

IN MEMORIAM

Roy R. Robson

Christine D. Worobec ¹ and Amy Nelson²

¹Northern Illinois University, Email: worobec@niu.edu

²Virginia Tech, Email: anelson@vt.edu

Roy Raymond Robson, age 60, passed away on Monday, January 29, 2024, after a long struggle with cancer. He will be remembered as a distinguished scholar, inspiring teacher, loyal friend, devoted family member, and beloved husband. Roy was a gentle soul whose quick wit, big heart, insatiable curiosity, and infectious sense of humor endeared him to all. A scholar of Russian history and religion, Roy earned advanced degrees from the University of Pittsburgh (MA, 1987), and Boston College (PhD, 1992). In 1997, after three years as Assistant Professor at Fayetteville State University, he joined the faculty of University of the Sciences in Philadelphia, where he taught history and humanities for eighteen years. Since 2015, he had been Professor of History and Religious Studies at Penn State University, The Abington College, serving as Division Head for Arts and Humanities, 2015–18.

Roy's scholarship, comprising three books and dozens of articles and book chapters, is notable for its breadth and elegant prose. With support from Fulbright, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Council of Learned Societies, IREX, and John Templeton Foundation, Roy excelled at making Russian history accessible to wider audiences and situating the Russian Orthodox faith within the broader fabric of global Orthodox Christianity.

Roy's first book, *Old Believers in Modern Russia* (NIU Press, 1995), filled a significant historiographical gap by chronicling how imperial Russia's Old Believers coped with the challenges of modernity as they suddenly made the transition from being restricted to "tolerated" religious communities as a result of the 1905 Act of Toleration. Raised in a diaspora Old Believer community in Erie, Pennsylvania, Roy (baptized as Andronik Osipovich) had an insider's, but nonetheless critical, view of the demands of modernity and secularism. Through an examination of the fledgling Old Believer press in the short window between 1905 and the October Revolution of 1917, he reconstructed vibrant Old Believer parish communities founded upon shared cultural practices and a system of egalitarian mutual assistance. Indeed, they became the envy of bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church who sought greater lay involvement and investment, which ironically came only with the Bolshevik assault on religion. While Old Believer traditionalists remained skeptical of the state, clinging fiercely to their beliefs and liturgical practices, Roy demonstrated how a significant group of liberals adapted to the modern state's free marketplace of religions by modifying some ritual practices and building modest but beautiful churches. Icons were never hung on iconostases, but rather lay upright on shelves so they could be removed easily in case persecution raised its ugly head again. The liberal Old Believers Roy described also engaged in various social reform movements, championing temperance and organizing cooperatives.

Subsequently, Roy turned his attention to Old Believer communities in the diaspora. He traced the histories of active communities in the Baltic States by way of archival documents across the interwar period and into the times of Soviet occupation, Nazification, and Soviet expansion, showcasing adaptation, reforms, and transnational experiences through migration. He tracked the peripatetic biography of the Old Believer iconographer Pimen Maksimovich Sofronov (1898–1973), who eventually came to the United States, and analyzed his evolving iconography for the Serbian Orthodox Church. When Sofronov's archive of forty-two boxes of rare books and sketches in Millville, New Jersey became available in the 2000s, Roy helped secure that valuable collection for the Hilandar Research Library at Ohio State University. That public scholarly outreach was Roy's second such venture in his career, the first involving the organization of an international conference and exhibition in 1998 on "Old Belief in Traditional Russian Culture" in Erie, Pennsylvania, which brought together leading scholars from the Russian Federation with their counterparts outside Russia. The exhibition catalogue, *Old Believers in Erie, PA: Tradition, Assimilation, Adaptation*, is used in Russian classrooms to this day.

Reaching audiences beyond the academy had always been Roy's ultimate goal. With *Solovki: The Story of Russia Told Through its Most Remarkable Islands* (Yale UP, 2004), he succeeded brilliantly. The first biography in English of a Russian monastery, the book earned acclaim in both the academic and popular press, including in the Russian media. Described by *The Times* (London) as "hauntingly beautiful," it filled another significant historiographical gap. Scholars had largely ignored the history of monasteries in Russia despite their pivotal religious, economic, and political roles. Reconstructing the five-hundred-year history of an institution built on a fortress-like archipelago on the White Sea, Roy examined the Solovetskii monastery as an economic empire, a major outpost of schismatic rebellion, a tsarist prison, a mecca for pilgrims, a place where miracles were believed to occur, and finally a fundamental part of the Soviet gulag system. He did so through the voices and eyes of the people who mattered, be they the monks of Solovki, the peasants who labored and traded there, the pilgrims and later tourists who visited, and the inmates incarcerated there in the imperial and early Soviet periods. Researching the book forced Roy to change time periods constantly: for example, one minute he was immersed in early modern manuscripts in the National Library of Russia in St. Petersburg, the next he was meeting with specialists at St. Petersburg's recently founded Memorial Society seeking to uncover Solovki's dark gulag history. "Vividly evoking the monastic world and its severe yet serenely contemplative environment, surrounded by the harsh landscape of Russia's Far North," in the words of one reviewer (in *Slavic and East European Journal*), the book was highly recommended "to historians, amateur enthusiasts, armchair travelers, and energetic tourists alike" by another (*Journal of Modern History*).

Extending his scholarly reach even further, Roy served as the series editor for Orthodox Christian Studies at Northern Illinois University Press (now an imprint of Cornell University Press). Beginning in 2008, he built an impressive list that offers a global view of Orthodox Christianity, ranging from east-west relations to studies of the faith in Orthodox Churches around the world, including western Asia and North Africa. Seventeen acclaimed volumes have been published and two path-breaking monographs are forthcoming.

Unsurprisingly, Roy's magical writing and generosity of spirit and mind infused the formal and informal classroom. He inspired students to think critically about how religious faith and practice inform historical experience. In his textbook, *Think: World Religions* (Prentice Hall, 2010, 2012), emphasizing ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, Roy won over countless classrooms with his opening chapter asking whether the Steelers Nation football team could be considered a religion. He was also a sought-after lecturer for National Geographic Expeditions, where he led groups along the Trans-Siberian Railroad. In the words of a colleague, "In this life, when we are graced with the friendship or even the merest contact with such as Roy, gentle, devoted, kind and learned, we are elevated."