

Professor John Klier

(1944–2007)

PROFESSOR JOHN DOYLE KLIER died after a short illness on 23 September 2007 at the age of only 62. His sudden and untimely death at the height of his powers has profoundly shocked and saddened his family, friends and colleagues. Klier was arguably the most innovative and influential historian of Russian Jewry working in recent decades. Capable of communicating his research effectively to a variety of audiences he was an inspiring and sought-after speaker who was well known and will be sorely missed far beyond the realm of the academy.

Klier was born on 13 December 1944 in Bellefonte (Pennsylvania) but grew up in Syracuse, New York, where his father taught aeronautical engineering at Syracuse University. Coming from a Catholic background, he took his first two degrees at Notre Dame University (Indiana) before moving as a doctoral student to the University of Illinois, then a focal point for Russian and Soviet history. It was not least the maltreatment of Jews by the Soviet regime that directed his interest increasingly towards the history of Russian Jewry and his PhD thesis eventually discussed the protracted and haphazard process by which tsarist Russia sought to absorb the large Jewish population that had come under its control as a result of the Polish partitions towards the end of the eighteenth century.

Soon after beginning work on his dissertation it became increasingly clear to Klier just how little original, archive-based research had actually been undertaken in this field for much of the twentieth century. This was due in large part to the difficulties involved in gaining access to the relevant archival material, for the history of Russian Jewry was still considered a sensitive topic and its systematic study ultimately remained a taboo in the Soviet Union. Klier was able to circumvent these constraints by claiming that his field of study was in fact the Russian popular press. It was not least the unprecedented access to archives he gained as a postdoctoral researcher at Leningrad State University in the late 1970s and again in the early 1980s that allowed him to present a startlingly fresh and innovative viewpoint on his topic that challenged much of the previously accepted wisdom.

Klier never denied that the Jews' situation in Imperial Russia, for a whole variety of reasons, was indeed dire. Yet on closer examination it transpired that the conspiracy-theory version of events portraying the tsarist regime's dealings with Russian Jewry as born of a persistent and wilful desire to do the Jews harm, was simply not tenable. The circumstances and conflicts that generated the difficult situation in which

Russian Jewry found itself turned out to be altogether more complex and Klier did more than any other scholar to clear the way for an understanding of the history of Russian Jewry that genuinely takes this complexity into account. Klier was not the sort of scholar who drew satisfaction from the breaking of taboos for the sake of it and the compassion and integrity he brought to this project rendered the occasional isolated attempt to portray him as a revisionist, not in the scholarly but in the polemical sense of the word, utterly misguided.

Klier's thesis eventually grew into his first book, *Russia Gathers Her Jews: The Origins of the Jewish Question in Russia* (DeKalb, IL, 1986). Not only has this book become universally acknowledged as a standard text indispensable to the study of Russian Jewry, it also put Klier firmly on the map as a historian widely respected among scholars of both modern Jewish history and Russian history more generally. In 1991 a collection of essays, co-edited with Shlomo Lambroza, *Pogroms: Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Jewish History* (Cambridge and New York), followed. It too became an instant classic. While in no way questioning the significance and impact of anti-Jewish violence in Imperial Russia on its own terms, the research assembled in this volume demonstrated clearly that pogroms were in fact rarely initiated by the regime or the authorities nor can they be considered the primary cause of Jewish emigration to the West. Among the contributors to this volume was the late Hans Rogger whom Klier credited with having first formulated the research agenda he himself then did so much to implement, a debt he always generously acknowledged.

As the former Soviet archives became more easily accessible after 1991, Klier was among the first foreign scholars to put the material now available in Kiev, Moscow, St Petersburg, Minsk and elsewhere to good use for his own research. Funded by the US National Endowment for the Humanities, he also surveyed the material relevant to Jewish Studies in former Soviet archives more generally and thus became a crucial first point of contact for innumerable scholars seeking guidance on these archival holdings. Klier's research in these years culminated in two further monographs. *Imperial Russia's Jewish Question, 1855-1881* (Cambridge and New York) was published in 1995. It draws out the account begun in *Russia Gathers Her Jews* and was immediately acknowledged as a similarly ground-breaking standard text. Taking the story one step further, Klier recently completed the manuscript of *Southern Storms: Russians, Jews and the Crisis of 1881-2* which will be published posthumously by Cambridge University Press. 1995 also saw the publication of a book aimed at a wider readership and prepared jointly with his wife, Helen Mingay, *The Search for Anastasia: Solving the Riddle of the Lost Romanovs* (London). Perhaps inevitably, this book sold more copies than all his academic publications put together, even though it

showed that the notion of Anastasia's survival was indeed no more than a legend.

In the past it occasionally used to be said of academics who had not published widely but were nevertheless highly influential and widely respected in their field that they had produced many 'unwritten books' — a reference to the impact they had on their students and colleagues and their dedication to the many duties of academic life that are invisible to the wider public: reviewing, refereeing, examining, administrative and committee work, offering informal advice and guidance in response to all manner of queries. Klier not only leaves an outstanding body of published work that will last. He also leaves more 'unwritten books' than most. He was a dedicated and inspiring teacher, a generous and solicitous colleague, he was incredibly hard working and brought an unflappable cheer and warmth to all his dealings with both students and colleagues that was extraordinary and quite irresistible. At the same time he was so unpretentious that undergraduates frequently completed his courses without realizing what a giant he was in his field.

Having begun his teaching career at Fort Hays State University in Kansas, where he was soon promoted to a full professorship, Klier moved to the Hebrew and Jewish Studies Department at UCL in 1989. The initial drop in rank from a professorship to a lectureship was soon forgotten, as Klier was promoted to a Readership in 1993 and then took up the Sidney and Elizabeth Corob Professorship of Modern Jewish History that he held from 1996 until his death. He was also head of department for almost a decade and his part in making this a department whose welcoming, collegial and stimulating atmosphere is frequently commented upon by students, staff and its many visitors alike can hardly be over-estimated. The same goes for his role in supporting Jewish studies in Eastern Europe and fostering contacts between East European and Western scholars.

Klier was co-editor of *East European Jewish Affairs* (formerly *Soviet Jewish Affairs*) and played a crucial role in guiding the journal through difficult years of transition and engineering its recent consolidation. He was also on the board of this journal from 2000 until his death, and the esteem in which he held the *SEER* was visible to any attentive visitor to his office where he kept a run of the journal that had long since burst out of the space he had initially assigned it and was gradually colonizing every spare inch in his overflowing book cases.

His incredibly busy professional life notwithstanding, Klier found time to read widely in a number of literatures which he accessed in the original wherever possible, and displayed a broad knowledge and appreciation of classical music, the opera and the arts. He also maintained a lively interest in sport, both active and passive, and was a

skilled fencer with numerous medals to his name. Far from least, he was fiercely devoted to his wife, Helen Mingay, and their twin daughter and son, who survive him, along with his siblings and mother in the US. One of his sisters, his two children and his successor as head of department, Dr Ada Rapoport Albert, spoke at his funeral, and their eulogies all bore striking and moving testimony to the fact that Klier had displayed the same unusual measure of compassion and integrity, of generosity and good humour in all walks of life. He was a real *mentsh* and his death has created an unusual sense of loss even among many whose relationship to him was of a purely professional nature.

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