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Shumushu Island in August 1945

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Shumushu Island is the northernmost island of the Kuril Islands (Chishima in Japanese), and was therefore the former border between Russia and Japan (1875-1945). However, in the early hours of 18 August 1945, the Soviet Army suddenly carried out an assault there, resulting in a grave battle between Soviet troops and the 91st Division of the Imperial Japanese Army. As a result, more than 1,500 soldiers had died, and furthermore, most of the surviving soldiers were detained in Siberia after the battle.

Based on original documents in both Japanese and Russian, this paper mainly describes the sequence of events that led to the outbreak of this battle and the eventual ceasefire.

The assault operation of the Soviet Army was planned and executed in order to take advantage of the defeat (surrender) of Japan using only current military strength of the Kamchatka Defense Troops (about 9,000 soldiers). The aim of the operation was to seize three of the Northern Kuril Islands. The Soviet troops decided to assault Shumushu Island first, not considering the possibility of taking possession without bloodshed.

During the daytime of 17 August, the Japanese troops of the 91st Division were intending not to put up resistance. But, just before the beginning of the Soviet attack, the headquarters of the 91st Division changed plans and ordered a counterattack. It was possible that Kiichiro Higuchi, the commander of the 5th Area Army, which controlled the northern areas of Japan, changed the order.

As they believed Japan and the Allied powers had already agreed a ceasefire by the time, the Japanese Army of the Northern Kuril Islands was ordered to cease hostilities at 16:00 on 18

August. However, the Imperial headquarters of Japan had decided on this time unilaterally.

The 91st Division fought off the Soviet attack until 16:00, and stopped fighting once the time limit was exceeded. However, the Soviet troops had no knowledge of this. Therefore, they continued the landing operation after the Japanese time limit and succeeded to take possession of two of the most important highlands on the island. It could be argued that the time limit imposed by the Imperial Headquarters of Japan was the main reason for the defeat of the 91st Division.

On the evening of 19 August, the first meeting for a ceasefire was held. Although the Japanese representatives agreed to the surrender that the Soviet troops instituted, Fusaki Tsutsumi, the commander of the 91st Division, rejected the surrender agreement after the meeting. His refusal of the surrender was directed by the headquarters of the 5th Area Army. The area army believed that the Soviet's "thoughtless" and "illegal" attack was the result of an arbitrary decision by Kamchatka's troops, and tried to have the attack halted through the order of Marshal Vasilevskii, the commander of the Far Eastern Soviet Army.

On 19 August, Marshal Vasilevskii met the chief of staff of the Kwantung Army in Manchuria to discuss a ceasefire and offered an expression of regret about the war situation in the Kuril Islands (and Sakhalin). The Kwantung Army communicated Vasilevskii's "heartaches" about the ceasefire to the 5th Area Army. But, the area army's staff misunderstood the meaning of his "heartaches." They believed that he was also anxious about the illegal nature of the attacks by the Kamchatka and Sakhalin troops. As a result, the ceasefire between the Soviet Union and Japan was delayed until the 5th Army cleared up their own misunderstandings.

Historical accounts of the war in the Russian language report that the Kamchatka troops attacked again on 20 August and defeated the Japanese troops. However, there is no evidence in Japanese historical accounts that a full scale attack occurred. In fact, the battle came to an end on 18 August.

This paper highlights the area army's participation in Japanese counterattacks and the delay of the ceasefire agreements. Also it points out that (official) Japanese historical accounts of the war concealed such participation entirely. The author supposes that the reason for the concealment was to defend Commander Higuchi from being designated a war criminal by the Soviet Union.