
NEWS OF THE PROFESSION

ROBERT LEE WOLFF, 1915–1980

Robert Lee Wolff, who died on November 11, 1980, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, was one of this country's leading specialists in the field of East European studies. Born in New York City, the son of Samuel Lee Wolff, professor of English at Columbia University, he graduated from Harvard College in 1936. The following year he took his master's degree at Harvard and became a teaching fellow. His academic career was interrupted by World War II, and from 1942 to 1946 he served as chief of the Balkan Section of the Research and Analysis Branch of the Office of Strategic Services. In 1947 he obtained his doctorate and joined the history faculty of the University of Wisconsin. Returning to Harvard in 1950 as associate professor, he was promoted to full professor in 1955 and became Coolidge Professor of History in 1965.

Wolff's teaching encompassed nearly the entire area of Eastern Europe from the Byzantine and Russian empires to the Soviet Union and the modern Balkans. He offered such innovative courses as "Russia and the West," a study of differing mentalities, and "The Ottoman Empire and Its Successors," a survey of the entire Near East (in the old sense of the term), given in cooperation with other specialists. His skill as a teacher is evident in the enormously successful textbook, *A History of Civilization*, of which he was coauthor.

Wolff's intellectual curiosity was limited by neither geography nor discipline, and he divided his research and publication between two quite different fields. In history he was preoccupied with the Latin Empire of Constantinople. It was the subject of his massive, fifteen-hundred-page dissertation and of a series of articles, published in *Speculum* and other journals, that illuminated obscure areas and proposed solutions to controversial questions. The latter studies were brought together in 1976 in a Variorum reprint edition entitled, *Studies in the Latin Empire of Constantinople*. Wolff also wrote *The Balkans in Our Time*, first published in 1956 and reprinted in 1967 and 1974 with supplementary chapters, the most authoritative account in English of Southeastern Europe in the decade after World War II. All these writings are distinguished by an exhaustive command of the sources in a variety of languages and by a direct, lean prose style.

Wolff was also an ardent student of Victorian fiction, and at the time of his death he was engaged in compiling a five-volume catalogue of his own extensive collection. In 1961 he lectured at Yale, and in the 1970s he gave a course at Harvard on the Victorian novel. Among his numerous writings on the subject are *The Golden Key* (1961), a study of the fairy tales and novels of George MacDonald, *Gains and Losses* (1977), an investigation of religious faith and doubt in the Victorian novel, and *William Carlton, Irish Peasant Novelist* (1980).

The wide range of Wolff's interests, his meticulous scholarship, and his high standards of style were constant sources of inspiration for a generation of younger scholars of Byzantine, Russian, and Balkan history. The intellectual stimulation and the friendship he gave will not soon be forgotten nor easily replaced.

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