From the Editors
A Letter from Marc Raeff
Invitation to a Discussion on e-Kritika

Readers of this column may recall that in the last volume of Kritika we began an interview series, with the goal of presenting discussions with figures of special interest to the field. It was with a series of questions for such an interview that we contacted Marc Raeff, Bakhmeteff Professor of Russian Studies emeritus at Columbia University. Professor Raeff began by explaining why he could not answer our questions but in the course of doing so wrote an interesting and instructive response. In place of the interview originally planned, we reprint this letter (except for slight excerpts) with his permission.

Marc Raeff is one of the most influential and prolific historians of imperial Russia in the world. He defended his dissertation at Harvard in 1950 under the direction of Michael Karpovich.1 His major works include books on Mikhail Speranskii; the Decembrists; the origins of the Russian intelligentsia; the well-ordered police state; state and society under the old regime; the Russian emigration; political ideas and institutions; and many other topics. 2 A full bibliography of his works until 1987 can be found in the 1988 Festschrift in his honor.3 His most recent publication is in the current issue of Kritika.

The questions we asked were the following: (1) How do you evaluate the state of the field of imperial Russian history today, both institutionally and in terms of its thematic focus? What do you think would be the most fruitful avenues for future inquiry from the next generation of historians? (2) Does post-Soviet Russia’s overall development affect your thinking about the longue durée of imperial Russian history? What does a deep historical perspective tell us about the course of post-Soviet Russia? (3) Has the "opening of the archives," in your view, substantially changed the direction of research on imperial Russia? (4) What do you make of the ÔpatrioticÔ turn in Russian historical scholarship after 1991? (5) How has the field changed over the course of your career? The first item listed in the bibliography of your works compiled in 1987 by Edward Kasinec is a review published in 1946. You must have a very interesting perspective on the postwar history of Russian studies, about which relatively little has been written. Do you care to share any recollections with us today? What aspects of the history of the field do you think are most important for Kritika readers and future historiographers?

Here is what Marc Raeff wrote in response.

Since receiving your good letter about a week ago I tried, repeatedly, to write out an answer to the several questions you have asked. I must confess that I must give up the
effort. In the terms you have put them I feel incapable of saying anything of substance.

How can I evaluate the field of imperial Russian history when I have long stopped following the literature, both Russian and non-Russian, whether monographs or journals? Is such an evaluation even possible in principle? I doubt it, for the field is both too vast and protean as I think it should be. For that reason, too, I believe strongly that the future of any historical field depends and should depend exclusively on the accidents and vagaries of individual historians' interest, curiosity, and so on of the moment. For example, who can foresee the twists and turns of a historian's interests? Each aspect of research is often in some way connected with earlier work but would a scholar have foreseen the particular turn it would take each time? Since no period, no set of events, is ever exhausted by historians, how can one presume to determine a "fruitful" direction? It all depends on the imagination, insight, and broad background of individual scholars. At least, such is my credo. Planning, as you well know, was the undoing of the Soviet system. Why expect it to be different in our discipline? This is not to say that individual scholars may not set for themselves a long-range task that would require multiple areas of research and a number of monographs centered on one special problem or period. It would, normally, lead to a narrow, specialized focus. This is a matter of personal inclination or talent. Again the eternal "hedgehog and fox" situation.

Alas, the short-term development so far since the collapse of the Soviet Union (and we have only the short term to go by) has for me the feel of an "eternal return." The persistence of a rather overly loosely structured society makes it nearly impossible to detect an "organic" line of development. Of necessity a historian has to think in terms of past categories and norms. But how can he apply such terms and categories when they have disappeared and when new ones have not fully crystallized? By the way, this is the reason why I have always believed that a historian should not do "contemporary" history, that is, study the present. Look what happened to "Sovietology" in the broadest sense.

Opening of archives depends for whom and under what conditions. In the Russian case, that is, censorship and ideological control, much could be learned, I guess, about the specifics of events and persons that were interdicted in Soviet times. But the basic problem is not open archives or not it is what questions are asked. Also, really meaningful exploration of archives requires not only openness (and a full one at that) but also tremendously time-consuming work. Only a resident on the spot can do that and discover truly novel information or data. For the imperial to 20th-century periods this is probably possible only for teams with very specific (i.e., narrow) questions. Of course, there is always the chance discovery of a document, or a discrete body of sources, to permit a new insight or an analysis that may lead to broader issues (to refer
to a personal experience: my chancing upon Catherine II's notes taken while reading Blackstone, or access to the letters of Andrei Turgenev—although to the latter there were some leads in the literature).

On the whole, however, as far as I have been able to determine, archival research has been useful mainly to bolster the documentation for conclusions reached on the basis of published sources and the benefits of broad and deep background knowledge, acute perception, and creative historical imagination. I might add that I have the impression that for most of Russian history there are few instances of the mass documentation that has underpinned the historians of the Annales school, as well as the quantitative historians in the West.

What I imagine you mean by "patriotic turn" is a fervent (often fervid) nationalism (or chauvinism) with definitely "reactionary" (in the literal sense) implications. In a way it is a "natural" response to Soviet ideology. It gives me, hopefully, reason to think that it will not be a lasting or influential phenomenon. After all, "you can't go home again" especially when that home has been destroyed, nay, obliterated. For a revival of expansionist imperialism there are sufficient reasons without appealing to history, whether "patriotic" or simply nostalgic.

Throughout my "career" I have endeavored to avoid institutional entanglements. My knowledge of the "history" of Russian "studies" is, therefore, very scant. It never interested me. Of course, I suppose, it had a role in orienting the work of colleagues. For my part, I did my work alone, never had assistants, and avoided speaking about it before publishing whatever results came from it. Then I put it out of my mind, rarely coming back to it. Of course, it helped me a lot in my teaching—especially the research work. Whether my students benefited from it, and in what way, is not for me to say. I have strong opinions on the publications of my colleagues that I have read. But I have no perspective on the history of Russian studies, except to note with satisfaction that they have been very productive and stimulating in their results. Without the contributions of American colleagues I cannot imagine doing meaningful and valuable work in the field now. It is a major failing, it seems to me, that our Russian colleagues are still not quite willing to accept that fact or draw the consequences from it. At least, that is the impression I gain from the limited sample with which I am acquainted.

Your last question implies what lessons of the history of the field should we draw? I really don't know. Obviously, any censorship, including self-censorship, is the greatest threat to the intellectual independence of both practitioners and discipline. Scholarly integrity requires full autonomy and freedom on the choice of topic and on the manner /perspective in which one approaches it. True, access to sources is essential, but the selection of sources should be totally in the hands (or mind) of the researcher. Kritika
should be open to any topic and any interpretive orientation provided the work submitted is professional and of high quality.

I realized halfway through my letter that what started as an apology for not being able to answer your questions turned out some sort of answer after all. You are free to use my cogitations as you see fit.

By the way, it reminds me of a time when I told Professor Karpovich that I found it exceedingly difficult to write up the results of my research for my dissertation and wondered why this block when I had no trouble writing letters. He said that if so, why don't I write out a draft of my dissertation in the form of letters? Well, I didn't quite take that advice—perhaps I should have. But I realized that it was good advice—and often suggested something similar to students who had a writing block. As you see from the long letter above, I unconsciously followed Karpovich's advice once I started explaining why I could not answer your questions. Whether the result is adequate for your purposes is for you to decide—I shall accept your verdict cheerfully, whatever it may be.

How to participate in e-Kritika

After you have read Raeff's piece, please direct your questions and comments for the author, preferably kept to a maximum length of a few paragraphs, to the email address ekritika@mac.com. Raeff will periodically respond to these questions, creating a dialogue with his readers that will later be posted to the Kritika website (www.slavica.com/kritika) under the link eKritika (www.slavica.com/kritika/e-kritika.html). Future additions to e-Kritika including other discussions, images, data, and other amplifications of the print version will be posted to the same site. Readers have until late fall to take part in this discussion by sending an email to the ekritika address. The final transcript of the dialogue will be posted under the eKritika link on Kritika's website under the URL www.slavica.com/kritika/e-kritika/raeff.html. This link will be included in the electronic versions of Kritika, volume 6, number 2; and future readers of Raeff's review article will be able to click on this link and peruse the exchange. In this way, the readers' discussion with the author which we would like you to help create will become a "virtual" part of the publication and, we hope, add in useful and interesting ways to the historical record.