Edward L. Keenan: To the Editors

July 15, 1999

To the Editors:

Marshall Poe's suggestion that I might jot down a few words by way of "passing the torch" to your new and very ambitious Kritika plunged me into a rather disorderly razdum'e, which was probably not his intention: the occasion called merely for a few harmless reminiscences from a grizzled veteran.

But of course I didn't really remember much about how things "really were" when we cooked up Kritika nearly 40 years ago. (And I am frankly shocked by that arithmetic, having spent part of my morning discussing whether a major work of garden masonry, built in the same 1963 but now crumbling, was worth saving.) I have, consequently, attempted to refresh my memory by consulting the record.

From the confrontation of that record with the plans for the new Kritika, which I know only from your prospectus (who knows what the next two decades will bring?), similarities and differences emerge.

The new prospectus, perhaps inadvertently, points to one major difference. It summarizes the earlier publication's role: "The original Kritika served two important functions. First, by publishing review essays and long reviews, Kritika provided a forum for scholars to evaluate the work of their colleagues beyond the confines of the standard 'short review.' Second, by concentrating on reviews of books in Russian, it served as a bridge between Western and Russian historical scholarship."

This evaluation should perhaps be juxtaposed with the retrospective (1984) self-evaluation of Kritika's editors, which stressed two goals: "One was to review in depth the important and innovative Soviet books on Russian history that had begun to appear at that time, but which Western professional journals still tended to ignore. The other was to provide students of Russian history enrolled in the graduate school at Harvard with an opportunity to develop the kind of critical and editorial skills that they would need in the future both as creative scholars and as supervisors of doctoral dissertations." This latter statement coincides with my own recollection, although interestingly enough, in its own, five-sentence, "Editorsä Preface" of vol. 1, no. 1, Kritika said only that it "will endeavor speedily and accurately to report on and to evaluate certain of these works [i.e., recent monographs of'positive merit']."

One perceives immediately a major contrast: our little venture had a significant and conscious pedagogical function, and all of the editorial inputs were those of graduate students in a single program: we were trying to learn how to be professional scholars. That was a very rational objective during the great expansion of American higher education, and especially Russian studies, that was then under way. Of the 85 authors who contributed reviews, no fewer than 62 ultimately became college professors, another seven made careers in Russian studies in government service (including the present South Korean ambassador to Finland), two eventually
headed major Slavic library collections, two became university administrators, and four left the field for law or journalism. (The later activities of the remaining nine are unknown to me.)

It is clear that your goals are intellectually much more ambitious, and both you and your prospective collaborators (not to speak of your distinguished board) are more mature and professional than we were. And, of course, they look out upon a vastly changed professional landscape.

But it was not only the dramatically booming job market that made the early 'sixties different from 2000 C. E. We chose to limit ourselves to new Soviet books because we had perceived a significant improvement in the quality of historical scholarship in the USSR (leaving aside, for the most part, treatments of the Soviet period.) As we said in our Preface, "It was not long ago that one picked up a historical monograph published in the Soviet Union with a certain [here, I think, we meant not nekotoryi but uverennyi] foreknowledge of its premises, methods and conclusions." In retrospect I think our perception of a change for the better is borne out by the evidence. And we were probably right, among other reasons, to cease publication during the nadir of the Stagnation because of a corresponding decline.

In any case, the nature of publications and scholarly interchange in our field have changed dramatically and irreversibly, for better and for worse: cascades of archival materials and archive-based monographs are pouring forth, both in Russia and elsewhere; long-neglected topics and authors are widely discussed; the leaden hand of the censor has fallen away, like the statue of "Iron Feliks." But at the same time the impoverishment of academic institutions and the chaos of the book market has created new impediments to the publication of serious scholarship, in the presence of an "excessively exuberant" market for vulgarization, neo-Slavophile (not to say chauvinistic) revivalism, and a peculiar Russian filtration of New-Age historiosophy. The more reason, then, for the new Kritika to feature, in the words of its prospectus, "research articles, as well as in-depth review articles and long book reviews." In our time, aware as we were of the constraints under which, even after the "Thaw," our colleagues worked, we took pains to restrain our criticisms and to avoid sharp challenges to authors' assumptions or apparent belief systems. Now that our Russian colleagues are free to speak their minds (if they can find a small subsidy), I hope that the contributors to the new Kritika will do them the honor of holding them to world standards of epistemological candor, documentary proof, and logical argument.

Our Kritika was fun. And it served its original purposes. I warmly wish the same to its successor.

With all best wishes,

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