W. Bruce Lincoln, 61, Expert Who Enlivened Russian History

By ERIC PACE

W. Bruce Lincoln, a historian known for his gripping books about Russians and their history, died on Sunday at Kishwaukee Community Hospital in DeKalb, Ill. He was 61 and lived in DeKalb.

He had cancer, Northern Illinois University in DeKalb said in announcing his death. He had taught there for 31 years.

Dr. Lincoln, whose doctorate in Russian history was from the University of Chicago, spent several years in Russia as a exchange scholar. He recalled in the 1970’s: "I have become convinced that the historian who writes only for other specialists neglects an important part of an historian's broader task. Therefore, I have begun to write for a broader audience in the hope that my efforts to explain Russia's past may enable readers to better understand Russia's present. I like to think that I have succeeded in that broader effort, at least to some extent."

He first used that approach in "Nicholas I: Emperor and Autocrat of All the Russias" (1978, Northern Illinois), and much of his writing was about Nicholas's dynasty, the Romanovs, who held sway for three centuries, until 1917.

Dr. Lincoln won particular praise for "Red Victory: A History of the Russian Civil War" (1990, Da Capo). It was listed as a notable book of year by The New York Times Book Review, in which John A. C. Greppin, a writer on Russian literature and history, said in reviewing the book, "It is successful not because of a new analysis of fact but because of its author's abiding descriptive powers; he presents a vast warring frontier filled with people who, no matter how familiar their names and actions have become, often baffle us."

Publishers Weekly called his book "The Conquest of a Continent" (Random) one of the best books of 1994 and said: "In Lincoln's compulsively readable epic narrative, Siberia's dark history comes alive as a vast human drama of greed, adventure, exploration, ambition, persecution and protest. Tamerlaine, Danish explorer Vitus Bering, Dostoyvesky, Lenin, rogues, reformers and Siberia's natives people this prodigiously researched tapestry."

So did Lenin's wife, whom Dr. Lincoln described in the book as "a typical turn-of-the-century..."
radical woman with short-cropped hair, an upturned nose and eyes that were just beginning to protrude as a result of the goiter that would plague her the rest of her life."

Colleagues of Dr. Lincoln said this week that more than 100,000 copies of each of several of his dozen books had been sold.

His "Between Heaven and Hell: The Story of a Thousand Years of Artistic Life in Russia" (1998. Viking Penguin) had some editing from Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis while she was an editor at the work's original hardcover publisher, Doubleday. But she died before she finished her work on the book.

Dr. Lincoln said he had learned from Petr Andreevich Zaionchkovskii and other contemporary historians of Russia whom he revered "that the writing of history is an all-consuming craft that demands not sporadic attention but daily devotion."

Indeed, while keeping up with his teaching, he worked continuously on his books and wrote at least one page a day.

He worked hard to find poignant details for his books. While researching a work on St. Petersburg, Dr. Lincoln turned up cookbooks that had been compiled while Petersburg was known as Leningrad and was under siege and painfully sort of food. The books included recipes for cooking rats.

Dr. Lincoln was born in Suffield, Conn. He earned a bachelor's in 1960, at the College of William and Mary, and a doctorate in 1966. He retired from Northern Illinois in 1998.

A first marriage ended in divorce. Surviving are his wife, Mary; two daughters, Dr. Virginia Wallace of Milwaukee and Mary Margaret Matzek of Minneapolis; a brother, Charles who lives in Connecticut; and two grandchildren.

Photo: W. Bruce Lincoln (Northern Illinois University)