

Princeton University
Honors Faculty Members Receiving
Emeritus Status



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The biographical sketches were written by
colleagues in the departments of those honored.

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Herman Sergeevich Ermolaev



Herman Sergeevich Ermolaev was born in Tomsk, Siberia in 1924, but grew up in the region of the Don River, attending high school in Tsymlianskaia and Rostov-on-the-Don. His mother was a doctor, his father a lawyer. Herman Sergeevich remembers the first book his father read to him: *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* in Russian translation. Like his parents, Herman Sergeevich had no illusions about the Soviet experiment. (His father, a White army veteran, had moved to the Don region largely because the Cossacks were unlikely to reproach him for his political past.) As a youth, Herman Sergeevich witnessed the brutality of the Soviet collectivization project and the widespread starvation it caused.

Soon after the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union, Herman Sergeevich found himself near the front in the ranks of a Soviet sapper army consisting of civilians mobilized for digging trenches. In July of 1942, he was captured by the Nazis, but escaped a few days later. In the turmoil of the next few years, he managed to find his way to the West and became part of the so-called “second wave” of Russian emigration. He resumed studies in Austria, completing a Russian secondary school in Salzburg and then entering the University of Graz, where he majored in Slavic philology and minored in German from 1947 to 1949.

Herman Sergeevich came to the United States in September of 1949 as a scholarship student at Stanford University. His Austrian preparation allowed him to complete the requirements for an A.B. in Russian one year later. From there he went to the University of California–Berkeley, where he studied with the legendary scholar Gleb Struve. He received an M.A. in 1953 and a Ph.D. in 1959, both from the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures.

By the mid-1950s, experts in the Russian language were suddenly in great demand. Herman Sergeevich helped his adopted country train a cadre of specialists (not Slavists!) as a Russian language instructor both at the Army Language School in Monterey and at the Russian Language Institute at Dartmouth.

He spent his entire academic career in Princeton's Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, as an instructor in 1959, an assistant professor from 1960 to 1966, an associate professor from 1966 to 1970, and after that as a full professor. He served the American Association of Teachers of Slavic Languages and Literatures (AATSEEL) as vice president (1968–1970) and president (1970–1972) and was a member of its executive council (1972–1977). In addition to his duties at Princeton, Herman Sergeevich taught advanced literature courses for many years at the Russian Summer School at Middlebury College.

Herman Sergeevich's scholarship focused on Russian literature of the Soviet period (both official and émigré), and he is widely recognized as one of the world's authorities in this field. His first book, based on his dissertation, was called *Soviet Literary Theories 1917–1934: The Genesis of Socialist Realism* (1963, reissued 1977). It remains to this day the standard work on the subject. Parts of the book have been translated into Chinese.

His next major project was an annotated translation of Maxim Gorky's *Untimely Thoughts: Essays on Revolution, Culture, and the Bolsheviks, 1917–1918*. Initially published in 1968, it was reissued in 1995. It was translated into French in 1975.

The Nobel Prize-winning author Mikhail Sholokhov was the subject of some of Herman Sergeevich's most important work. In *Mikhail Sholokhov and His Art*, published by Princeton University Press in 1982, Herman Sergeevich used careful stylistic analysis to disprove claims that the various parts of the novel *The Quiet Don* were written by different authors. His

views created considerable controversy both in the West and in Russia. The book was updated and published in Russian in St. Petersburg in 2000. Herman Sergeevich authored another book, *The Quiet Don and Political Censorship* (written in Russian and published in Russia in 2005), and co-authored a commentary to *The Quiet Don*, published in England in 1997.

As a scholar of Soviet literature, Herman Sergeevich always confronted the question of censorship. Given the inaccessibility of Soviet archives, he devised a time-intensive yet extremely fruitful method for charting the changing policies of Soviet censorship. He compared the numerous editions of Soviet “classics” and noted what was removed (or inserted) in each era depending on the most recent political concerns. This work demanded extraordinary patience and painstaking attention to detail, but the result was a broad and astonishingly coherent picture of the influence of the political on the literary throughout the Soviet period. His magisterial analysis was published in 1997 under the title *Censorship in Soviet Literature, 1917-1991*.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Herman Sergeevich has returned to Russia with frequency and always as an honored guest. He was a consultant to the academy edition of Sholokhov and for many years a member of the public council for the literary journal *Don*. His scholarly works appear in Russian journals, and he has been interviewed in Russian newspapers and on television. He is especially revered in the Don region where he grew up and about which he has often written.

As a teacher at Princeton, Herman Sergeevich was known to wide segments of the undergraduate population for his survey course on Soviet literature, which he brought alive through personal reminiscence, history, and literature. As many as 350 students a semester enrolled in this course. Herman Sergeevich also taught a popular course on the works of another Russian Nobel Prize winner, Aleksander Solzhenitsyn. For students who knew Russian, he offered upper-level undergraduate courses on the Russian short story and advanced Russian courses.

Graduate students always appreciated his detailed analyses and meticulous knowledge of the entire Soviet period. For generations of Princeton undergraduates Herman Sergeevich was an inspiring adviser of independent work, generous with his time and eager to explain subtleties of the Russian cultural context.