

WARREN LERNER, 1929-2007

Our dear friend, colleague, and mentor, Warren Lerner, emeritus professor in the Duke Department of History, died recently at the age of 78.

Warren was a pillar of the history and Slavic studies communities at Duke and in the Triangle since he was first appointed at Duke in 1961. During his four-and-a-half decades at Duke, Warren served as chair of the Duke History Department and as a member of the Policy Committee of the Center for Slavic, Eurasian, and East European Studies from its inception. In addition to Warren's extraordinary contributions to the Department of History and CSEEEES, his years of teaching for the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies and Focus programs and for the Department of Slavic and Eurasian Studies forever changed the shape of those units, their faculties, and students.

An author of many notable books and articles on 20th century Soviet history, Warren Lerner was a leading scholar and teacher who supervised dozens of doctoral students, many of whom now teach at universities throughout North America. To the thousands of undergraduate and graduate students he taught during his long tenure at Duke, Warren was a gifted, generous, engaging teacher.

For those of us who had the privilege to work with Warren Lerner, he is simply irreplaceable. Warren was a generous and kind friend and colleague to so many of us; his impact on our lives will never be forgotten. In the dictionary, next to the word "mensch" you'll see a picture of Warren Lerner. He will be sorely missed.

CSEEEES is delighted to announce the establishment of the Warren Lerner Research Prize in Russian and East European Studies to honor Warren's memory.

Each year CSEEEES will award a cash prize to an outstanding student at Duke University to enable that student to conduct research, especially research abroad, in some aspect of Russian and East European studies.

It is an honor for CSEEEES to extend his legacy further with the creation of this prize.

Anyone interested in contributing to the Warren Lerner Research Prize Fund can send a check made out to Duke University—Lerner Research Prize Fund to CSEEEES at the following address: CSEEEES, Duke University, Box 90260, Durham, NC 27708-0260.

Many of Warren's friends shared their memories of Warren with us and we are pleased to share them with you:

Susan P. McCaffray
Professor and Chairperson
Department of History
UNC Wilmington

When I started grad school at Duke in 1978 Warren Lerner was a towering figure in every way. I had been attracted to Duke because of Warren's work on Radek and early Bolshevism. As it turned out, Radek was probably not the most important think Warren helped me to understand.

My grounding in Soviet history owes so much to his sensibilities that it is hard to disentangle his teaching from my own fundamental assumptions. I can still see the syllabus for that two-semester course in my mind's eye. We started with "The viability of tsarism in the twentieth century." We talked about the "generation of 1914," in which, for Warren, Rosa Luxemburg figured rather significantly (and I learned to think of it, as he did, as "Fran's topic"). We contemplated the Civil War: "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" - still a pretty good way to approach civil wars. Of course we thought a lot about Lenin's choices for expanding and exporting (or not) revolution "at bayonet point," especially where Poland was concerned. Later we considered the relatively new memoir, Khrushchev Remembers, about which Warren liked to say, "he also forgets." I use that line every time I teach Soviet history. Warren required the grad students in the seminar to select a dozen books from his massive reading list and to submit reviews. A lot of us wrote a lot of reviews in the last week of the semester. To this day my standard for an independent study is that students read twelve monographs or the equivalent. I have carried forward a strong sense over a 25-year career that the way he did things was the right way to do them.

I have also tried to impart to students the life lessons all of Warren's students always talk about the most when we bump into each other. Being a historian, as wonderful and important as that is, must be part of a whole life. When I got turned down by IREX the first time I applied, right after getting married, Warren's comment was, "Do you have any idea how many people who go on IREX wind up divorced?" I didn't, but, of course, I did learn that later on. I watched people really struggle, both in Russia and after they returned, because their advisors obviously expected them to sacrifice everything for their dissertations. But I had an advisor who met his son's school bus every afternoon. For a young person, maybe especially for a young woman, embarking on an academic career in the early '80s, that was a very liberating lesson. It was a lesson about keeping things in perspective.

I also learned from Warren what it means to be loyal to one's students. You have to keep paying attention to them. You have to advocate for them behind their backs. If you're doing it right, students of other advisors are probably jealous. I know my colleagues were jealous of me.

It was at Warren and Fran's house that I attended my first Passover Seder. Danny Lerner's was my first Bar Mitzvah. I remember the Lerner home as a warm and wonderful refuge. It is fixed in my memory forever. One of my earliest memories of the living room there was a meeting to plan the (then Fall) meeting of the Southern Conference on Slavic Studies. I think Sam Baron was there, and Vasa Mihailovich, and Vlad Trembl. I attended my first SCSS meeting as a go-fer in 1978. Warren, Betty Wheeler, Cliff Fouts and the others, launched something back in the '60s that thrives still. As all of the fans of the Southern always say, there is a friendliness that permeates the organization. The founders gave it that.

I have too many stories and memories to share them all here. Plus, I must refrain from sharing certain things, such as what Warren thought of his advisor, G.T. Robinson, and the hilariously garbled messages my roommate wrote down whenever Warren called.

In the end, you can't really pay back the people to whom you owe the most. As the movie title says, you have to pay it forward. Warren, thank you, and Godspeed.

Michael Rouland
Assistant Director, Havighurst Center for Post-Soviet Studies
Visiting Assistant Professor,
Department of History
Miami University
Oxford, OH

I am sorry to hear about the loss of Warren Lerner.

There is no doubt in my mind that I decided to pursue Russian history while I was sitting in Warren Lerner's popular lectures of "A History of Socialism and Communism." His passion for his subject and his gift for teaching were a genuine inspiration.

Edward A. Tiryakian
Professor
Department of Sociology
Duke University

That is startling and disconcerting news! Warren was a pillar of International Studies at Duke, and we had a deep respect for one another that went back to the 1960s when I first came to Duke, and Warren was already a well-established figure. He greatly enjoyed teaching and for many years before and after the 1989 Soviet implosion his courses gave Duke students the needed historical materials to make sense of the Communist and post-Communist world. It was good to see him at the monthly Campus Club wine-tasting group, where we could continue our conversations on world affairs. We really will miss him.

Mark R. Beissinger
Professor of Politics
Princeton University
President, American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies

I was very saddened to hear the news today from Beth Holmgren that Warren Lerner had passed away. As an undergraduate at Duke in the early 1970s, I was a student in several of Warren's classes. Indeed, I would say that it was Warren, perhaps more than any other teacher, who was responsible for igniting my passion for Soviet Studies at the time.

I recall how there were few seats in his classes on the history of communism (2 semesters), even though the course was held in one of Duke's largest classroom auditoria on East campus. The whole classroom sat spellbound at his lectures on the nineteenth-century German social-democratic movement, Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin and the Bolsheviks, and the rise of Stalinism. His brilliant sense of humor and impeccable knowledge of detail made his classes among the most exciting I ever took. I remember vividly one of Warren's final examination questions. He simply walked over to the blackboard and wrote a single word--"Trotsky?"--expecting us to figure out what the question meant and then to provide an answer to it. It's a story I often tell to my own students today.

I rarely kept up with Warren after I left Duke for graduate school. But I am incredibly grateful to have had him as a teacher. Few teachers have the ability to engage students and ignite their

creativity in the way that Warren Lerner was able to do. Please pass on to his family and colleagues my sincerest condolences.

Sharon Kowalsky
UNC PhD, 2004
Assistant Professor, History
Texas A&M University-Commerce

I am very saddened to learn about the passing of Warren Lerner. Although I did not know him well, he went out of his way to help me by stepping up at literally the last minute to sit on my dissertation defense committee. I had never worked with him before, but he read my dissertation quickly, carefully, and thoroughly, and made a very positive contribution to the defense. I will always be grateful to him for that service. I think this speaks volumes for his generosity as a teacher and scholar and his commitment to his profession. We will certainly miss him.

Michelle Newman
Master of Arts in Liberal Studies, Duke University '08

I just heard the news about Dr Lerner and wanted to send on a message.

Going to Dr Lerner's class was like going to story time. I took a class from him called "The Communist Century" through the MALS Program, and we met once a week for about 2.5 hours. Each class meeting was like a brisk walk through time. All the students would gather around the table and just listen to him talk. His description of events was so vivid it seemed like you were hearing it from someone who was there and loves to tell the tale to any who will listen. I don't think I ever took notes in the class, as I was always captivated by what he had to say next. I am sorry I only had the opportunity to take one class from Dr Lerner - he was an amazing teacher and will be sorely missed.

Dr. Alison Rowley
Department of History
Concordia University

I'm still reeling from the news about Warren but wanted to share a couple of tidbits that epitomized him.

I was Warren's last Ph.D. student and, during a meeting, I asked him about his dissertation. He told me that he hated the topic since it was one that his advisor had assigned to him, so he did not own a copy of his dissertation and swore that he would never do the same thing to anyone who worked with him. Then he pointed to a special shelf in his office and proudly said "those are the books written by my students though."

I was also reminded of the man who, as a junior faculty member, turned down a full-year award to do more archival research in Russia since one of his children had just been born. These were the days when families were not included. His colleagues were astonished but Warren always said it was more important not to miss a year of his child's life. He loved his grandchildren with

the same intensity. One of my favorite memories of him is watching him walk down the hallway in the Carr Building with one of them. The child was just learning to walk and was holding onto one of Warren's fingers. Warren simply towered over him but there was so much gentleness in the way he was helping the baby to walk.

Clifford Foust

Warren's passing fills me with great sadness ... and not a few wonderful memories. It does seem to me to be just yesterday that Warren came down from New York/Boston to join John Shelton Curtiss in one of the most successful and congenial odd couples in Slavic history (or for that matter history in general) in the country. How many were the days, months and years that he and I shared in striving to advance Slavic studies in the Triangle and to build collaborative effort in our institutions? So many rich moments, such as the conference in December 1966 at the Quail Roost Conference Center in Rougemont, a gathering of southern journalists and fertile Russian scholars - Ernest Simmons, Herb Levine, Darrell Hammer, George Gigian, Alexander Dallin, and Duke's own Wladyslaw Kulski. Warren was in every way one of a kind.