

Seymour Becker

In 2004 Seymour Becker (1934–2020) began his response to the query “Why Russian history?” with the following recollection:

Exactly thirty-five years ago I first visited Italy, and Florence, after working for nine months in the archives and libraries of Moscow and Leningrad on the research for my second book. . . . That was when I first asked myself, where did I go wrong? Why Russian history? Why not Italian history? . . . The food, the climate, the joie de vivre, the art and architecture, the landscape—in none of these respects can Russia hold a candle to Italy. So what drew me to Russia, and do I really regret it? Of course not!¹

In many private conversations over the years, Seymour continued adding colorful details that made the Moscow–Florence (read Russian/Soviet versus European) contrast even more striking. For example, he remembered how in 1967, with other readers at the Lenin library in Moscow, he queued for bluish chicken being sold that day in the library’s lobby; or how before leaving on research trips to the USSR, he packed medicines and other deficit goods for people he did not know personally. Unlike many historians of his generation, Seymour was never motivated by the left or right ideological sympathies that were uncritically projected onto the Soviet Union, and he always stood above the Pipesonian/revisionist divide in his field. Rather, from the very beginning of his career as a historian, Seymour understood Russia as a normal participant in the global drama of history, a European empire that simultaneously exhibited various developmental patterns, thus complicating the assumed notions of west and east, Europe and Orient, and empire and nation. This is how he resolved the Moscow–Florence dilemma for himself in scholarship and in university teaching. (After completing his dissertation at Harvard under Richard Pipes in 1963, he taught Russian and world history at Rutgers University until his retirement in 2004.)

Becker’s dissertation was published in 1968 as *Russia’s Protectorates in Central Asia: Bukhara and Khiva, 1865–1924* (Harvard University Press, 1968). The book examined “the motives and methods for the extension of Russian control over the Khanates, the post-conquest policies followed by the imperial government toward its two protectorates, the reasons for those policies, difficulties they encountered, and the fate of Bukhara and Khiva at the hands of the revolutionary successors to the tsars” (xii). This was a major step in rediscovering Russia as an empire, a hierarchically organized polity practicing differentiated subjecthood and experimenting with regimes of diversity management—a clear outlier at the time of its publication.² The book’s

1. Seymour Becker, “Why Russian History? (2004),” *Ab Imperio* 21, no. 3 (2020): 191–93.

2. The only indirect precedents were: Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism, 1917–1923* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964) and the

methodological context was set by the modernization paradigm as applied to the era of New Imperialism, but Becker's original analysis resulted in a highly nuanced approach to Russia's role in the world expansion of European powers. Unknowingly anticipating the post-1990s developments in our field, in 1968 Becker argued that "Russia's role in the world-wide drama [of modernization and New Imperialism] has been a unique one—that of both antagonist and protagonist" (xii). The acknowledgment of Russia's "empireness" beyond the formal name of the state, the interrogation of its place as both the object and the subject of westernization, and its characterization as a self-reflective colonial regime in the "convulsions of modernization" continue to resonate with the most recent scholarship.³

Becker's second book, *Nobility and Privilege in Late Imperial Russia* (Northern Illinois University Press, 1985), among the finest pieces of social history, was written when the social history approach was still firmly associated with the revisionism of the early Soviet period and with the substantiation of the structural social-political crisis on the eve of World War I, which presumably made the Revolution inevitable.⁴ Becker's intervention complicated such structuralist explanations and therefore was not enthusiastically received by many social historians working in a structuralist Marxist paradigm or by literary scholars influenced by Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*. Both groups perceived the postreform Russian nobility as an objectively declining social group. However, nothing is more short-lived than historiographic fashion. After what we have learned in the 1990s from American, Russian, British, German, and Japanese social historians, *Nobility and Privilege* has emerged as a groundbreaking contribution to the modern history of social estates in the late imperial period. Alfred Rieber's 1989 seminal essay "The Sedimentary Society" has set new parameters for the debate by presenting early twentieth-century Russian society as atomized and segmented. Instead of a stable social structure, Rieber painted a social mosaic of overlapping divisions based on legal estates, classes, cultures, and generations.⁵ *Nobility and Privilege* not only resonated with this image but suggested an answer to the question that Rieber's article left unresolved: was the state of fragmentation a sign of disintegration and decay or a healthy reflection of ongoing effective modernization? Having assembled and carefully contextualized various economic data and professional statistics, Becker traced the evolution of nobility from an outdated estate into several modern social groups such as professionals, bureaucrats, and entrepreneurs, thus exposing the futility

much less known Georg von Rauch, *Russland: Staatliche Einheit und Nationale Vielfalt: Föderalistische Kräfte und Ideen in der Russischen Geschichte* (Munich, 1953).

3. This explains why the book was republished in 2003: Becker, *Russia's Protectorates in Central Asia: Bukhara and Khiva, 1865–1924*, 2nd ed. (London, 2003).

4. On the latter topic, see Leopold Haimson's seminal essays: "The Problem of Social Stability in Urban Russia, 1905–1917 (Part One)," *Slavic Review* 23, no. 4 (Winter 1964): 619–42 and "The Problem of Social Stability in Urban Russia, 1905–1917 (Part Two)," *Slavic Review* 24, no. 1 (Spring 1965): 1–22.

5. Alfred J. Rieber, "The Sedimentary Society," *Russian History* 16, no. 2–4 (1989): 353–76.

of a rigid structuralist approach to historically evolving social categories. Becker's book called for treating Russian history as "part of a pan-European phenomenon" and de-exoticizing Russian social patterns vis-à-vis the assumed "Western" normativity (3).

By the early 1990s, Becker had embarked on a new project, eventually titled: "The Borderlands in the Mind of Russia: Russian National Consciousness and the Empire's Non-Russians in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries." In pathbreaking articles published in the *Central Asian Survey*, he began by revisiting Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, thus once again pioneering a debate that would soon be picked up by the most dynamic historians of the younger generation.⁶ Becker's articles stressed the need to read Said's *Orientalism* through the prism of Russian imperial experience, exposing the limitations of Said's model while making sense of Russian imperial and colonial strategies. Later the focus of his project shifted to Russian intellectuals' and politicians' conceptualizations of the western and southern borderlands of the empire as reflecting their attempts to connect the idea of the modern state to that of the Russian nation. The drafts of the book's nine chapters, published posthumously in *Ab Imperio*, allow us to speculate that its main ambition was to explore the emergence of the Russian national political project counterintuitively—not as a response to the rising nationalisms of the Poles, Finns, or other "minority" groups, but on its own terms and in a broad west European intellectual and political context that informed and defined the episteme of the Russian imperial elite.⁷ Becker's unfinished book can best be described as an archaeology of the nationalizing empire, the startling story of how a form of sociopolitical imagination produced by anti-autocratic rebels—in France, Britain, the United States, and then in Russia—first connected modern ideas of the state and sovereignty to nation and then came to be embraced by conservative monarchs bent on preserving autocracy during the last two reigns in imperial Russia. In essence, from the standpoint of the existing consensus in the field, it leads to a surprising hypothesis of Russian nationalism as the first modern nationalism in the empire: centered on the imagined community still to be arranged by means of social engineering rather than on the precedent of historical (and hence prenatal) statehood.

I believe that Seymour Becker's real place in our field is yet to be appreciated. He never conformed to any "school" and hence was never particularly influential in the sphere of academic politics, but his books

6. Becker, "Muslim East in Nineteenth-Century Russian Popular Historiography," *Central Asian Survey* 5, no. 3–4 (1986): 25–47; Becker, "Russia between East and West: The Intelligentsia, Russian National Identity and the Asian Borderlands," *Central Asian Survey* 10, no. 4 (1991): 47–64. See also articles by Becker: "Contributions to a Nationalist Ideology: Histories of Russia in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century," *Russian History/Histoire Russe* 13, no. 4 (1986): 331–53; "Russian Historiography between East and West: Some Afterthoughts in 2002," *Ab Imperio* 3, no. 1 (2002): 465–69; "How Nineteenth-Century Russian Historians Interpreted the Period of Mongol Rule as a Largely Positive Experience in Nation Building," *Ab Imperio* 7, no. 1 (2006): 155–76; and others.

7. See the chapters in: *Ab Imperio* 21, no. 3 (2020): 203–57; no. 4: 193–253; *Ab Imperio* 22, no. 1 (2021): 185–237.

withstand the scrutiny of time particularly well. Is this not the best legacy of a historian—to remain *relevant* long after he is gone?

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William G. Wagner

William G. Wagner (1950–2021) joined the faculty at Williams College in 1980, after studying Russian language and culture at Haverford College and earning a D.Phil. from Oxford in Modern European History. At Williams, he served as Department Chair, Dean of the Faculty, Director of the Williams-Exeter Programme at Oxford, and Interim President, all the while continuing to teach in the classroom and pursuing his scholarship.

As a teacher, Wagner excelled in the seminar format afforded to faculty and students by a liberal arts college. He asked thoughtful questions, listened attentively, provoked discussion, and guided the class towards a complex appreciation of historical questions. He was a careful and insightful reader of student writing, returning papers full of marginal comments and summary evaluations. An innovative teacher, he introduced a course on the Bolshevik feminist Alexandra Kollontai in the late 1980s at a time when Russian women's history was just emerging as a new and exciting field.

In tandem with his teaching interests in Russian women's history, Wagner devoted his scholarly endeavors to uncovering critical aspects of Russian women's experiences. His magisterial and pioneering *Marriage, Property, and Law in Late Imperial Russia* (Clarendon Press, 1994) won the prestigious Barbara Heldt Prize for Best Book in Women's Slavic Studies in 1995. In this work, Wagner focused on issues that directly affected Russians' daily lives—especially family, property, and inheritance—through the lens of the new juridical structure and activities of the Senate Cassational Departments after the 1864 reforms. He analyzed complex legal debates over family law, including proposals to circumvent the Russian Orthodox Church's strictures against divorce, and for improving property and inheritance rights for both women and men. Wagner found that the Cassational Departments' judges were able to apply their liberal-modernizing ideas in the legal cases they adjudicated, even as they encountered resistance from imperial bureaucrats who delayed reforms of the written law until the 1910s. Wagner's book helped to set the stage for new research on the growth of civil society and the impact of divorce settlements outside the church on all women (but especially those in the lower ranks) as well as ongoing analysis of liberal challenges to the legal and political status quo within late imperial Russia.

Joining forces with Robin Bisha, Jehanne M. Gheith, and Christine Holden, Wagner worked tirelessly for years on a path-breaking anthology of annotated primary sources that appeared in 2002 as *Russian Women, 1698–1917: Experience and Expression* (Indiana University Press). A remarkable achievement involving more than forty contributors and translators, *Russian Women* continues to spur both student and faculty research and writing. Wagner's

chapter on “Religion, Piety, and Spiritual Life” reflected his growing interest in Orthodox women’s piety and the lives of female monastics, about which little was known at the time of the sourcebook’s publication.

Since 2003, Wagner has filled that historiographical gap by publishing nine seminal book chapters and articles on the religious and social history of female Orthodox monasticism in general, and a biography of the Nizhnii Novgorod’s Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross in particular. Together these articles span the period from the mid-eighteenth century’s devolution of monasteries to the final dissolution of monastic institutions and exile of its members in the 1930s. These events served as bookends to the phenomenal growth of women’s Orthodox communities and convents in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Wagner’s most recent publication appeared this past year in the acclaimed journal *Church History* 89, no. 2.

Wagner’s forthcoming *Orthodox Sisters: Religion, Community, and the Challenge of Modernity in Imperial and Early Soviet Russia* (Northern Illinois University Press, an imprint of Cornell University Press) represents the culmination of his prodigious work on monastic women. Based on deep study of Russian archives and mastery of a vast secondary literature, *Orthodox Sisters* is a biography partly of a single convent in Nizhnii Novgorod, partly of all Orthodox convents in Nizhnii Novgorod diocese, and partly of Orthodox convents and their inhabitants throughout the empire. The book also provides an important history of the Nizhnii Novgorod region. In Wagner’s analysis, the sisters’ religious beliefs and practices firmly intertwine with the social, political, and economic forces that historians associate with modernity and modernization. In beautiful prose, Wagner chronicles not only monastic women’s religiosity, but also their agency, creativity, leadership and managerial skills, and service to the larger community. His sophisticated quantitative analyses uncover the changing patterns of geography, demography, social origins, and literacy in female monasteries. Along the way, Wagner provides a brilliant comparative perspective, demonstrating how Russian Orthodox nuns and convents were both similar to and different from their counterparts—Catholic women’s orders and Protestant diaconates—in Europe and North America. This definitive work is a tour de force and a product of love.

As a teacher, scholar, and friend, Bill Wagner’s legacy persists in the lives and work of countless former students and colleagues in the fields of Imperial Russia, Orthodox Christianity, and Russian women’s history. We have each benefited from Bill’s astute commentary, professional encouragement, humility, gentleness, warm friendship, and unflinching optimism. Bill’s presence at conferences, his insightful and sympathetic criticisms, and his friendship have been models of collegiality. His influence will live on through his groundbreaking scholarship, successful students, and grateful colleagues.

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