

Ralph T. Fisher, 1920–2015

Ralph Fisher, who died on April 4, 2015, at the age of ninety-five, made signal contributions to Russian and east European studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and to the field as a whole. He was professor of Russian history and director of the Russian, East European, and Eurasian Center (as it is now called) at Illinois for nearly thirty years, and he was the first administrator, or secretary, of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies (AAASS, now ASEES) for nearly ten years. These titles can only hint at the extent and productivity of the relationships he cultivated with colleagues throughout the profession and the influence he exerted on generations of undergraduate and graduate students. Nor do they adequately reveal his wide-ranging intellectual interests.

As Ralph put it himself, in his early years he did not seem destined for a career in academe, let alone Russian studies. His favorite subjects in high school in Oakland, California, where he was born and grew up, were physics and mathematics, and he thought of becoming a civil engineer. But his parents' sponsorship of a stay for him for a year in France at the Université de Montpellier brought a serious change of direction. On his return home, in 1938, he entered the University of California, Berkeley, where a major in history and a minor in French literature turned his interests toward international affairs. He also gave much time to student activities on campus, as is clear from his election as president of the Associated Students of the University of California in his senior year. As an ROTC graduate in 1942, he was sent to an infantry training center as a platoon instructor, but the mission that aroused his enthusiasm and absorbed his energy was his assignment to the American China theater headquarters in Kunming, for which he studied Chinese intensively and achieved fluency. His main responsibility in 1945 and 1946 was to observe the Chinese Communists, often in Mao's capital at Yenan, and help write up daily intelligence reports for Washington, D.C.

After his discharge from active duty in the summer of 1946, he chose to study Russian and Soviet history, a response to a growing trend in international studies, to his own sense that this relatively new field was open to exploration and innovation, and to his experiences in China. He enrolled in the master's program at Berkeley and wrote his thesis under the direction of Robert J. Kerner on the beginnings of the Comintern. He then decided on Columbia University as the place to work on a PhD in history because he liked the interdisciplinary approach fostered by its Russian Center. He studied with, among others, Geroid T. Robinson and Philip Mosely, and it was Mosely who recommended him for his first job in the Russian field as a research assistant to Margaret Mead for her project on Soviet attitudes toward authority. His next job was at Yale University, teaching the undergraduate survey in Russian history during George Vernadsky's temporary illness. This was followed by a full-time instructorship, beginning in 1952, when he was already at work on his doctoral dissertation about the Soviet Komsomol, a subject inspired by his assistantship with Mead. He completed the manuscript in 1955, and Columbia University Press published it in 1959 as *Patterns of Soviet Youth: A Study of the Congresses of the Komsomol, 1918–1954*. With an assistant professorship at Yale, he and his wife, Ruth Meads, whom he had met at Berkeley, began to raise a family.

Ralph always said that Yale was the ideal place to begin a career in teaching Russian history. The students were bright, the library met most of his needs, and his colleagues were devoted to teaching and scholarship. With one of them, Sergei

Pushkarev, as chief compiler, and Vernadsky as senior editor, he assembled a comprehensive collection of sources on Russian history intended especially for teachers of survey courses. The project grew well beyond its original limits and was published in three volumes in 1972 by Yale University Press as *A Source Book for Russian History from Early Times to 1917*. The glossary was also expanded, and Yale published it in 1970 as a separate volume, *Dictionary of Russian Historical Terms from the Eleventh Century to 1917*.

Ralph accepted a tenured position at the University of Illinois in 1958 to teach Russian history. By his own admission, he looked forward to a normal career of teaching and research, and he inaugurated an ambitious schedule of classes on the political, economic, and social history of Russia and the Soviet Union. But soon after his arrival in Urbana-Champaign, he became deeply involved in organizing and promoting Slavic and east European studies at Illinois and further afield. He was the founder of the Russian and East European Center, as it was initially called, which began to function in 1959 with the full support of the university administration and grants from the U.S. Office of Education. Under Ralph's directorship (until 1987) and that of his successors, it became one of the leading centers in the country. Ralph gave particular attention to building the library's holdings in the field as essential for attracting outstanding faculty and graduate students, and thanks to his enthusiasm and perseverance and to the support of the library directors and staff, Illinois's collection became one of the strongest in the United States. The same combination of expertise and devotion led to the establishment of the Slavic and East European Library, in 1970, which served as a hub for research on campus and beyond. Ralph was always concerned about sharing scholarly resources, and at his initiative the Summer Research Laboratory on Russia and Eastern Europe took form in 1973. Its main purpose, as Ralph envisioned it, was to make Illinois's holdings easily available to researchers from this country and abroad. The success of the enterprise may be measured by the large numbers, in one year two hundred, who were thus drawn to the campus. The Slavic Reference Service, established in 1976, grew out of the laboratory as a means of providing continuous support for research activities. While several of these projects were getting underway, Ralph was asked by the Joint Committee on Slavic Studies of the ACLS and SSRC to establish a membership organization to support the *American Slavic and East European Review* and the field in general. He set to work with characteristic vigor and efficiency, and as secretary of AAASS between 1960 and 1969, he oversaw a going concern whose members rose from 900 to 3,700.

In all these varied undertakings, Ralph's role was crucial. He of course had the necessary administrative experience and knowledge of the field, but his success owed, in the first place, to his humanity and integrity. He was always sensitive to the needs and wishes of others, and thus he always thought of the center, the library, and the laboratory as cooperative ventures. Yet, everyone knew who the chief architect was. Such accomplishments and such modesty are rare things. Ralph will be greatly missed.

KEITH HITCHINS

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign
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Jane T. Hedges, 1951–2015

A good editorial hand is invisible, clearing away typos and inelegant or imprecise phrasings, of course, but also helping authors sharpen their thinking and refine their arguments. All that is left on the page is the best work the writer was capable of all