

GEORGE VERNADSKY, 1887–1973

George Vernadsky, one of the honorary editors of the *Slavic Review* and since 1965 the honorary president of its sponsoring Association, died June 12, 1973, at the age of eighty-five. He was actively engaged in research and writing right up to the last day of his life.

Vernadsky had long been regarded as our country's greatest living historian of Russia and as a world leader in his specialty. He was in the first group of scholars to receive one of the \$10,000 Special Prizes awarded by the American Council of Learned Societies to "scholars of great distinction" in the humanities, and for many years was the only historian of Russia to be so honored. His fame was based largely on his published works, for he was a shy man who did not seem to like speaking in public and who avoided most professional conferences. By the time of his death he had written or edited twenty-five scholarly volumes, and his articles and shorter pieces numbered well over one hundred. (Those up to 1963 are listed in the Festschrift volume *Essays in Russian History*, edited by Alan D. Ferguson and Alfred Levin.) His contributions ranged chronologically across the whole sweep of Russia's history, from earliest times to the Soviet period. In contrast to the modern tendency toward extreme specialization, he conducted scholarly excursions into almost every major aspect of Russia's development, be it legal, intellectual, social, religious, literary, diplomatic, or economic. In the course of his investigations he suggested answers to many of the puzzling questions of Russia's past, especially in the medieval period. Although some of his hypotheses were highly controversial, his approach was speculative rather than combative, and he was always ready to examine new evidence and opinions.

Vernadsky came from one of the solidly established families of prerevolutionary Russia's educated class. He was born August 20, 1887, in St. Petersburg. His father, Vladimir Ivanovich (1863–1945), was a university professor of mineralogy and member of the Academy of Sciences who helped to establish the fields of geochemistry and especially biogeochemistry; his former office in Moscow is maintained as a museum in his honor. Vernadsky's mother was Natalia Egorovna Staritskaia, from a family prominent in the Poltava region. On his father's side, Vernadsky's grandfather, Ivan Vasilievich (1821–84), was a professor of political economy at Kiev University and at the Pedagogical Institute in St. Petersburg, while his great-grandfather Vasilii Ivanovich (1760–1838)—the son of an Orthodox priest in the Chernigov region—was a military doctor in Suvorov's army.

During the first thirty years of his life Vernadsky was able to obtain an exceptionally solid preparation for scholarship despite the troubled times. His studies at Moscow University were interrupted by the disorders of 1905, but he profited from the opportunity to visit the universities of Berlin and Freiburg. In 1911 he (as well as his father) left Moscow in protest against the arbitrary actions of Minister of Education Kasso, but this had the beneficial result of bringing him to the University of St. Petersburg. His experience at the two leading universities of the empire meant that both Kliuchevsky and Platonov, as well as Lappo-Danilevsky, Presniakov, and many other masters of prerevolutionary Russian historiography, were among his teachers and friends.

The next ten years brought many changes. He left Petersburg in October of 1917, taught briefly at the University of Perm, and then, threatened with arrest as a former supporter of the Constitutional Democrats, moved beyond the reach

of the Cheka to the new Taurida University in Simferopol before leaving Russia for good. His first home abroad was in Athens, where he worked as a librarian and extended his knowledge of Byzantine materials. Early in 1922 he moved to Prague. There he taught Russian legal history and became associated with those scholars who stressed the Eurasian nature of Russian civilization and statehood. He became very active in scholarly publication, and in 1927 was invited to Yale.

He was then forty. While continuing to publish scholarly studies in Russian, French, and German, he quickly turned to the writing of popular surveys in the language of his new homeland. His one-volume *History of Russia* (1929), translated into several foreign languages and issued in revised editions for more than three decades, became one of the most widely known general texts in its field. That and his other English-language volumes of the 1930s, including his *Political and Diplomatic History of Russia* (1936), helped to make him one of this country's handful of recognized specialists in Russian history before World War II. He had taught as a visitor at Harvard University in 1931–32, and in 1949 he did the same at Columbia University. With his encouragement the Yale University library greatly expanded its Russian holdings. Graduate students came to study under his guidance. The Vernadskys spent almost all of their time in New Haven and environs from 1927 until their deaths, traveling very little except for a short yearly migration to their modest dacha near North Haven. Vernadsky's research and writing were his life.

The work for which he will be most remembered did not begin to appear until Vernadsky was fifty-six. This was his monumental study, *A History of Russia*, which traces Russia's development down to the late 1600s. It was published by the Yale University Press in five volumes from 1943 to 1969. Meanwhile he carried on several other projects, including the three-volume *Source Book for Russian History from Early Times to 1917*, of which he was the senior editor; it appeared as recently as 1972. At the time of his death he was working on his own memoirs and on various essays in the history of Russian scholarship. His uncompleted manuscripts, along with all his personal notes and letters, were bequeathed to the Archive of Russian and East European History and Culture at Columbia.

Over the years, many of the younger generation of American scholars in Russian history, both Vernadsky's own former pupils and others, came almost as if on pilgrimage to consult him. Whether his visitors were old friends or newcomers, established scholars or mere beginners, Vernadsky was unfailingly hospitable to them and interested in their ideas. They valued his advice, for he had a masterful command of minute details as well as of complex interpretive questions, and he was always gentle and encouraging in his criticism and suggestions.

Fortunate in his own adaptation to the United States, Vernadsky was generous as well as unobtrusive in serving as an official sponsor or financial guarantor for more than a score of others who sought refuge here. One of these was a fellow teacher from Prague days, the historian Sergei G. Pushkarev, who was a close scholarly collaborator and counselor of Vernadsky's from 1949 onward.

Two Nina Vladimirovna were important in Vernadsky's life. One, his wife, née Ilinskaia, died in 1971 after some sixty-three years of marriage. The other, his sister, Dr. Toll, is a psychiatrist in Middletown, Connecticut. She and her daughter Tatiana are the only surviving members of the immediate Vernadsky family.

George Vernadsky will be long remembered for his rich contributions to Russian historiography. He will also be remembered as a teacher and friend. The ill wind that drove him from his native country brought good fortune to our own. The priest at his funeral referred to him as a "saintly soul," and Mr. Pushkarev was right in observing that in this case the phrase was more than merely rhetorical. To many of those whose lives he touched, Vernadsky was an inspiring embodiment of the finest traditions of Russian culture.

RALPH T. FISHER JR.
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

REINHARD WITTRAM, 1902–1973

Reinhard Wittram, *ordinarius* professor emeritus of world history at the University of Göttingen, died in Merano on April 16, 1973. He was born on August 9, 1902, in Bilderlingshof near Riga, and studied history in Jena and Tübingen, where in 1925 he received his doctorate under the supervision of J. Haller. From 1928 to 1939 he taught in Riga at the German Herder-Hochschule. There he gave special attention to the history of his Baltic homeland. His *Geschichte von Livland, Estland und Kurland* appeared in 1939; the third edition (1954) bore the title *Baltische Geschichte*. Moving with other Germans from the Baltic states, he taught in 1940–45 at the University of Posen, and when he had to flee found a new location in which to work at Göttingen. There, in 1955, he secured the chair of East European history, then—as befitted his breadth of interests—in 1959 the chair of world history. Thereafter he concentrated chiefly on Russian history, problems of nationalities (*Das Nationale als europäische Problem*, 1954), and, to an increasing extent, questions of the theory of history. However, he remained interested in the past of his homeland. Besides the newer problems of its history we are indebted to him for the exposition of cultural history based on the story of his own family, *Drei Generationen* (1949) and the collective work *Baltische Kirchengeschichte* (1956). Wittram was one of the founders of the Baltic Historical Commission and its chairman for twenty-two years, having organized twenty-six "Baltische Historikertage" in Göttingen; therein he vigorously advocated cooperative work with Estonian and Latvian historical researchers in exile.

Wittram's chief work in the realm of Russian history is the monumental biography *Peter der Grosse: Czar und Kaiser* (1964), on which he worked for almost twenty years. Changes in the conception of history and the widespread turning away from history after 1945 led him to the observations he set forth in the collections of lectures and articles entitled *Das Interesse an der Geschichte* (1958), *Zukunft in der Geschichte* (1966), and *Anspruch und Fragwürdigkeit der Geschichte* (1969). A penetrating observer of all the changes of our time, Wittram took part in the dialogue with Marxism and was committed to the reform of the universities. His importance as a teacher and the number of his pupils were great.

E. AMBURGER
Giessen