

The “unknown” Moscow-80 torch – an Olympic mystery

By Oleg Vorontsov

The Belorussian wrestler Alexander Medved. He won three Olympic titles in succession from 1964 to 1972, the first in the world to do so. In 1980 he lit the Olympic fire in the Minsk Dinamo Stadium. Photo far right: The special torch from Minsk was presented to Medved by the Organising Committee.

Photos: ITAR-TASS/Vladimir Meshevich



What do historians like most of all? Perhaps it is a mystery. Investigations with conspiracy and secret or unpredictable results which change the order of history. The story I would like to tell hardly changed the legacy of mankind, but still deserves to be explained.

For a long period of time, historians and collectors believed only one design of torch was used for the 1980 Olympic Torch relay to Moscow. All historical publications, books, and articles used photos of this torch. It was originally planned that the torch would be manufactured by the Japanese company, Mizuno, but in fact it was eventually made “in house” by the Soviets. There were 6200 torches produced. In photos from ceremonies held in Moscow, Leningrad, Minsk and Kiev, we saw athletes holding the flame at local ceremonies. One thing became clear. Some of them carried a different design of torch. It emerged that there were two different types and both of them were official.

This story begins when I acquired archives of Boris Tuchin many years ago. He had been chief engineer of the 1980 torch relay. His collection consisted of hundreds of documents. These ranged from local maps for the torch relay to important organising documents. They even included his handwritten notes for a speech at the Communist party meeting in the factory where he worked. Without any doubt, his records form the best source for the complete story of the 1980 Moscow Olympic torch.



Oleg Vorontsov | *1962. Ph.D. From 1992 till 2014 his primary business was related to the Olympics and sport marketing, now an IT business. Vorontsov is a member of the International Olympic Memorabilia Federation (1993-2001); author of various publications on Economics, Olympic history and memorabilia, and, also, literature and poetry. He received the bronze medal Olympihilex-92, silver Olympihilex-96; Medal of Honour at Olympihilex-2002.

In May 2002 I published an article about the 'ordinary' Moscow torch which explained the main reasons why it had been produced locally in the USSR instead of by Mizuno. It detailed how a prototype had been created in less than a month. It also noted the varieties of Olympic souvenirs produced to celebrate the torch relay. Along with those archives, I also acquired an unusual torch which did not resemble those seen in most photographs. This continued to puzzle me until I saw a book written by Conrado Durántez about the history of the torch relay (*La Antorcha Olímpica*, 1987, published in Spanish, French and English).

On the front page was a photo of Sergey Belov, the Soviet basketball gold medallist who was the final torch bearer. He was shown running at the Lenin (Luzhniki) Stadium at the Opening Ceremony with "my" torch. I couldn't believe it! At that time the Internet was by no means as developed as it is now. It proved very difficult to find the necessary information. But I knew it was just a question of time. This time is now!

Let me first present you the facts, before coming to some conclusions. I would like to illustrate my research not only with photos, but with Internet links, so you can judge for yourself.

During the 1980 Games, Kiev, Leningrad and Minsk were used as sub centres for the football tournament. In addition, Tallinn staged the Olympic sailing regatta. In each of those cities, an Olympic flame was lit in a special ceremony.

There are now many photos of Sergey Belov at the Opening Ceremony itself on Internet websites. Although the text is in Russian, this website¹ shows six different photos with this unusual torch.

At the ceremony in Leningrad, 1980 cross country skiing gold medallist Yevgeny Belyayev ran the last final metres to light the cauldron.

Another link² depicts the Olympic flame arriving in Leningrad by train. It also shows the flame being carried in an Olympic lamp. 15 of these were produced in all. There are also photos of local dignitaries carrying the Olympic lamp at the railway station. The picture of Belyayev shows him with the "special" torch in Leningrad's Kirov Stadium. It is the same design used in Moscow during the Opening Ceremony.

Alexander Medved – torch bearer in Minsk

Triple Olympic wrestling champion (1964, 1968 and 1972) Alexander Medved was selected to light the cauldron at the stadium in Minsk. This link³ offers detailed information about the transportation of the flame from Moscow to Minsk and about the ceremony at Dinamo Stadium in Minsk.

On another site⁴, there is a wonderful and extraordinary report on the torch and Opening Ceremony in

Minsk. It is clear that throughout the day of the arrival of the flame in different locations throughout Minsk, they used the "ordinary" torch. However, there is one photograph where it is possible to see that Medved is bearing a special torch. After lighting cauldron in the stadium, he put the torch into a special metal bucket but the fire from the torch burned a hole in it!

A special torch was also used in Kiev. The torch bearer was 1972 decathlon silver medallist Leonid Litvinenko. Now we are very close to understanding just why they used two different torches in the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games. That day, Litvinenko carried the torch on two separate occasions. He was a bearer during the relay in the city centre and then used a different torch at the stadium. He presented the first of these torches to the Kiev Historical Museum. He kept the model used at the Opening Ceremony for his private collection.

The "ordinary" Moscow torch used liquid gas. However, those used at the Opening Ceremonies used solid fuel which was capable of burning even in water (It can be used by divers). The Organising Committee were determined to avoid unexpected mishaps. To make sure each ceremony would be trouble free, they decided to use a different torch, without any aluminum part at the top (this would probably have been too fragile when lighting the large fire in the cauldron).

The most likely reason that this special torch was introduced was because the fuel would keep burning under any circumstances (heavy rain, strong wind, etc.). There was always the possibility that those used in the general relay might fail unexpectedly.

To illustrate the level of improvisation by Moscow Games organisers, let me tell you another curious story.

Arrival of the Olympic fire at the "Moscow – Hero city" obelisk on 18th July 1980.

Photo: ITAR-TASS/Igor Utkin





In a ceremony in front of the Moscow City Soviet building, the flame was sent on its way to Kiev, Leningrad, Minsk and Tallinn, where the preliminaries in football and the sailing competitions took place.

Photo: ITAR-TASS/Oleg Ivanov

Originally costumes made of paper had been produced for the "crowd scenes" at the Opening Ceremony. However, at the general rehearsal it rained heavily, and the colours ran. In different tailoring shops around Moscow, some 2500 new dresses were produced in one night!

In Tallinn the torch bearer was Vaiko Vooremaa. He was not an Olympic athlete but twice junior world champion in the sport of ice yachting (see Estonian post in the Russian language).⁵

Since the person lighting the cauldron in Tallinn didn't run at all, the Organising Committee of the Olympic Regatta, taking into consideration the small size of the cauldron, decided to use the normal relay torch and not the special one. In the 1980 *Official Report*⁶ there are photos of the Opening Ceremony in Tallinn with the generic panorama of the event.

Another reason might be that, because the athlete was coming by boat to light the cauldron, there was

no time to fire the solid fuel, which needs a special procedure and more time (In the article about the ceremony at Kiev stadium it was mentioned that it took a great deal of time to fire the solid fuel before Litvinenko could proceed with the ceremony).

On this website⁷ there is detailed information about sport competitions in Tallinn. This includes the arrival of the flame in a special lamp on 19th July 1980, the Opening Ceremony on 20th July at the Regatta center on the Pirita river, and the Closing Ceremony on 29th July. Eighteen IOC Members, came for the Closing Ceremony as a part of group, headed by outgoing IOC President Lord Killanin and the newly elected Juan Antonio Samaranch.

And now another interesting fact. If someone views the ceremony of the lighting of the Olympic flame in Moscow (on the Daily Motion website) he will realise that it was Viktor Saneyev, three times Olympic champion in the triple jump, who ran into the stadium carrying the Olympic torch. But nobody saw him lighting his torch from the previous athlete! A gate was opened, he ran in, and the gate was closed. So nobody saw the process.

This was because it took time to light the ceremonial torch. As he reached the flagpole with the Olympic Flag, he passed the flame on to Olympic gold medallist Sergey Belov. That's exactly what spectators and television viewers saw. A description of this ceremony is in the *Official Report*.⁸

The flames for the sub centres travelled from Moscow by train. These were carried in two safety lamps. Two special torches were prepared and delivered for the lighting ceremony in each city (except Tallinn). The solid fuel was provided by Mizuno (I have those boxes in my collection, as well as three cylinders with liquid gas for the normal relay torches). Solid fuel was also used in the lamps.

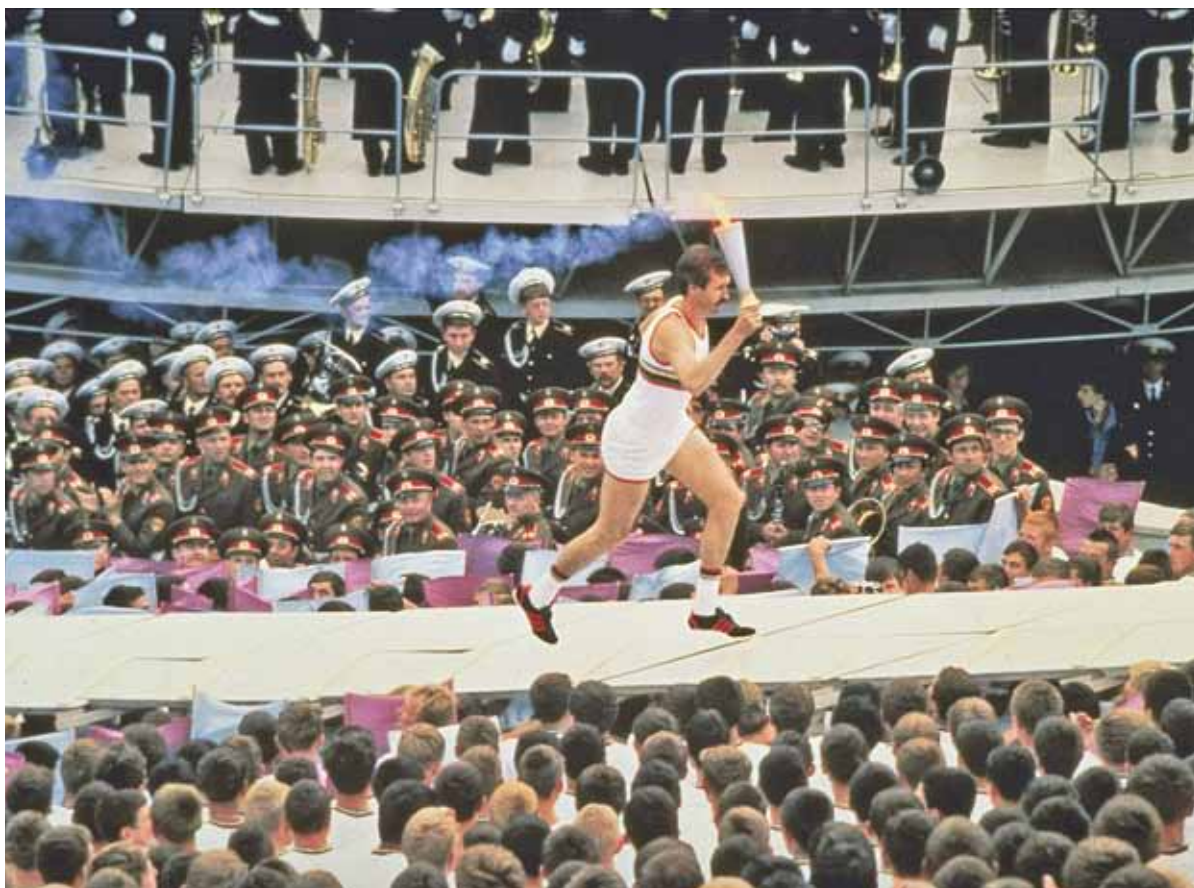
The only mention of the special ceremonial torches is to be found on page 264 of the *Official Report*:

It was first proposed to use pyrotechnic components as fuel for the torch. However tests had shown that the high burning temperature and the build-up of waste called for great care in the use of the torch. This first proposition was only used in the creation of a variant of the torch which was to be carried around the stadiums (20 of this type were produced).⁹

The comparative dimensions of both torches are as follows:

	Height (in cm)	Weight (in kg)
Moscow relay torch*	56	0.75 (without cylinder)
Moscow ceremonial torch	56.5	0.97

* The *Official Report* gives different figures for the relay torch. However, I used figures from my own measurements.



The basketball player Sergey Belov lit the cauldron at the Opening Ceremony in the Central Lenin Stadium (Now known as the Luzhniki). An Olympian from 1968 to 1980, he had won Olympic gold in 1972 and had two World championship golds to his name. He was also a captain in the Soviet Army . He died on 3rd October 2013.

Photo: ITAR-TASS

Summary

1. The 1980 Organising Committee produced 6200 'normal' relay torches and 20 special torches for the Opening Ceremony to light the cauldrons at the stadia.
2. Those 'special' torches were used in Moscow, Leningrad, Minsk and Kiev.
3. The relay torch used a liquid gas system, while the special ceremonial torch used solid fuel. Its basic elements comprised a burner section, a ringed cup and protective screen, made from an aluminium alloy. The torch handle contained the gas reservoir.
4. The special ceremonial torch had no aluminum part at the top in order to avoid heavy burning or possible damage.
5. The holder of the ordinary relay torch is made of aluminum alloy and was designed to hold a container with liquid gas. The holder of the Opening Ceremony torch was made of a different material in brown.
6. The shape design of the special torch is quite similar to the relay torch, especially taking into consideration the yellow aluminum part above the holder. This is the main reason why so many were confused and never speculated about a special torch for the Opening Ceremony.
7. In ten years of investigation I have found seven out of those 20 special torches in museums or private collections.

It goes without saying that today, this special torch is highly collectable. As a matter of fact, it is thought that no example has yet been offered at any Olympic memorabilia auction. I truly hope that this interesting "pedigree" of the ceremonial 1980 torch will serve as inspiration in the continuing quest for as yet "unknown" pages of Olympic history.

* * *

The Russian News Agency ITAR-TASS has been of great help to my investigation and has offered (at a reasonable fee) to publish photos from their archives. Some of them for the first time ever, to illustrate the use of special torches at the Opening Ceremonies of the 1980 Olympics in different cities. ■

- 1 <http://yapet.livejournal.com/227078.html>
- 2 <http://yapet.livejournal.com/193904.html>
- 3 <http://news.tut.by/sport/177596.html>
- 4 <http://yapet.livejournal.com/196431.html>.
- 5 [http://rus.delfi.ee/sport/muudalad/foto-smotrite-kak-35-let-nazad-v-tallinne-zazhigali-ogon-olimpiady-80?id=71948193#!dgs=dgsee-157361:1KnnL2354Yo8d iSJM10-B\).](http://rus.delfi.ee/sport/muudalad/foto-smotrite-kak-35-let-nazad-v-tallinne-zazhigali-ogon-olimpiady-80?id=71948193#!dgs=dgsee-157361:1KnnL2354Yo8d iSJM10-B).)
- 6 *Official Report of the Organising Committee of the Games of the XXII Olympiad*, (in English), Vol. II, pp. 247-249, Fizkultura y Sport, Moscow, 1981
- 7 [http://www.barque.ru/sport/1980/olympic regatta_in_tallinn 1980](http://www.barque.ru/sport/1980/olympic%20regatta_in_tallinn_1980)
- 8 *Official Report*, pp. 290-294
- 9 *Ibid*, 264