agent,” *The Foreign Correspondents’ Club of Japan*, April 2024, at <https://www.fccj.or.jp/index.php/>

In June 1938, NKVD General Genrikh Lyushkov, head of operations in the Soviet Far East, defected to Japan to escape Stalin's purges. Sorge managed to acquire the German Embassy's top-secret report that Lyushkov had provided Japan knowledge of Soviet military deployments and codes.¹⁴ Ozaki acquired information suggesting that Japanese leaders, occupied with a major conflict in China, did not want a wider conflict with the Soviet Union.¹⁵ The Soviets then used this intelligence to launch a massive attack backed with tanks, air support, and artillery. The Battle of Lake Khasan ended with a Soviet victory. Japan asked for peace and accepted Moscow's terms.¹⁶ However, peace did not last long.

From May to September 1939 Japan and the Soviet Union clashed again. In what started out as a small border clash but quickly escalated into a large undeclared war in the Mongolian plains near the city of Nomonhan. (The battle at Nomonhan was known as the Battle of Khalkhin Gol in Russia.) The Soviets, employing over 1,000 tanks, defeated the Kwantung Army's predominately infantry force.¹⁷ Sorge was able to provide military intelligence to Moscow on Japan's unwillingness to allow the conflict to become a general war.¹⁸ "Ozaki told Sorge that Japan was intent on 'solving the problem locally.'"¹⁹

Two years later, on 13 April 1941, despite Japan signing the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy, with war raging in Europe, and two months prior to Hitler's attack on the USSR, Moscow and Tokyo signed the Japanese-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact (a.k.a. Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact).²⁰

German Invasion Plans

Nazi Germany and the Soviets had signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression pact on 24 August 1939, pledging not to attack each other and dividing Poland and Lithuania between them. Soon

thereafter by 1940 Sorge warned Moscow that Adolf Hitler's forces could soon be attacking the Soviet Union. GRU officials who read his report added their own notes to it, calling it "doubtful material," and not viewed as particularly trustworthy.²¹

In April 1941, the senior German military attaché revealed that German plans for the invasion of the USSR were complete. On 12 May, "two special military envoys came to Tokyo to brief Ambassador Ott (and his Nazi Party associate, Richard Sorge) on the details of the attack." Sorge transmitted to Russia that the Wehrmacht had 150 divisions prepared to attack and Berlin estimated that Leningrad would fall within two months. On 30 May Sorge reported to Moscow that "Berlin has informed Ott that the German invasion will begin in the latter half of June. Ott is 95% certain that war will break out." Sorge followed this up with further warnings, but they were ignored.²² Sorge reportedly sank into a deep depression and cried for several hours after the attack occurred.^{23,24}

Japanese Strategic Intentions

Ozaki learned from Prime Minister Konoye's secretaries, details about the Roosevelt-Konoye negotiations in Washington, DC. He also reported the results of the Council in the Imperial Presence of 2 July 1941, at which Japan decided to advance southward against Great Britain, the United States and Holland. Two weeks after the German attack Sorge reported on 12 July 1941 "If the Red Army suffers defeat then there is no doubt that the Japanese will join the war, and if there is no defeat, then they will maintain neutrality." "The version of this telegram in the military archives bears Stalin's initials alongside those of Molotov, Beria and army chief Marshal Voroshilov."²⁵ Top Politburo and Soviet Army officials had finally begun to trust Sorge's information. The value of this intelligence was incalculable as it assured Moscow that its Siberian borders were safe, at least until the spring of 1942.²⁶

number-1-shimbun-article/impeccable-spy-richard-sorge-stalins-master-agent. (Bloomsbury Publishing London, 2019.)

14. *SpyPedia*.

15. The Second Sino-Japanese War began in 1937 and continued until the end of World War II.

16. *SpyPedia*.

17. LTC Charles Otterstedt. "The Kwantung Army and the Nomonhan Incident: Its Impact on National Security Strategy," Research Project, Carlyle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 4 April 2000.

18. *SpyPedia*.

19. McClure.

20. The Tripartite Pact was signed on September 27, 1940. "The Pact provided for mutual assistance should any of the signatories suffer attack by any nation not already involved in the war. This formalizing of the alliance was aimed directly at 'neutral' America—designed to force the United States to think twice before venturing in on the side of the Allies." (<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/the-tripartite-pact-is-signed-by-germany-italy-and-japan>).

21. Saitō Katsuhisa. "A Fresh Look at a Legendary Spy: New Japanese Translation of Richard Sorge's Reports from Tokyo," July 21, 2023, citing Zorange fairu 1941–1945: Sekigun jōhō honbu kimitsu bunsho (The Sorge Files, 1941–45: Secret Documents from the Soviet Main Intelligence Directorate), a translation of the 2000 Russian-language work Delo Rikharda Zorge: Neisvestnye Dokumenty, edited by the researcher Andrey Fesyun. <https://www.nippon.com/en/japan-topics/bg900461/>.

22. Ibid; "Again the Sorge Case."

23. *SpyPedia*.

24. It is possible that the GRU's skepticism was based in part on Sorge's radio operator, Max Clausen, who had lost his passion for the work and began deleting portions of Sorge's reports, filing truncated, inaccurate versions with the GRU authorities (Saitō Katsuhisa).

25. McClure.

26. "Again the Sorge Case."

Japanese War Plans

The next month Sorge warned that Japan was planning to attack the United States but had no desire to attack the USSR's far east. He indicated that the Japanese Army was preparing to move southward against Pacific targets (Dutch East Indies and French Indochina), rather than northward toward Siberia.²⁷ In a 23 August cable to Moscow, Sorge reported "Many Japanese soldiers are being issued short trousers—tropical uniforms, in other words—which suggests they are likely to be dispatched to the southern theater..."²⁸

As McClure notes "The biggest question surrounding Sorge and his network is to what extent Stalin acted on the information that Sorge supplied confirming that the Japanese would not invade Siberia."²⁹ "Towards the end of September, Soviet troops began moving in large numbers to fight the Germans on the plains of European Russia... In all, Stalin would shift over half the available troops in Siberia to the defense of Moscow." This appears to be the first confirmation in English of Sorge's pivotal role in the Soviet leader's decision, according to McClure.³⁰

UNRAVELING OF THE SORGE NETWORK

The Japanese secret police had been relentless in tracking suspected communists since the clash at Khalkin Gol. Sorge's activities, including his philandering, were well known in the German and Japanese communities. The German secret police, the SS-Sturm-bannführer, was resident in the German Embassy.³¹ "By 1940 both the Kempeitai and Tokkō suspected an espionage ring was operating in Japan, though neither organization shared information with the other." In mid-1940 the Germans began suspecting Sorge was a Soviet agent and informed the Kempeitai that Sorge was under surveillance.³²

Although the Kempeitai used radio direction finding for counterintelligence it was the radio detection element of the Investigation Department that detected Sorge's transmissions, but it had never been able to locate the transmitter, nor decipher the messages.³³

In November 1939, the Tokkō arrested Ritsu Ito, one of Ozaki's assistants. He was held and interrogated for almost a year before being released as a police informant.³⁴ In the Spring of 1941 the Japanese learned that Tomo Kitabayahsi had come to Japan via

RED ARMY DIVISIONS TRANSFERRED WEST FROM SIBERIAN MILITARY DISTRICTS

Division	Military District	Date Transferred
26 th Rifle Division	Far East	Sept. 1941
21st Rifle Division	Far East	Sept. 1941
114 th Rifle Division	Transbaikal	Sept. 1941
92nd Rifle Division	Far East	Oct. 1941
65 th Rifle Division	Transbaikal	Nov. 1941
32 th Rifle Division	Volga/Siberian	Oct. 1941
93 th Rifle Division	Siberia	Oct. 1941
78 th Rifle Division	Far East	Nov. 1941
238 th Rifle Division	Central Asia	Oct. 1941
58 th Tank Division	Far East	Nov. 1941
60 th Tank Division	Far East	Oct. 1941
82 nd Mechanized Division	Transbaikal	Nov. 1941
18 th Mountain Cavalry Div.	Central Asia	Nov. 1941
20 th Mountain Cavalry Div.	Central Asia	Nov. 1941

<https://www.operationbarbarossa.net/the-siberian-divisions-and-the-battle-for-moscow-in-1941-42/>

27. SpyPedia.

28. Katsuhisa.

29. McClure.

30. Ibid.

31. John W.W. Chapman. *Richard Sorge, the GRU and the Pacific War*, Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. xi-xviii.

32. Raymond Lamont-Brown. *Kempeitai: Japan's Dreaded Military Police*, Sutton Publishing, 1998, pp. 89-97.

33. Ibid, p. 66, and Matthews.

34. Pat McTaggart. "Soviet Military Intelligence: Richard Sorge," *War-*

the U.S. and was engaged in spying activities. Finally arrested in late September she denied being a spy, but implicated Yotoku Miyagi, who worked for the *Japan Advertiser*, an English language newspaper. He had recruited her as a member of Sorge's network. Miyagi was arrested on 11 October, and after attempting suicide, stunned his interrogators by revealing the work he had done. The sheer magnitude of the espionage operation astounded and shocked senior Tokkō officials as they read reports of the interrogation. He implicated both Ozaki and Sorge in the process. The Tokkō then arrested Ozaki on 14 October 1941. Four days later the Tokkō arrested Sorge; Max Clausen, his radio operator; and another Soviet agent.³⁵

After their arrests by Japanese authorities, every member of the Sorge spy ring—with the honorable exception of Kawai,³⁶ one of Sorge's junior agents—sang like canaries.³⁷

The Japanese counterespionage elements had intercepted and transcribed Clausen's encoded radio messages from almost the beginning. During interrogation Clausen, who cooperated with authorities, surrendered his book code. This opened up the history of Sorge's reports to Moscow.³⁸ Investigators searching Sorge's residence also discovered messages in plain sight. Sorge confessed his role as a spy after six days of brutal torture.³⁹

Sorge and Ozaki were tried, convicted, and hung on 7 November 1944 in Tokyo's Sugamo prison.⁴⁰

The final arrests in the Sorge case totaled 35 people, making this a case of espionage on an unprecedented scale in the counterintelligence history of Japan. "A great deal of controversy still surrounds the exposure of the Sorge ring, most authorities agree today that the decisive clue was supplied accidentally by [an unnamed] turncoat Japanese Communist."⁴¹

fare History, Vol. 1, No. 2, March 2002. <https://warfarehistorynetwork.com/article/soviet-military-intelligence-richard-sorge/>.

35. Lamont-Brown.

36. Teikichi Kawai was one of two of Sorge's agents on the Asian mainland (McTaggart).

37. *An Impeccable Spy* by Owen Matthews. Used with the permission of Bloomsbury. Copyright © 2019 <https://lithub.com/meet-a-bad-man-who-became-a-truly-great-spy/>

38. Matthews.

39. *SpyPedia* citing the testimony of Mitsusada Yoshikawa, former procurator to the criminal courts in Tokyo, before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, August 1951.

40. Katsuhisa.

41. "Again the Sorge Case," and Shimizu Ryotaro. "Richard Sorge and the Japanese Attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941," *Center for Military History*, The National Institute for Defense Studies, No. 249, December 15, 2022.

Japanese Counterintelligence

The Japanese had multiple intelligence organizations engaged in counterespionage. The Army had the Kempeitei secret police. Its primary mission was to enforce discipline. The Special Higher Police (Tokubetsu Kōtō Keisatsu), abbreviated as Tokkō was, from 1911 to 1945, a Japanese policing and counterespionage organization, established within the Home Ministry for the purpose of carrying out internal security, domestic criminal investigations, and control of dissident political groups thought to threaten the government. Tokkō was the civilian counterpart to the Kempeitei. The War Minister also had the Investigation Department, which reported directly to him. It conducted covert counterintelligence investigations against Japanese politicians, other officials, including the military, and foreigners.¹

1. Ken Kotani. *Japanese Intelligence in World War II*, Osprey Publishing, 2009, pp. 58-68.

CONCLUSION

Sorge provided Moscow strategically important intelligence. The suspicious nature of Stalin, who distrusted many spies and their reports, served him poorly. Warnings of war he ignored, and the Red Army was unprepared for the initial onslaught of the Wehrmacht in the summer of 1941. The subsequent movement of up to half the Russian forces in the Far East to the Eastern Front in Europe, along with the creation of numerous new divisions, helped stop an exhausted German army before it reached Moscow in the late fall. Sorge's reports that Japan would turn its aggressive intentions south, rather than north against the Soviet Far East, apparently impacted Moscow's strategic decisions. However, historian Nigel Askey

concludes the widely held belief that these Far Eastern divisions “stopped the Germans” at Moscow is largely myth. Upon their movement westward, they were spread out from opposite Finland to southern Ukraine. Only 14 divisions transferred west from August to December 1941 (six in October). These are the only divisions that could possibly have been influenced by any information from Sorge’s spy ring, Askey concludes.⁴²

In recent years Sorge has been hailed by the Kremlin as a hero. His actual value to the USSR, however, remains hidden in the GRU’s files.



*Source: Publicly available
image of postage stamp
issued by the Soviet Union*

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42. Nigel Askey. “The ‘Siberian’ Divisions and the Battle for Moscow in 1941-42,” *Operation Barbarossa*, <https://www.operationbarbarossa.net/the-siberian-divisions>