



IN MEMORIAM

Nicholas V. Riasanovsky
Professor of History, Emeritus
UC Berkeley
1923 – 2011

Nicholas V. Riasanovsky died on Saturday, May 14, 2011, at the age of 87.

He was America's most influential historian of Russia. Since 1963, most Americans who study Russian history have done so by reading his *A History of Russia* (recent editions have been co-authored with his student, Mark Steinberg). Russian intellectual history, in particular, is unimaginable without his *Russia and the West in the Teaching of the Slavophiles: A Study of Romantic Ideology* (Harvard University Press, 1952); *Nicholas I and Official Nationality in Russia, 1825-1855* (University of California Press, 1959); *A Parting of Ways: Government and the Educated Public in Russia, 1801-1855* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1976); *The Image of Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought* (Oxford University Press, 1985); and *Russian Identities: a Historical Survey* (Oxford University Press, 2005). He wrote on European intellectual history beyond Russia (*The Teaching of Charles Fourier*, University of California Press, 1969; *The Emergence of Romanticism*, Oxford University Press, 1992), and he had planned a book about "the overwhelming congruence between the Nazi ideology and the Nazi performance."

Riasanovsky's colleague and friend, Reginald Zelnik, called him "a Russian- European American." Riasanovsky himself attributed the success of his *History of Russia* to the book's mixed origins. "One way to state this," he wrote, "is to emphasize that my father was linked to the main traditions of prerevolutionary Russian historiography and that I managed to adapt that historiography, and whatever else I learned, to the American and Western scene." He was a European who grew up in China and the United States; a Russian who attended baseball games as religiously as he did the Orthodox mass; an American who, in his own words, was "certainly not Anglo- Saxon or Protestant." He relished a good audience for his stories and enjoyed lunches with his colleagues and students (at Espresso Experience, on Bancroft Way), but he tended to avoid large groups of people and sometimes appeared lost in thought. He spent most of his time in his office, reading, and writing about history. History, he wrote in a 1988 article, represents "people's efforts to do the command of God, and often, earn their own salvation and eternal life in the process. And if we are to speak in secular terms, the situation is even more drastic: the only possession human beings have is history."

Nicholas V. Riasanovsky — or "Nick," as his colleagues and friends called him, "Nikolai Valentinovich," as he was known to Russian- speakers, or "NVR," as I will call him here — was born in 1923 in Harbin, China, into a family of refugees from the Russian Civil War. His father was a legal scholar, his mother a fiction writer. NVR grew up bilingual in Russian and French; his first school was an American YMCA school in China. In 1936, after the Chinese Eastern Railway was sold to Japan, the family moved to Tientsin; in 1938, after the Japanese bombardment, they boarded the RMS *Empress of Asia* and left for America.

NVR graduated from the University of Oregon in 1942 and served in the U.S. Army in Europe during World War II, and received an A.M. from Harvard in 1947. His most vivid memories were of Mikhail Karpovich's course on Russian history, Crane Brinton's on the Enlightenment, Gaetano Salvemini's on the Renaissance, Robert Blake's on Byzantium, and Joseph Schumpeter's on the history of economic theory. In 1947, he won a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford University. In 1949, he defended his D.Phil. dissertation, supervised by B. H. Sumner and Isaiah Berlin, and took up a teaching position at the University of Iowa, where he met his wife Arlene. They arrived at Berkeley in 1957 and never left.

NVR served as chair of Berkeley's Department of History from 1967 to 1969, and as president of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies (AAASS) from 1973 to 1977. He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1987. He received the AAASS Award for Distinguished Contributions to Slavic Studies in 1993 and the American Historical Association Award for Scholarly Distinction in 1995. He was also a trustee of the National Council for Soviet and East European Research. He had close ties to the Graduate Theological Union and was a founder of its Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute, serving as an institute board member from 1986 to 2005.

NVR was prodigiously prolific. The bibliography of his writings, last updated in 1993, lists 239 items, not counting reprints and translations. He never forgot to put copies of his new book reviews in his colleagues' mailboxes: two typewritten pages with an occasional correction in blue ink and a neat signature at the top. All of his drafts, written or dictated, were final. All of his books were written on the same typewriter. He prepared for writing by reading and taking notes. He wrote entire books in his head before committing them to paper. He remembered every book he had ever read.

His work was epic in scope and tone; his view of human affairs was both morally serious and ironically detached. He had a quirky way of stating the familiar and an unaffected way of arguing the unconventional. "In some sense," he told an interviewer in 1996, "I'm very much an individual; here I remember Hans Rosenberg's statement, and I don't know whether he meant it as condemnation or praise, or rather as a description. I'm a rare example of 'people who don't seem to be affected by trends, a person going his own way'. And I think that's correct."

NVR's favorite subjects, from Count Uvarov to Charles Fourier to Prince Trubetzkoy, were remarkable for their hubris and humility, eccentricity and love of order. And so, in his own peculiar way, was NVR. He was irrepressibly, almost boisterously proud of his parents, his upbringing, his books, and his family; but he was wholly sincere when he wrote: "Especially taking into account my opportunities, I cannot claim to have done much. As one of the heroines in Mother's fiction put it, 'my fame is mainly local'." He wore a suit and tie to football games. He might appear shyly reserved one moment and recite an Akhmatova poem the next. (He had a special expression when he recited poetry: self-mocking and solemn at the same time.) He would walk into our kruzhok seminar room, bow stiffly, take off his raincoat, sit down, and reach for the biggest cookie on the tray. He had a firm handshake and a high-pitched laugh. He was spontaneously and unself-consciously generous. He had never met a bad person. Most people he had met were eccentrics of Dickensian proportions.

"As I grow old," wrote NVR in a 1988 autobiographical article, "I am increasingly impressed by another characteristic of history, namely, history as a bid for the survival, for a time, if not for eternity, of the events and record of the past, and with them, of the recorder himself. In this respect the earliest markings on the tombstones or the bragging inscriptions of pharaohs, are already history, even central history." The history that NVR created — in his writings, his stories, and his life, as we shared and remember it — will survive for a very long time. Perhaps for eternity.

Nicholas V. Riasanovsky is survived by his wife Arlene and their three children: John Riasanovsky, of Huntington Beach, California; Nicholas N. Riasanovsky, of Berkeley; and Maria Riasanovsky, of Palo Alto, California. He also is survived by a grandson, Nicholas J. Riasanovsky, and a brother, Alexander V. Riasanovsky, of Tampa, Florida.