Obituary

LYDIA T. BLACK (1925–2007)

Dr. Lydia T. Black, Professor Emerita of Anthropology at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, died on 12 March 2007, at age 81, in Kodiak, Alaska. Dr. Black had been the preeminent authority on Russian America, devoting her career to documenting the interactions of Alaska Native and Russian cultures. Her Ph.D. dissertation (1973) and her first scholarly article (1972), though, dealt with the Nivkhi (Gilyak) people of the Russian Far East.

Dr. Black was born in Kiev in the former Soviet Union on 16 December 1925. Her childhood was tainted by the dictatorships of Stalin and Hitler. After her father had been executed by Soviet authorities in 1933, she was declared an “enemy of the people” by the Soviet government. During World War II, she was kidnapped and conscripted into forced labor by German forces. At the end of the war, she found herself in Munich, where she met and married fellow Soviet refugee Igor A. Black. In 1950, they emigrated to the United States, where they lived in New Jersey, Michigan, Texas, and Massachusetts. Upon her husband’s premature death in 1969, Dr. Black—as a single mother of four children—resumed full-time studies, leading to a B.A. in history from Northeastern University. This was followed by a Master’s degree in anthropology from Brandeis University in 1971 and a Ph.D. from the University of Massachusetts-Amherst in 1973. In 1973, she accepted her first academic position at Providence College, Rhode Island, while also serving as staff member of Brown University’s Arctic Institute. Dr. Black moved to Alaska in 1984 in order to be closer to her research interests, accepting a position at University of Alaska Fairbanks. At Fairbanks, she quickly became one of the most prominent and productive faculty members of the Department of Anthropology, supervising numerous M.A. theses and four Ph.D. dissertations. After her retirement in 1998, she contributed her skills to St. Herman’s Theological Seminary in Kodiak, Alaska, and volunteered as a teacher of Russian history at Saint Innocent’s Academy.

Dr. Black’s most recently published book was Russians in Alaska, 1732–1867 (University of Alaska Press, 2004), a concise and accessible
history of the Russian period in Alaska. Anóoshi Lingít Aaní Ká/Russians in Tlingit America: The Battles of Sitka, 1802 and 1804 (University of Washington Press, 2007), co-edited with Professor Richard L. Dauenhauer and Tlingit poet Nora Marks Dauenhauer, about the Russian-Tlingit battles of 1802 and 1804 at Sitka, Alaska as described by Tlingit oral tradition and contemporary Russian historical documents, will be published later this year. Among her many older books is Aleut Art (first published in 1982; second, revised edition 2003), which is representative of her career in providing a comprehensive look at both the techniques used to create and the symbolic meaning of a variety of pre- and early-contact Aleut arts and crafts. She was also a translator of international reputation, making available important Russian-language sources from the nineteenth century—such as Hieromonk Gideon and Iakov Netsvetov. She was the author of close to 70 books and articles appearing in publications as diverse as Natural History, Arctic Anthropology, and Studies in Soviet Thought and was a contributor to various exhibits and conferences on the Arctic, including the Library of Congress’ Meeting of Frontiers, the American Museum of Natural History’s Jesup Centenary Congress, and the Smithsonian Institution’s Crossroads of Continents.

Dr. Black appeared in several documentaries and was a regular guest lecturer in the United States and abroad (e.g., England, Canada, Russia, and Japan); she also was one of very few outside scholars to supervise a thesis at Oxford University. In 1992, she was elected a foreign member to the Center for the Study of Russian America and Russian-American Relations, Institute of History, Russian Academy of Sciences. She served as chairwoman of the international committee for the birthday bicentennial exhibit celebrating Saint Innocent of Alaska in 1996. In 2001, Russia awarded her, among others, the Order of Friendship, honoring her contribution to promoting cross-cultural understanding between Russia and America. A highlight in her retirement was an invitation to speak about Saint Herman of Alaska at Valaam Monastery during its 2003 conference celebrating the completion of renovations there. In addition, she was the recipient of the Alaska Anthropological Association’s Lifetime Achievement Award in 2000 and of the Alaska’s Governor’s Lifetime Achievement Award for the Humanities in 2005. Dr. Black is survived by four daughters, six grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren.

Peter Schweitzer
University of Alaska Fairbanks