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ON PAGE C-1

WASHINGTON POST  
26 December 1984

# A Bookseller With a Select Clientele

## Rockville Store Stocks 90,000 Volumes in Russian

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The warehouse storage room is dim and full of cardboard boxes and maps of the communist world. A stocky man with a broad chin has just unpacked leather-bound Edgar Allan Poe poem collections and a shipment of paperbacks titled "Cooking for Children." They share a table with "Capital Promotes Imperialist Expansion," the latest from the Soviet Union's foreign minister, Andrei Gromkyo.

But what makes this place special is that from poetry to political science, all the tomes are in Russian.

For two decades, high-ranking diplomats, working-class emigrants, government analysts and college students have hunted for treasures in this 12,000-square-foot Rockville warehouse that experts on the Soviet Union say is the largest Russian-language bookstore in the United States.

State Department Sovietologists, Defense Department experts and, in all likelihood, Central Intelligence

Agency employes, peruse the books that come from the Soviet-Union to the Victor P. Kamkin Bookstore, just north of Randolph Road near Rockville Pike.

"It certainly would not be erroneous to draw the conclusion that we do business with them," said Patti Volz, a CIA spokeswoman. "But I can't confirm it."

Being the largest disseminator of Russian literature, as well as what is often referred to as Soviet propaganda, makes the store a curiosity to some. The proprietors have responded by shunning media attempts to publicize their story and by guarding their customers' identities.

Politics, said the owners, is not sold with the merchandise.

"We have very good customers," said coowner Elena Kamkin, 71, a White Russian who emigrated to the United States in 1949.

"I will never give [information] about whom we sell to," she said. "I will never talk about it. This is the cus-

tomer's privilege. Universities, government, everybody buys books."

With 90,000 titles on everything from political terrorism to home remedies for the new housewife, the bookstore outstocks the shelves of The Book Annex in Georgetown (40,000) and even the Barnes and Noble store on Fifth Avenue in New York City (80,000).

"It's a golden dream of any person who knows Russian," said Vadim Bytensky, a Russian chemist

who lives in Toronto and visits the store each time he is in town. "It's one of the best bookstores, even if you include Russia itself."

Jim Shoemaker of the State Department's Soviet desk said professional Soviet aficionados shop there for everything from spy novels to technical manuals. "I've bought a lot of books there myself," he said. Shoemaker's latest find is a Russian-Buryat dictionary, published exclusively in the Soviet Union, and one of the 1,200 dictionaries Kamkin's offers. This dictionary translates a language spoken just along the Mongolian border.

Ninety percent of Kamkin's business is in mail orders from the Unit-

ed States, Canada and Australia, said coowner and manager Anatoly Zabavsky.

One-third of the sales are language textbooks, but the Boston and Cleveland public libraries, which serve Russian populations, are also loyal customers, he said.

The collection is as broad as the warehouse—with its faded blue tile facade—is large.

An English translation of "Laser Physics" sits on the floor, next to "The CIA in Latin America." Encyclopedias on ballet are stacked next to those on flowers and birds. Important political debates—dialectical materialism discussed by Marx, Lenin and Stalin, and "Militarism in Peking's Policies"—share the store with glossy coffee table books on Russian churches.

The military section—an aisle of technical works, memoirs of famous combatants and such collections as the 1984 edition of "The Artillery Division in Battle"—sells well, Zabavsky said. Since April, the U.S. Defense Supply Service, which makes purchases for the Army and Air Force libraries at the Pentagon and bases in the Washington area, spent \$1,333 on Kamkin's books, said Richard Walker, who handled the orders.

Kamkin's is a convenient backup for U.S. government agencies, which usually buy books directly from the Soviet Union, said Shoemaker. "It's a lot like the Library of Congress," he said. "You don't go there too often, but it's nice to know it's there."

It was a circuitous route that led Victor P. Kamkin to Rockville. Shortly after the Russian Revolution, Kamkin's family escaped to China. There he met and married Elena and started a bookstore outside Peking. After the Communists came to power there, the two fled to San Francisco; they moved to D.C. in 1952, where they did business for more than a decade before moving to the suburbs. Victor Kamkin died of a heart attack in the Rockville bookstore in 1974 at age 72.

Selling Russian-language books has attracted misguided attention for the business on occasion. In the mid-1960s, a local right-wing radio station, "Life Line," launched a broadcast attack on what it called "a large Red propaganda center in the very heart of the city," according to press accounts at the time.

To stay out of politics, the owners said, they try to keep the store

out of the limelight. "We always kept a low profile," said Zabavsky, whose worn cowboy belt and frequent use of American colloquialisms adds to the distance he wants to put between himself and the turns in U.S.-Soviet relations. "We buy directly from the Soviet Union. They offer, we buy and we resell. It's a purely capitalist approach."