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A Foreigner's Guide to Surviving Victory Day

Practical tips on navigating WWII conversations with Russians

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Teachers, Businessmen and Students of the Moscow expat community! You are about to embark on the Great Crusade, through which we must endure once per year.

Yes, my friends, Victory Day is upon us.

Each year, Russians dedicate an entire weekend to celebrating their victory in the Second World War. And each year, it is one of the best weekends in Moscow. Nuclear missiles are paraded through the streets, fireworks shrapnel rains down on the embankments, and the bars are packed.

But Victory Day weekend is also one of the most perilous in Moscow. Russian patriotism reaches feverish heights, making it difficult to avoid talking about World War Two. Or, as your Russian interlocutors will no doubt insist on calling it, the Great Patriotic War against fascism.

This can lead to undesirable outcomes, such as lost friends, breakups, and/or bar fights.

Luckily for you, foreigner, most conversations you have with Russians on WWII will be highly predictable. This puts you at a distinct advantage, as you can prepare in advance to hold the line at clubs, parks, and craft beer bars across town this weekend.

But why ruin the holiday, frantically running Google searches with a beer in your hand? We've done the work for you. Just keep this handy guide accessible on your phone, and consult as needed. You can thank us later.

Related article: How Russian Authorities Hijacked a WWII Remembrance Movement

Who Won The War?

Most conversations with Russians on the topic of World War II will begin with the question of who actually won the war. Chances are that the average Russian will be infinitely more concerned with naming a single winner than you are. If you are an American, they will justify bringing this up by claiming Americans don't respect Russia's sacrifices in the war.

The easiest way to deal with this is simply to insist that Americans are taught the war was won through the combined effort, and sacrifice, of the Allied Powers, which included the U.S., the UK, France and the Soviet Union.

What you are really talking about here is not so much who *won* the war, but who paid the highest price. Almost every Russian family was affected by the war, and the experience has left deep historical scars.

At least 20 million Soviet citizens died during the war, so you cannot win this argument. Respecting the scale of Russia's casualties during the war is key to maneuvering through these encounters. If you had a family member who served on any side, it helps to mention that. If you are lucky, you can end the WWII discussion with a toast to the Allies and the fallen.

Lend-Lease

No battle plan survives first contact with the opponent; you must be prepared to be challenged on a few additional points. Odds are, the second round of the debate will be sparked by a Russian accusation that the United States didn't do enough to help the Soviets battle the Nazis, or that Washington somehow delayed its arrival in Europe to weaken Moscow in the long-run.

Take a deep breath, and approach this methodically. Russian historical education and state propaganda has for decades downplayed the contribution of the United States to the war in Europe. That the Soviets alone saved the world from fascism is a narrative that has become Russia's national idea. The government exploits this masterfully to generate domestic

support.

The first thing to do is mention the famous Lend-Lease Act of 1941. The United States and its allies began shipping critical warfighting materials to the Soviet Union, reeling from a surprise Nazi invasion.

Western tanks, airplanes and guns were important — though historians generally agree they didn't help much until around 1943 — but the real benefit of Lend-Lease came in the form of critical food supplies, boots and clothing for soldiers, and communications equipment. In short, Lend-Lease improved Red Army supply logistics significantly — a key to winning wars.

War, All Over the World

The Lend-Lease discussion, while important, can be an endless exercise. You will need more than that to get through a WWII discussion with Russians. There are three additional points you need to make: The war with Japan, the Battle of the Atlantic, and a massive strategic bombing campaign over Europe.

You may be accused of not knowing enough about the Eastern Front in WWII. This is the ideal time to remind Russians that the primary enemy of the United States in the beginning of the war was Japan. America suffered a surprise attack in December 1941 — one that decimated the Pacific Fleet. Time and resources were needed to rebuild what was lost, so the U.S. could engage Japan's navy on the high seas.

It was not until September 1943 that American troops landed on the European continent. This was less a conspiracy against the Soviet Union, and more of a logistical problem. The U.S. needed time to transport a million men across the Atlantic, as well as the tanks and other military hardware required for the invasion of occupied Europe.

Transport was complicated by German U-boats operating in the Atlantic. In what was the longest single campaign of WWII, the Allied navies battled the German Kriegsmarine for control of the seas. Supply transports were sunk by the hundreds before the Allies finally broke the German navy, clearing the way to Europe (and allowing more convoys to travel to Russia).

Meanwhile, the United States and the UK were engaged in the largest aerial campaign of all time: the strategic bombing of Europe. This was an economic exercise, with fleets of high-altitude bombers putting constant pressure on key German industrial targets. Nazi tank manufacturing and fuel production suffered deeply, giving the Allies superiority later in the war.

Final Battle: The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact

It is difficult to predict how your defense of America's contribution to the war effort will play out. If you've done it right, you have engaged in a cultural bonding exercise and both parties leave with greater understanding of the other. This is the happy ending. But not everyone will reach a happy ending.

If you are extremely unlucky, there is one, final controversy you may encounter. I am, of

course, talking about the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact.

For those who don't know their history, the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact is one of the Second World War's greatest controversies. This German-Soviet non-aggression pact was signed in 1939, and at face value could be justified. After all, other nations had signed non-aggression pacts with the Nazis. In a secret provision of the deal, however, Germany and the USSR agreed to divide Poland in two.

Russians will insist that the pact has been mischaracterized, and insisting otherwise will be fruitless. Unless you are Polish and have an axe to grind, you should avoid conversations about the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact at all costs. It is simply a no-win scenario.

And with that, we wish you good luck over the holiday weekend. This guide represents some of the main arguments you may encounter, but there are naturally other possibilities. And if you decide to go on the attack, consider quizzing your Russian friends on U.S. war trivia: Who was Chester Nimitz? What happened at the Battle of Midway? Why save Private Ryan?

While these games can be fun, it is important to understand that Russians crave respect more than anything else. Show respect, listen to what they have to say about the war, and try to teach them something about your country's perspective, too. Do this, and you will make it through Victory Day.

God speed, soldier!

Disclaimer: The author of this story is of Polish descent. His grandfather fought with the Red Army after being imprisoned in a Gulag near Perm from 1939-1941.

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