

David Ramseur, *Melting the Ice Curtain: The Extraordinary Story of Citizen Diplomacy on the Russia-Alaska Frontier*. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2017. xviii + 307 pp. Photographs, maps, endnotes, select bibliography, appendix, index. \$29.95 (paper).

Scanning *Melting the Ice Curtain*, I was struck that the 1988 Friendship Flight was being observed and researched by such a young man. Born in 1954, David Ramseur was decades younger than his counterpart citizen diplomats working in other parts of the USSR during the 1980s and 1990s. Although Alaska was close to the USSR, it was to a part of the country less in the public eye than Western Russia, where Moscow and Leningrad attracted most of America's citizen diplomats.

Secondly, I was struck by how each of the American citizen diplomacy groups worked largely in isolation from each other. I started the Center for US-USSR Initiatives in 1983, the year the Korean Airliner 007 was taken down by the Soviets in the Kamchatka area. This was just three years before the Alaskans started making citizen overtures. Reading the book, I saw names I had long forgotten, such as the Alaskan Peace activist Dixie Belcher, the Beyond War group located in Palo Alto, and the American Society. Our isolation was not intended; it was just that our work was so all-consuming we did not have time to interact with others. There were so few of us and the field was so vast that it took everything we had to get our own work moving forward.

Third, I am grateful that Ramseur was a young journalist with a passion for healing the world's challenges so that he could dive into this work that was beginning to develop in far-away Alaska where Soviets and Americans practically touched each other physically but had had no contact with each other. I am the oldest and longest citizen diplomat in the whole of America. I can truthfully say that *Melting the Ice Curtain* is the most complete and authentic account of the work of any of the citizen diplomacy organizations that were active in the 1980s, 1990s, and into the 2000s between the two countries. No other book has the kind of broad data collected in one place as does Ramseur's history of events between Alaska and Russia.

For those of us who have worked as serious citizen diplomats, we have seen the largest nation in the world crumble into despair and helplessness. The collapse of the Soviet Union was great for us in the West, but not for the Russians who had to either perish or eventually figure out how to survive—they had to somehow totally reinvent themselves. Many perished in this process, particularly the elderly; to date I have not seen an estimate of how many.

The author and I have different views of how Russia has emerged out of this utterly devastating period. I have less respect for the young oligarchs, for Nemtsov in particular (I was so impressed with him when he came from Gorky). I was not impressed with the "freedoms" the super privileged had, particularly investor Bill Browder's role in the new Russia. I have been quite impressed at the role of Vladimir Putin in finally putting Russia in a track to make it successful today and consistent with Russia's thousand-year conditioning.

But these aspects matter not a whit in the big picture. All of us come from different perspectives, admire and reject different aspects of many things in Russia today. All countries are in evolution or devolution, and it seems to me that we in America need to be more observant of what is happening to our own democracy and future rather than regaling Russia and Putin for not being a carbon copy of the U.S.

David Ramseur has given us the best history of any of those of us who worked between the two countries in the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

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