Obituary

John Albert White (1910–2001)

A tribute by Professor John J. Stephan, University of Hawaii, USA

On 8 August 2001, John Albert White passed away in League City, Texas, six days before his ninety-first birthday and six decades after his debut as a historian of Russia in Asia.

White was born on 14 August 1910 in Providence, Rhode Island, to parents of Danish and French Canadian ('Le Blanc') antecedents. As an only child, he lost his father at the age of 4 and was taken by his mother to California, where she too passed away after remarrying, leaving the boy to be raised by his stepfather and grandparents. Following graduation from a public high school in 1929, he enrolled in the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). He first learned about Asiatic Russia in the lectures of Professor ('Prince') Andrei Anatol’evich Lobanov-Rostovsky (1892–1979), scion of an aristocratic family, grandnephew of a foreign minister, army officer, and civil war veteran. Lobanov-Rostovsky was a protégé of Sir Bernard Pares, who several years previously had persuaded the young émigré to leave a modest but secure position in a London insurance firm in favor of an untenured post in the History Department of a university on the American West Coast. Lobanov-Rostovsky was no stranger to the Pacific Rim, for he had grown up in China and Japan where his father served in a succession of consular postings. While eschewing the Eurasianist vogue among First Wave intellectuals, Lobanov-Rostovsky believed that Russia’s past could be viewed through an Asian as well as European prism. The ‘eastern approach’ informed his lectures and inspired the volume, Russia and Asia (London, Macmillan), published in 1933, the year of White’s graduation.

Uncertain about his own career and mindful of Depression-era realities, White accepted a teaching post in a Carmel, California high school, a decision that postponed graduate studies. In 1938, he enrolled in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Columbia University, and read nineteenth-century German and Russian history under the supervision of Geroid Tanquay Robinson (1892–1971), a pioneer in the field of Slavonic studies. Awarded the MA degree in 1940, White returned to the West Coast with an eye for a Russian history Ph.D. program with an Asian component. At the University of California, Berkeley, he was interviewed by Robert Joseph Kerner (1887–1956), founder of the Northeast Asia Seminar and editor of a 1939 Northeast Asian bibliography that embraced Siberia, the Russian Far East, Manchuria, Mongolia, Korea, and Japan. Kerner invited the freshly minted MA to become his student, but White hesitated, ultimately electing to work with a historian of Russia at Stanford,
Harold Henry Fisher (1890–1975). Nearly a half-century later, White recalled his choice. Kerner was thought to prolong the apprenticeship of his graduate students in order to utilize their expertise and labour. Fisher had no such proprietary proclivities. Moreover, Fisher chaired the Hoover Institution of War, Revolution and Peace, parent organization of the Hoover War Library (as it was then called) which had a unique collection of primary materials collected in Russia by the library’s founding director, Professor Frank Alfred Golder (1877–1929).

White’s Ph.D. studies were interrupted and reshaped by the Second World War. Early in 1942, he applied for and was selected for intensive Japanese language training at the US Naval Language School in Boulder, Colorado. Upon completing the eighteen-month course, he received a commission, attended a Military Government School in Washington, and questioned Japanese POWs in a recently captured naval base in the Palau Island Group of the west Carolines. White returned to Stanford late in 1945, equipped with Japanese language skills and looking for a dissertation topic about Siberia with a Japan connection.

In his dissertation, completed in 1947 and published as *The Siberian Intervention* (Princeton University Press, 1950), White achieved an uncommon degree of comprehensiveness, incorporating Soviet, White Russian, British, American, and Japanese sources deposited in the Hoover War Library. The inaccessibility of Soviet diplomatic and party archives and tendentiousness of Soviet published sources made his treatment of Bolshevik aims and strategies somewhat perfunctory. While deftly navigating historiographical shoals, he was not immune from the temper of the times, notably in a somewhat oversimplified portrayal of Japan’s motives. Scholars subsequently introduced new sources and offered more details, but *The Siberian Intervention* remains the most serviceable general treatment of the subject.

In 1947 White accepted a position in the Department of History at the University of Hawaii, inaugurating an association that endured for forty-seven years. Harvard had offered him an assistant professorship, but Hawaii’s associate professorship with tenure held out a prospect of security that appealed to a 37-year-old with a wife and child. Moreover, a Russia in Asia program had been initiated at the University of Hawaii in 1937 by Klaus Mehnert (1906–1984), whose own contributions to Russian history included works with an Asian dimension. Mehnert’s curricula had lapsed upon his departure in 1941 but the university retained his personal library in addition to acquisitions made under his supervision. White revived Mehnert’s courses on Russia in East Asia and Russia in the Pacific, adding graduate seminars. He expanded acquisitions not only of Russian vernacular materials but also of sources in East Asian languages on Siberia, the Russian Far East, Manchuria, and Northern Japan. These efforts formed the background of the establishment in 1986 of a Center for the Soviet Union in the Asia Pacific Region (renamed Center for Russia in Asia in 1992), directed during the 1990s by White’s student Dr. Robert B. Valliant. White’s labours also bore fruit in East Asian Russian imprints collected by his student Patricia Polansky, the university library’s Russian bibliographer. In 2002 an
annotated catalogue of this collection was published by the Russian State Library, with introductions by Polansky and by Vladivostok historian Dr. A. A. Khisamutdinov: Russkaia pechat’ v Kitae, Iaponii i Koree: Katalog sobrania Biblioteki imeni Gamil’tona Gavaiskogo universiteta (Moscow: Rossiiskaia Gosudarstvennaa Biblioteka, 2002).

White’s later works about Russia in Asia dealt with the sixty years between the Crimean War and the First World War. In The Diplomacy of the Russo-Japanese War (Princeton University Press, 1964), he illumined the international repercussions of Imperial Russia’s advance into and partial retreat from Manchuria, Korea, and Sakhalin. In Transition to Global Rivalry: Alliance Diplomacy and the Quadruple Entente, 1895–1907 (Cambridge University Press, 1995), he reconstructed the transformation of Anglo-Russian rivalry under the influence of Germany’s and Japan’s emergence as imperial powers.

The Cold War discouraged White from setting foot in Siberia or the Russian Far East but added an element of piquancy to his sole visit to the USSR. In 1960, while attending the XVth World Conference of Orientalists in Moscow, he found himself unwittingly involved in a momentary lapse from choreographed decorum. The lapse occurred moments after he had delivered a paper on the provocative gambits of court favourite Bezobrazov on the eve of the Russo-Japanese War. A Soviet specialist on Japanese history, A. L. Gal’perin, rose as if to ask a question, collapsed, and expired on the spot. Amid a stunned silence, E. M. Zhukov, a Party-certified authority on Far Eastern international relations, strode over to White and earnestly assured the American professor that he would not be held responsible for the incident.

While conducting research in London during the early 1960s, White had the good fortune to meet Violet Conolly (1900–1988), who was instrumental in his being granted access to diplomatic papers kept in the Foreign Office, as distinct from those archived in the Public Record Office. Dr. Conolly conducted him to the ministerial repository, pulled several folios, placed them on a table, and invited White to inspect them at leisure, with one proviso: that he refrain from examining anything beyond the red ribbons that demarcated material less than fifty years old. On 24 June 1977, they met again in London under less formal circumstances at Casa Mario on Duke of York Street. Over a leisurely lunch, she astounded White with the revelation that fifty years earlier she – together with Klaus Mehnert – had studied Russian history under Otto Hoetzsch.

Violet Conolly and John Albert White were pioneers of Siberian studies in the west, as were Terence E. Armstrong, Elizabeth Lindgren, and Raymond H. Fisher. They expanded the perimeters of knowledge while coping with obstacles unimaginable to those whose professional experience is confined to the post-Soviet era. The context of this scholarly achievement is thus a vital part of their individual and collective legacy.