

Fighting between Soviet and Chinese Frontier Guards on Far Eastern Border. - Protest Demonstrations in China and Soviet Union. - Soviet Proposal for Boundary Negotiations.

Armed clashes between Soviet and Chinese frontier guards, causing considerable loss of life, occurred on March 2 and March 15 on the River Ussuri, which forms the border between the Chinese province of Heilungkiang and the Soviet Far East. The scene of the fighting was a small uninhabited island 1 1/2 miles long by half a mile wide, known to the Russians as Damansky Island and to the Chinese as Chenpao Island, which lies about 110 miles south of Khabarovsk and 250 miles north of Vladivostok.

The frontier in this area is regulated by the Treaty of Aigun (1858) and the Treaty of Peking (1860), which were imposed on China by the Tsarist Government at a time when that country had been weakened by a war with Britain and France in 1856-58. The Treaty of Aigun gave Russia sovereignty over 230,000 square miles north of the River Amur and placed 150,000 square miles east of the Ussuri (the Amur's principal tributary) under joint Sino-Russian control, whilst the Treaty of Peking incorporated the territory east of the Ussuri into the Russian Empire. Although the territory involved consisted of sparsely-populated wastelands and had never been settled by the Chinese, having become part of the Chinese Empire only as the result of the Manchu conquest in the 17th century, its annexation by Russia in such circumstances remained a long-standing grievance, and Chinese spokesmen suggested in 1963 and 1964 that China reserved the right to demand its return. [see 19566, 20368]

The status of Damansky Island under these treaties is disputed. A Chinese Foreign Ministry statement of March 10 contended that under international law the central line of the main channel of the Ussuri formed the boundary line, that the island was situated on the Chinese side of this line, and that it had always been under Chinese jurisdiction and had been admitted to be Chinese by the Soviet delegation at boundary negotiations in 1964. A Soviet Note of March 29 [see below], on the other hand, maintained that a map approved by both Governments in 1861 showed the Chinese bank of the Ussuri as the boundary line in this area. The problem was complicated by the fact that after the breaking up of the ice in spring the Ussuri regularly floods its banks and frequently shifts its channel.

Following the deterioration in relations between the two countries numerous minor incidents had occurred on this and other sections of the Sine-Soviet border from 1960 onwards. Boundary negotiations began in Peking on Feb. 25, 1964, but were suspended in the following August without any progress having been achieved. The Soviet Note of March 29, 1969, stated that the Soviet delegation had put forward proposals at these talks for the "clarification" of certain sections of the border, but the Chinese had "tried to question the historically established State frontier"; according to the Chinese statement of March 10, the Chinese delegation, while regarding the Treaties of Aigun and Peking as "unequal treaties," had offered to take them as a basis for determining the entire alignment of the boundary, subject to "necessary readjustments at individual places on the boundary by both sides," but the Soviet side had refused to accept these proposals. Although it was agreed in principle to resume the talks in Moscow at a later date, no further negotiations have in fact taken place.

During the earlier stages of the Cultural Revolution in China a tense situation developed on the border, especially in February 1967 [see 22047-48]. According to diplomatic sources in Moscow, many minor

incidents took place in 1968, but neither side gave them any publicity; a Chinese protest Note of Sept. 16, 1968, however, alleged that Soviet military aircraft had flown over Heilungkiang province 29 times between Aug. 9 and 29. The Chinese statement of March 10, 1969, asserted that Soviet frontier troops had intruded into “the Chenpao Island area of China” 16 times between Jan. 23, 1967, and March 2, 1969, wounding Chinese frontier guards on several occasions, whilst Major-General Vasily Lobanov (Soviet commander in the Pacific frontier district) claimed on March 16 that Chinese troops had repeatedly attempted to capture the island during the past 18 months.

Diametrically opposite accounts of the clash on March 2 were given by the two sides. According to the Soviet version, about 300 Chinese soldiers, camouflaged in white cloaks, crossed the frozen river during the night of March 1–2 to Damansky Island, where they lay in ambush. In the morning about 30 more Chinese approached the island, and when Soviet frontier guards came up to them to protest opened fire without warning. At the same time both the troops on the island and others on the Chinese bank of the river opened fire with rifles and artillery on another group of Soviet frontier guards. With the help of reinforcements from a neighbouring post, it was stated, the Soviet troops had expelled the intruders after a two-hour battle in which they had lost 31 killed, including an officer, and 14 wounded. Chinese official statements, on the other hand, stated that a large Soviet force, accompanied by four armoured vehicles, had opened fire on Chinese frontier guards who were on normal patrol duty, killing and wounding many of them.

Both Governments sent strongly-worded protest Notes to the other on March 2. The Soviet Note demanded an immediate investigation, the punishment of those responsible for the incident, and immediate steps to preclude any further violation of the frontier, and declared that “reckless and provocative actions by the Chinese authorities” would be “met on our side by a rebuff.” The Chinese Note similarly demanded the punishment of the culprits, reserved the right to demand compensation, and declared that if the Soviet Government continued to “provoke armed conflicts” it would receive “resolute counter-blows.”

Mass protest demonstrations began on March 3 outside the Soviet Embassy in Peking, which for four days was virtually besieged by thousands of Chinese servicemen and civilians shouting such slogans as “Hang Kosygin” and “Fry Brezhnev.” Similar demonstrations, in which according to the New China News Agency 260,000,000 people took part, were held in the next few days throughout China. On the Russian side, although demonstrations took place in Khabarovsk and Vladivostok on March 3–4, there were no demonstrations in Moscow until March 7, when over 50,000 people marched past the Chinese Embassy in the largest organized protest seen in the city for many years; some of the crowd threw stones, lumps of ice, ink bottles, and paint bombs at the building, and many windows were broken.

At a press conference on March 7 Mr. Leonid Zamyatin (head of the Soviet Foreign Ministry press department), after giving the first detailed account of the incident, alleged that the Chinese had shot and bayoneted wounded men, and that the faces of some of those killed had been “so mutilated as to be unrecognizable.” An even larger demonstration than that of the previous day occurred outside the Chinese Embassy in Moscow on March 8, over 100,000 people taking part, although on this occasion there were no disorders; protest meetings were also held on March 8–9 in many other Russian cities. In Peking protest demonstrations against the stoning of the Chinese Embassy in Moscow began outside the Soviet Embassy on March 11, and continued for three days. Red Flag (the Chinese Communist Party's theoretical organ) declared on March 14 that if the Soviet leadership wanted to fight, “let us thoroughly annihilate them.” The article added: “The Soviet revisionists have created such theories as ‘limited sovereignty’ to help Soviet troops march into other countries. This makes us understand that their recent armed provocation is no mere coincidence.”

A Chinese Note of March 13, which the Soviet Embassy refused to accept, alleged that between March 4 and March 12 Soviet armoured vehicles had “intruded into China's territory, Chenpao Island,” on six occasions, and that Soviet helicopters had twice flown over it during this period. Soviet official statements claimed that a group of Chinese soldiers had attempted to “invade” the island on March 14 but had been driven off.

Further fighting occurred on March 15, and was apparently on a much larger scale than that on March 2. General Lobanov told the Press on March 16 that Chinese infantry in regimental strength—or up to 2,000 men—had launched repeated attacks on the island under cover of artillery and mortar fire from the Chinese bank, and had been driven back, with the aid of frontier guards from neighbouring posts and the reserve, only after seven hours’ fighting. According to the version given by Peking Radio, large numbers of Soviet troops supported by tanks repeatedly attacked the Chinese frontier guards on duty on the island, and were driven back after an 11-hour battle during which Soviet heavy artillery and tanks shelled the island and the Chinese bank of the river. Although neither side gave details of the casualties, these were evidently heavy; Soviet press reports mentioned by name 12 officers and n.c.o.s who had been killed, including a colonel, suggesting—according to the Moscow correspondent of *The Times*—that a full regiment of frontier guards and reserves, or nearly 3,000 men, had been engaged on the Soviet side.

Only minor incidents were subsequently reported from the area. The Soviet Press reported on several occasions between March 18 and April 8 that the Chinese had directed mortar and machine-gun fire against the island and were digging fortifications on their side of the river, whilst Peking Radio alleged on April 13 that the Russians had committed “new acts of aggression” on the Ussuri frontier, without giving any further details.

A Chinese Note of March 15 accused the Soviet Government of “incessantly” sending troops to intrude into Chinese territory, and demanded that it should immediately stop its “armed provocations.” A Soviet Note of the same date maintained that “Damansky Island is an inalienable part of Soviet territory,” and declared that “if further attempts are made to violate the inviolability of Soviet territory, the U.S.S.R. and all its peoples will resolutely defend it and will deliver a crushing rebuff to such violations.”

For some days after the fighting on March 15 both the Chinese and the Soviet Press published virulent and bellicose attacks on the other country's leaders; the Peking *People's Daily* described “Khrushchev, Kosygin, Brezhnev, and company” on March 20 as “a herd of swine,” asserting that the Soviet people hated “the new tsars,” whilst the Soviet armed forces newspaper *Red Star* denounced Mao Tse-tung on March 23 as “a traitor to the sacred cause of Communism... painted with human blood” and compared him to Hitler. The fact that protest demonstrations were not resumed in either country, however, despite the seriousness of the latest fighting, suggested that both Governments were anxious not to push matters to extremes.

In a long and moderately-worded Note of March 29 the Soviet Government reaffirmed in detail its claim to sovereignty over Damansky Island, and proposed that the boundary negotiations broken off in 1964, should be resumed as soon as possible.

After giving the Soviet version of the incidents on March 2 and 15, the Note recalled that after the Russian Revolution the Soviet Government had repudiated all unequal and secret treaties with China, and had renounced all Russian spheres of influence, extra-territorial rights, and consular jurisdiction in China. The repudiation of these treaties had been given legal status by an agreement with China signed

in 1924, but this agreement had not referred to the Treaties of Aigun and Peking as unequal or secret, and there had been no question of annulling or revising them. The Chinese Communist Government, the Note contended, had signified its acceptance of the existing frontiers by concluding an agreement on shipping on the Amur and the Ussuri in 1951, and by asking the competent Soviet authorities for permission to use certain islands in those rivers for cutting hay and timber—an indication that they did not question the Soviet claim to those islands, including Damansky Island.

The Note went on to recall the friendly relations between the two countries in the 1950s, and commented: “If it were not for the position adopted by the Chinese side, trade, economic, and scientific and technical co-operation between our countries would undoubtedly have developed successfully further. This also holds true for today.... Whenever a danger arose to the security of the People's Republic of China, the Soviet Union, loyal to its commitments under the Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance, always came out in support of People's China.” [These statements were interpreted by Western observers as a suggestion that in the event of a change in Chinese policy the Soviet Union would be prepared to resume its economic aid and diplomatic support to China.]

After deploring the breaking off of boundary negotiations, and recalling that the Chinese Premier, Mr. Chou En-lai, had said in 1960 that the unestablished sections of the Soviet-Chinese frontier were “insignificant discrepancies in the maps, easy to solve peacefully,” the Soviet Note urged the Chinese Government to “refrain from any actions on the frontier that may cause complications and to solve any differences that may arise in a calm atmosphere and through negotiations.” It proposed that the consultations started in Peking in 1964 should be resumed as soon as possible, and concluded: “The Soviet Government is firmly convinced that in the final count the vital interests of the Soviet and Chinese peoples will make it possible to remove and overcome difficulties in Soviet-Chinese relations. The Soviet Government has stated, and considers it necessary to repeat, that it resolutely rejects any encroachments by anyone on Soviet territory, and that any attempts to talk to the Soviet Union and the Soviet people in the language of weapons will be firmly repulsed.”

A second Soviet Note of April 11 proposed that the boundary negotiations should be resumed in Moscow on April 15 or at any other early date convenient for the Chinese.—(Soviet Embassy Press Department, London - Peking Review - Times - Daily Telegraph - Guardian - Le Monde - New York Times)

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