

How General Parks Got to Know Russia Better

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A powerful Russian president at odds with a "lame duck" U.S. president in his second term is not just a current affair. It happened once before, more than 50 years ago, and I suspect my grandfather, U.S. Lieutenant General Floyd Lavinius Parks, played a hidden role. Parks was a frequent golfing companion of President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

By the late 1950s, Eisenhower was struggling to find his way diplomatically at the dawning of the space race with the Soviet Union. Then, as now, there were battles between Russia and the U.S. over the Middle East, and important thermonuclear weapons negotiations were underway. Time has revealed some of the backstage maneuverings engaged in by both countries during this period. Perhaps by reflecting on the past, informed citizens from both countries can minimize misunderstandings today.

Throughout his professional career, my grandfather's ties with Russia were strong. When he arrived in Berlin in 1945 as a U.S. commander, he bestowed a U.S. Legion of Merit medal

on Russian General Sergei Kruglov. General Vasily Sokolovsky presented Parks with the Russian equivalent, the Order of Kutuzov, upon his departure. During the Cold War, my grandfather learned the fine art of army public relations and was responsible for keeping military secrets out of the newspapers within the U.S. and away from the hands of the "enemy," which at that time was, above all, the Soviet Union.

In the summer of 1958, Parks participated in the 37th World Shooting Championships in Moscow, a simple sporting event designed to promote goodwill among nations. I have always surmised, however, that there was more to the story. It is likely that back-channel negotiations were involved. At the time of Sputnik, Eisenhower promised not to have direct talks with Russia on space controls. It is now known, however, that Vice President Richard Nixon had ties to Russian intelligence via journalist Frank Holeman and Yury Gvozdev, a KGB officer in Washington. Like Nixon, Parks had the experience and qualifications to operate as a go-between.

Despite Nixon's informal ties to Russia, it's likely that Parks more faithfully represented the will of his president while in Moscow. Parks was a soldier, not a politician, and knew how to take orders. Unfortunately, Eisenhower's true intentions in 1958 were secret. His strengths lay in a long-term strategic approach, and absolute secrecy was required for his nuclear policy. If peace and detente were the underlying goal of Parks's trip, then it appears to have ended in failure. The subsequent difficulties between the two countries are well known.

On Sept. 11, President Vladimir Putin wrote in a New York Times op-ed that there was "insufficient communication" between the U.S. and Russia. I don't think we can ever give up hope that increased information and communication can lead to a decrease in violence. Parks actually fought hard for a reduction of unnecessary military secrecy within the U.S., which by its very nature undermines its own democracy and its diplomatic capacities abroad.

There is a wonderful Parks quote from an interview he gave to Richard Hottelet on CBS in July 1945: "You always want to remember one thing: The Russians are a proud people with a great record of accomplishments behind them. ... The answer to all this is get to know the Russians better and vice versa."

Perhaps it's worth noting that by then, U.S. General Omar Bradley had already taken uranium from the Russian zone, and that Stalin had wiretaps placed in President Harry Truman's quarters for the Potsdam negotiations. But the quote remains true today.

The story of Parks belongs to both countries, and making friends with our collective past can only help us lead one another into a more peaceful future.

John Strain has been researching his grandfather for over a decade.

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