

Princeton University

HONORS FACULTY MEMBERS
RECEIVING EMERITUS STATUS



May 2017

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

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JAN T. GROSS



Jan Tomasz Gross, the Norman B. Tomlinson '16 and '48 Professor of War and Society in the history department, was born in Warsaw in 1947. He went on to become the world's leading historian of Poland in the period after the Second World War. His mother, Hanna Szumińska, fought in the Polish underground army during that conflict, then became a translator of classical French literature; his father, Zygmunt Gross, was an attorney who defended persecuted individuals, a professor of law at the Polish Academy of Sciences, and an avant-garde composer. His Catholic mother helped his Jewish father survive the Nazi occupation.

In high school, Jan, together with his classmate Adam Michnik (one grade ahead), founded an interschool Club of the Contradiction Seekers, which rebelled against the Communist system. At University of Warsaw, where he studied physics, then switched to sociology, Jan joined critical discussion circles and played a central part in the student revolt of 1968. He helped initiate a rally in support of two students, including Michnik, who had been expelled for political reasons, and he went on to help lead the student protest movement. Jan was himself expelled, and imprisoned. The Polish regime let his family emigrate to the United States in 1969.

Jan completed a Ph.D. in sociology at Yale University in 1975 under the political sociologist Juan José Linz. After serving as an assistant professor in Yale's sociology department until 1984, he taught for eight years in the political science department at Emory University, then eleven years in the political science department at New York University, before joining the Princeton history department in 2003. He has won Guggenheim, Fulbright, Hoover Institution, and Rockefeller Foundation fellowships. He has also served as a visiting professor at Harvard University, Stanford University, University of California–Berkeley, and Columbia University, as well as universities in Paris, Vienna, Kraków, and Tel Aviv. In 2014, he received Princeton's Howard T. Behrman Award for Distinguished Achievement in the Humanities.

Jan's work has changed forever the core concept of totalitarianism, the social consequences of war, and the history of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. His first book, *Polish Society under German Occupation: The Generalgouvernement, 1939-1944* (Princeton University Press, 1979), demonstrated with remarkable detail how Poles created an alternative society in response to Nazism. His second book, *Revolution from Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia* (Princeton University Press, 1988), took up the parallel Soviet occupation of Poland. Among the most important works ever published in Communist history, it mined a unique document collection assembled and smuggled to safety by Polish officers during the war.

Revolution from Abroad showed that totalitarianism involved a cunning "privatization of state power," whereby ordinary people with their petty grievances were encouraged to submit denunciations to the authorities and thereby themselves destroyed the bonds and institutions of their society and paved the way for Communist monopoly. Jan had previewed this breakthrough analysis in a succinct and modestly titled "A Note on the Nature of Soviet Totalitarianism" (1982), which should have compelled scholars to examine how patterns of daily life, or what might be called little tactics of the habitat, could undergird and enact massive topographies of terror.

In a follow-up article, "The Social Consequences of War: Preliminaries to the Study of Imposition of Communist Regimes in East Central Europe" (1989), also known under the revised title "War as Social Revolution" (1997), Jan showed that the postwar Communist regimes had their roots in the war experience itself. This constituted an enduring challenge to the majority analyses that usually begin with the Red Army occupations.

These works, together, already constituted a greater intellectual legacy than that of other living scholars on the region, and Jan was just getting started. *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton University Press, 2001), a National Book Award finalist, tells the story of how, on July 10, 1941, most of the Jewish inhabitants of a village were forced to the market square and, after a prolonged period of insults and physical assaults, were either clubbed to death with sticks and knives, then dismembered, or burned alive in a barn. The perpetrators, who also plundered the victims' property, were not Nazi occupiers, but Catholic Polish neighbors. Gross noted other such pogroms in the area.

The book unleashed a storm inside Poland, where a government commission confirmed Jan's scrupulous account on the whole, and documented many similar incidents in other places. Poland's president at the time, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, traveled to Jedwabne on the massacre's sixtieth anniversary to replace the memorial that had long indicated German culpability. "We cannot have any doubts—here in Jedwabne citizens of the Republic of Poland died from the hands of other citizens of the Republic of Poland," he said.

Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz (Random House, 2006), marshaling the archives of the Polish Catholic Church, among other sources, provided an even more in-depth look at how non-Jewish Poles extended practices of the Nazi occupiers. Jan offered chilling detail of how, after the war, Poles from just about every walk of life hounded or killed impoverished and emaciated survivors of the Holocaust. Church leaders and Communist officials did little to stop such actions, and in some instances encouraged or took part in them. Jan argued that guilt drove many Poles to additional atrocities.

Golden Harvest: Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust (Oxford University Press, 2012), written with his former wife Irena Gross, takes off from a group photograph of peasants resting after apparently having worked the fields. In front of them, however, lay skulls and other human bones—the peasants had actually been digging for gold and other valuables in the ashes at Treblinka, where around 800,000 Jews were gathered and killed.

In 2009, Jan's Polish citizenship, revoked forty years earlier, was restored. All the while, however, Polish hardline nationalists were denouncing Jan's scholarly works as blasphemies. Upset that Poland was now portrayed not merely as victim but also as perpetrator, these would-be critics have persistently, falsely claimed to have debunked Jan's evidence. Eleven years after the publication of *Neighbors*, a film based on the book was banned in Polish cinemas.

In an online op-ed in 2015 ("Eastern Europe's Crisis of Shame"), which was reprinted by a German newspaper, Jan criticized the Polish government for a refusal to accept more non-Christian refugees, and pointed out that during the Second World War, Poles had killed more Jews, who were citizens, than Poles had killed Germans, who were occupiers. This provoked the government to initiate possible criminal proceedings against him for insulting the nation. Jan has vowed, if indicted and forced to stand trial, he will defend the truth.