

An Appreciation of Donald Ostrowski

Daniel Rowland

Don Ostrowski is my oldest, and one of my very closest, friends among our colleagues and fellow workers in the vineyard of early modern Russian history. It is a great pleasure indeed to present this volume to him. I first met Don in the fall of 1972. I had just returned from the Soviet Union, and was working at Harvard's Widener Library, when I ran into Don in the stacks, on the floor that housed most of the Slavic collection. As he told me of his work on the Church Council of 1503, both his enthusiasm and his knowledge, plus a certain pleasure in overturning accepted opinions, made a great impression on me. We became fast friends, much to my benefit, both personally and professionally. Some of my happiest memories are of long, long conversations with Don about one or another problem in Muscovite history, and, a little later, about ideas, techniques, and materials for teaching that field, and others. Don's deep knowledge of the sources and his keen analytical mind made pretty much every moment of these conversations intensely stimulating and, sometimes, a little scary.

It is these qualities that come to mind when I think of Don's work in our field, and his deep influence on all who practice in it. Don follows the evidence of the sources, or "source testimony" as he often calls it, without fear and without preconceptions that I could detect. He examines all the sources that he can find for a given problem, including most emphatically the history of that piece of evidence from its creation to the present, and then draws what he feels are the appropriate conclusions, regardless of what others may have concluded in the past. What has always been particularly remarkable to me about Don is that, although his conclusions often contradict the work of other historians, he is never motivated by personal rivalries or animus. On the contrary, he is full of good cheer as he follows his trail of evidence, wherever it leads. He never seems to be offended by the views (or the personalities) of those who disagree with him, but welcomes source-based arguments regardless of the rank or identity of his opponent.

A story illustrates this point, a story which circulated years ago, when Don and I were both very junior members of our field. It seems that a very senior scholar, with a distinguished position in a famous university abroad, was giving a talk at the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute. He made a statement that surprised Don, who then, during the question period after the talk, asked this highly respected visitor for the sources that might back up his

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assertion. Different versions of the story have different endings, but all agree that those present were shocked that Don would ask such a distinguished visitor such a question. Don of course meant absolutely no offense: the question is the question that Don always asks, whether his interlocutor is a student at the Harvard Extension School, a close friend, or a revered authority from a famous institution. Historical assertions have always to be backed up by the sources, and never accepted on faith. He is cheerfully (and admirably) fearless in pressing everyone to cite the evidence.

This fearless desire to examine sources has led Don to explore many fields, some often quite distant from his original "field" of Muscovite history. Over a relationship that spans almost 40 years, I can hardly remember a time when Don was not chewing on some historical question and wondering about the sources on which conventional opinions were based. His endless and wide-ranging curiosity led to conversations over several years as to whether William Shakespeare was the author of the works conventionally attributed to him. He wondered, as many of us had done, about the connections between Sufism and Hesychasm, but Don worked seriously to find the links. His Muscovite work led him famously to study the Mongols and Central Asia, which then led to a deep interest in Chinese history, and then world history. He has taught courses on a truly astonishing variety of subjects, always with the same emphasis on the sources for whatever question he might be discussing. Because of Don's original approach to any historical issue, however far removed from the history of Muscovy, Howard Zinn singled Don's course in American history as one of the best he knew of.

Don's interests vary as widely in scale as they do in geography. He is particularly well-known among scholars of Muscovy for his painstaking and fine-grained studies of the history of various sources, from the "Kurbskii" corpus, to the *Life* of Aleksandr Nevskii, to the entire Primary Chronicle. But, as his work in world history attests, he tackles the broadest problems with equal enthusiasm and skill. I am especially fond of his publications in the theory of history, which I have assigned often to my own students, who always share my enthusiasm. Don is as much at home discussing whether the plot of Russian history overall is a comedy or a tragedy as he is debating the existence of an unattested text in the stemma of a 13th-century *tale* or *life*.

Don devotes tremendous energy to teaching, and to his students. I cannot count the number of intense, often late-at-night conversations we've had about how one or another problem could best be taught or how best to incorporate primary sources into our classroom discussions. Any discussion of teaching makes Don's eyes light up. He has composed a remarkable handbook on writing a thesis for his social science students at the Extension School, an excellent guidebook that I have often used in my own teaching. And seldom is the meeting with Don when he fails to extol the work of one of his current students, students whose theses, by the nature of Don's job at the

Extension School, cover again an astonishingly wide range of topics within the social sciences.

Finally, Don is and has always been a wonderful and generous friend and colleague. From the moment he first befriended me in 1972, I have benefited from endless discussions, bibliographic references, and critical readings of my work by Don. He has been equally attentive to the needs and queries of the most junior and the most senior members of our field. I have spent countless nights sleeping on the floor of whatever apartment Don happened to be living in near Cambridge, since commuting daily from our house in Maine has been impractical. I don't think I've ever asked him for help that he was unwilling to give. Like my co-editors, I only hope this volume can serve as an inadequate expression of my respect and my affection.