

Q&A: Kremlinologist's Russian Skills, Preserved in Alcohol

By [Justin Lifflander](#)

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Belousovitch as a senior analyst.

Every April for the past 17 years, former U.S. soldier Igor Belousovitch has gone to Arlington National Cemetery at the invitation of the Russian Embassy in Washington. There he joins a dwindling group of World War II veterans and U.S. and Russian officials in commemorating a 10-minute meeting between Soviet and American troops at the Elbe River on April 25, 1945, to celebrate their successful effort to destroy fascism in Europe.

"No one intended for me to be there, despite my Russian background," Belousovitch, one of the United States' most experienced Kremlinologists during the Cold War, told The Moscow Times. "It was an accident of fate. But my background allowed me to understand it."

A plaque installed at Arlington by the Russian government and some U.S. supporters reads, "In tribute to the partnership in the battle against tyranny." On Wednesday morning, it was quickly covered in red carnations deposited by children from the local Russian Embassy

school and other participants during the ceremony, while a bugler played taps in the shadow of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Belousovitch laid a wreath.

Igor Belousovitch

Education

1948 — University of California, Berkeley,
master's in Russian literature and language

1946 — University of California, Berkeley,
bachelor of arts, Soviet and East European
studies

Work Experience

1956-91 — U.S. State Department, Bureau of
Intelligence and Research, including chief of
U.S.S.R. section, Division of Biographic
Intelligence (1959-61); analyst of Soviet
policy, Near East Division (1962-68); analyst
of Soviet policy, with focus on Chinese-
Soviet relations, Asia Division (1969-75);
first secretary in political section, covering
Soviet internal affairs and dissent, U.S.
Embassy, Moscow (1976-77); senior
intelligence analyst, specializing in dissent,
human rights problems, emigration policy,
nationality issues and cultural trends, Soviet
Internal Affairs Division (1978-91)
1951-56 — Georgetown University, Institute
of Languages and Linguistics, editor of the
Russian-English military dictionary project
for the Department of the Army; also worked
in the Slavic division of the Library of
Congress

Born in Shanghai in 1922 as the son of a White Army officer fleeing Soviet Russia, Belousovitch moved to San Francisco with his parents in 1923. He enrolled in the University of California, Berkeley, in 1941 and joined the army two years later.

Belousovitch then spent the next half-century studying the intricacies of how the Soviet Union functioned. As a Kremlinologist, he read between the lines, interpreted the symbols and tried to provide objective information to U.S. policymakers.

Time and experience have given him immense perspective and refreshing optimism. He views the current opposition in Russia as being far better off than their Soviet-era predecessors. Despite the attention he and his fellow intelligence analysts dedicated to the country, they were unable to predict the final moments of Soviet power, even though they saw the writing

on the wall. Throughout his State Department career, he valued his ability to communicate in Russian as a tool to bring clarity to the otherwise opaque world of East-West relations.

Even as a brash soldier at that historic linkup on the Elbe River, he knew that his understanding of the subtleties of Russian, his second mother tongue, would affect the outcome of the meeting and what impression the Soviet soldiers would get of their American counterparts.

"Considering the importance of the event, it actually dramatized the end of the war," Belousovitch said by telephone from Washington. "Nobody at that time anticipated that the relationship between the United States and Soviet Union would soon get complicated. At that moment everybody treated each other as friends and allies."

Since then, both sides have been cautious about how they define the wartime relationship. "In America we called it an alliance; the Soviets never used that word," said Belousovitch, 90. "They spoke of a coalition — it gives a slightly different flavor to the relationship, which quickly degenerated at the end of the war. They still treated us as a potential adversary."

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: What do you make of how Russian and American societies regard World War II now?

A: For the U.S.S.R., it was a tragic national event that touched the great majority of citizens. In the U.S. we did not experience an invasion of our country. People here worked in the defense industries, read about the events of the war and hoped that their relatives who were in military service would come back alive. In that sense we participated, but it did not really affect the domestic population of the country in the way it did the Soviet Union — on a scale that is hard to comprehend.

Q: How did you feel the last time you were invited to attend the Victory Day parade by the Russian government in 2010 and you saw foreign troops march across Red Square?

A: That was an unexpected highlight. There we were, sitting in bleachers on the side of Lenin's tomb, from where I had witnessed the parade many times. All of a sudden I saw a detachment of the U.S. army with the American flag flying. The Brits were there and so were the French. It was the first time that I ever recall seeing foreign military participation in the victory parade. It was extraordinary. I treated it with enthusiasm, glee and joy. I looked at it as a symbol of current relations. It told me that things are developing, that the relationship is now becoming more normal.

Q: How would you compare the opposition movement now to the dissidents of the Soviet era?

A: In those days, dissidents were just beginning to become visible. There were the "big guns," the people who wrote huge manuscripts, like Alexander Solzhenitsyn, about fundamental issues of the political status of the Soviet regime, the terrorism that was being practiced and the gulags. Then there were the smaller dissidents who began to put out samizdat. It was all quite illegal, and, of course, we at the embassy collected as much of it as possible. To us this was brand new — that there was some possibility for Soviet citizens to express their opinion in as public a way as they could. But they were all running a serious risk.

On Human Rights Day a handful of dissidents would gather on Pushkin Square and at the same moment simultaneously take off their hats. They'd be arrested for having an "organized protest." You can see how symbolic but cautious these early demonstrations were.

Now, of course, instead of describing gulags and trying to preserve themselves without being arrested and sent there, the activists are running for office, they are visible in the press, they are grudgingly recognized by the authorities. All of this to me is tremendous progress, and I wish them well. Who would have thought in those days that opponents of the regime would be running for office and even joining legislative bodies. It shows how far these people have come.

Q: What about communicating at the individual level?

A: I remember in 1977, when I was at the embassy in Moscow, and Chief Justice Warren Burger came for a visit. He had been invited by his counterpart, Lev Smirnov, the head of the Soviet Supreme Court. The Soviets were overjoyed to have him come because it gave them a legitimacy they did not enjoy previously.

On a flight to Tbilisi, I sat next to Smirnov, and we started talking. It was not the first time I discovered that Soviets love to talk to old Russian emigres — the "first wave" ones who left as a result of the Revolution and civil war. They frequently become very candid, speaking not as a Soviet with a foreigner but as a Russian to a Russian. Smirnov began to recall World War II, when he was a military prosecutor. He told me how he was instructed to report on a case to Stalin himself. He said he became so frightened that his legs were trembling and he could barely walk into Stalin's office. He said what made it especially dangerous was that he was going to recommend the case not be prosecuted. Stalin accepted the recommendation and allowed him to leave the office, safe and sound.

Though I was a foreign diplomat, he felt secure talking to me because he knew the conversation would not be reported to the Soviet authorities and he knew I would understand him.

Official and nonofficial Russians would tell me things, including details of Soviet outrages, that they wouldn't dream of telling a foreigner, much less a diplomat or one of their own people. They would speak as though they were confessing. They would do such a thing only while speaking to an old Russian emigre.

One Soviet acquaintance told me: "One of the things I find interesting about you is your language. You speak a kind of old-fashioned pre-revolutionary language that one rarely hears in this country nowadays. It sounds like 19th-century Russian, preserved in alcohol."

Q: What were some of the surprising things you learned while working as an intelligence analyst?

A: It was a wonderfully interesting profession. We did our best to find out what was really going on — what the Soviet authorities were up to. Analysts were not bound to follow American policy in expressing their views. Occasionally we were heretical in how we analyzed trends.

In 1969, the Soviets and Chinese started shooting at each other across the Amur River. It was totally unexpected by everybody in Washington, particularly by the people in the Pentagon. They were mesmerized by the possibility of a major Sino-Soviet conflict. They began to churn out a huge number of articles, all kinds of staff studies, focusing on how a Sino-Soviet conflict would proceed. That's all they could think of. To me it sounded highly unlikely. For the Soviet Union to get involved in a conflict 6,000 miles (9,650 kilometers) away from Moscow, with that part of the country connected only by a vulnerable railroad track, was simply out of the question. The Chinese were not issuing a major challenge to the Soviet Union. They were just interested in getting the Soviets to recognize the exact line of the boundary. Moscow interpreted the previous treaty to mean that China started on the Chinese bank and the whole river was Soviet space. But this violated a modern notion of international law — that river boundaries run through the navigable channel of a river. Both sides eventually recognized that this was a reasonable Chinese position, and it ended there.

Another fascinating period was the approaching collapse of the Soviet Union. When Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, things began to happen in the Soviet structure that were, to say the least, strange. The authorities began to stray from the party line. In the Supreme Soviet there appeared to be signs of genuine free debate. These were things that you would never expect to take place in the Soviet Union.

Gradually, it became clear to us that Gorbachev was one of these rare birds — a genuine reformer. He and many others in the U.S.S.R. recognized that the Soviet structure was becoming incredibly inept and bureaucratic, that things had to be shaken up. The new trends of glasnost, of open discussion, of discussion about where the country was going and what should be done — it was unprecedented. Most of the information was hardly classified. It was appearing in open Soviet sources, the Soviet press. So we began to analyze these unlikely events and wrote papers that were barely, if at all, classified. Of course, a lot of people at the State Department were a bit uneasy about it.

Q: Were you able to foresee the demise of Soviet power?

A: Well, it did happen, didn't it? We couldn't predict the exact date of the collapse, but it was clear that events were moving toward a major political crisis. We understood that over the years the Soviet authorities, no matter how inefficient they were, had an uncanny ability to muddle through. If there was some sort of huge problem, they would rearrange the chess pieces in such a way that they would muddle through one crisis by taking resources from a different sector of policy and use them to somehow ameliorate the crisis of the moment. It was one crisis after another, some public, some not so public. They were having more and more trouble coping with shortages of resources. Gorbachev began to blow a little fresh air into the stagnant structure, and it was fascinating to observe this procedure. But it was hard to imagine they would ever come to a point where they could no longer muddle through.

Q: Do you feel that the current policymakers have built on the experience gained from your own historical time frame?

A: I am not sure. I sometimes wonder about that. Maybe occasionally we in the U.S. are muddling through?

But I lived through an absolutely fascinating period where glasnost touched not only

the Soviet authorities but my own work as well. Now there is a whole generation of adults in Russia who have never experienced the war personally or even the Soviet Union or Soviet life and who are interested in a more open society. That's why I think the country is gradually and steadily moving in that direction.

Q: What about the "anti-Americanism" during recent Russian elections?

A: You know, there is a lot of latent anti-Russianism here in the U.S., too. You can feel it every time there is publicity about repression, stacked court trials, fixed elections. And then there is also the Jackson-Vanik amendment. This is a painful thing because it was passed during the Soviet period. It seems to me it is hardly applicable anymore. Everybody would be better off if it was repealed.

I know that there are irritating aspects to the relationship, but, after all, we did manage to get rid of a huge stock of nuclear missiles on both sides. Who would have thought that this would happen during the height of the Cold War?

When I was in Moscow 10 years ago for a Victory Day celebration, I attended a reception at the U.S. Embassy. I was taken around the new building, which I had not visited before, and what do I see? Russian citizens working in the military section, dealing with contacts and equipment that we were making available to Russia. To see Russian employees working inside the embassy was totally unexpected.

Events are slowly and uncertainly bringing us toward more normal relations, but I do expect a lot of unpleasant things along the way. Painfully and slowly, with a lot of problems on both sides, Russia is becoming a normal country. I never thought I would live long enough to see such a trend. I think about the Cold War and compare it with current events to see the distance we have traveled.

People in Russia are beginning to lead normal lives, and I find that more important than any tension involving Washington and Moscow — which gradually simmers down in any case. I am optimistic.

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