In Memoriam: Nicholas V. Riasanovsky

Nicholas V. Riasanovsky (NVR) was born in Harbin, Manchuria on 21 December 1923; he died in Oakland, California on 14 May 2011 at the age of 87. He is survived by his wife of 56 years Arlene and their three grown children. NVR arrived in the United States with his parents, the noted legal historian Valentin and the novelist Antonina, and younger brother Alexander in 1938. From childhood he was fluently tri-lingual in French, Russian, and English. He received a B.A. degree from the University of Oregon in 1942, followed by three years of military service; an M.A. from Harvard in 1947 (under Michael Karpovich); and a D. Phil. from Oxford in 1949 (under Isaiah Berlin). Professor Riasanovsky’s first full-time faculty appointment was at the University of Iowa during 1949-1957. He moved to the University of California at Berkeley in 1957, where he served until his retirement in 1997. NVR was named Sidney Hellman Ehrman Professor of European History in 1969.

Riasanovsky’s long and highly productive academic career was distinguished by numerous grants and awards, as well as a widely acclaimed textbook, seven monographs, dozens of articles and essays, and several hundred book reviews and short pieces. Among his many awards were a Rhodes Scholarship, Fulbright and Guggenheim Foundation Fellowships, and grants from the International Research and Exchanges Board and the National Endowment for the Humanities. He served an extended term, 1973-77, as President of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies; was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences; and received the American Historical Association’s Award for Scholarly Distinction.


Riasanovsky’s work habits were legendary. He did not use a computer, preferring instead the manual typewriter he purchased in Oxford as a graduate student, and never revised what he wrote; the first draft was the final version. 2 That same insouciance was evident in his choice of topics: “I write on what I please, and I think there is no reason to write on anything else.” 3 NVR’s powers of concentration were also remarkable; he claimed, with characteristic precision, that even when he was busy with other matters, if he had a window of 17 minutes, he could accomplish some scholarly writing. 4

For nearly half a century, Riasanovsky’s textbook has been by far the best selling volume in Russian history in the English language. Even with ever increasing competition from a number of recent surveys, it remains the standard for its lucidity, balance, and comprehensiveness. In his monographic publications, Riasanovsky focused on the history of European ideas, especially during the early to mid nineteenth century. While the reign of Nicholas I was at the center of his interest, he was never a narrow specialist on Russia. Indeed, NVR insisted that he was an intellectual historian of Europe and believed that Russian intellectual history could best be understood in that wider context. Two themes of European origin ran through his research from start to finish: Romanticism and utopian socialism.

For Riasanovsky the defining institution of Russian national identity – the third of the major themes in his research – was the Orthodox Church. Beginning with Kiev and continuously thereafter until 1917, he placed it at the very center of the life of Russian society. In his first monograph Riasanovsky observed that while the Slavophiles were not narrow nationalists, they believed that only Orthodox Christians could be truly Russian. Few errors bothered

3) Interview, 221.
4) Ibid., 3-4