

Alexander Prusin (1955–2018)

Alexander Prusin was born in 1955 to Victor and Vitya in Lvov, Ukraine. In the west, he has pursued his PhD studies at the University of Toronto before joining New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology, where he taught for the past seventeen years. Alexander was an extraordinary scholar known for the depth and breadth of his inquiries into one of Europe's bloodiest periods, the mid-twentieth century.

First and foremost, Alexander's major field of interest was nationalism, violence, and the Holocaust in East Galicia. He has published a series of articles about several aspects of ethnicity in twentieth-century Galicia: on its Jews, on the OUN-UPA (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists-Ukrainian Insurgent Army) assault against Poles, on war crimes, on collaborations, and on violence. Besides numerous articles, Alexander's first book project—based on his PhD dissertation written under the guidance of Piotr Wrobel—was *Nationalizing a Borderland: War, Ethnicity, and Anti-Jewish Violence in East Galicia, 1914–1920*. In his typical meticulous treatment of a variety of sources from multinational origins, he sought to understand “the dynamics and mechanisms of the persecution of Jews in wartime Eastern Galicia,” to “reconstruct local dynamics of ethnic conflict,” and to see how they integrate within the larger national frameworks in which they occurred (x). Instead of looking at antisemitism as a standalone, almost ahistorical phenomenon, he claims that the Russian and Polish officials' policy of erasing Jews from the life of Galicia was similar *because* of the local context.

His second book project, *The “Lands Between”: Conflict in the East European Borderlands, 1870–1992*, was published when his research focus shifted from the 1920s more firmly into the 1940s. Stretching the chronological boundaries of his original work, this book represents his insatiable desire to explain large phenomena, to use his firm knowledge of the available sources but not to resign to analyzing a limited amount of them in depth: Alexander was a scholar who used the widest array of sources to shed light onto the bigger picture. Based on primary and secondary literature in English, German, Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Polish, he tried to explain how states and those who act in their name used violence in their nation-building efforts all the way to the fall of the communist experiment, and perhaps more curiously, why different groups participated in these joint acts of violence, such as the Holocaust. In this noble effort, he has contributed to an intellectual endeavor seeking to answer similar questions through macrohistorical exploration that has included contributions by Timothy Snyder and Mark Mazower, among others.

After engaging in such broad questions, the final phase of his career was dedicated to Serbia. In *Serbia under the Swastika*, published in 2017, the long bibliographical lists in east and west Slavic languages are exchanged for Serbian. Versed in both Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav historiographies and informed by his well-grounded expertise in the more traditional scenes of World War II research in eastern Europe, he sought not so much to reinvent our understanding of Serbia during the war as to tell its story in a way that binds it more tightly into current research on Nazi-dominated Europe. As the first complete book in English about the topic, it will remain invaluable reading for historians of the Balkans, of World War II, and of Europe more broadly.

Alexander has thus left us with a corpus of sound research, a ladder in which each step continuously challenged his previous works. In his first work, which grew out of his doctoral dissertation, he challenged the way we perceived anti-Jewish

sentiments and violence. Then, he turned to challenge himself and us by seeking explanations for phenomena of larger chronological and spatial parameters. In his last book, he drew back from the macro and broke into a new geographical field: the Balkans. Other challenges, what some might term side projects, were myriad throughout his career: Soviet Orientalism was an extreme example (which yielded an article in 2003), but World War II in Kiev and other parts of Ukraine and Poland has kept him fascinated throughout the years.

In November 2018, his last challenge will sadly be published posthumously. *Justice Behind the Iron Curtain: Nazis on Trial in Communist Poland*, co-authored with Gabriel Finder, is the culmination of his interest of war crimes, in which he and Prof. Finder offer an analysis—for the first time ever—of how Poland coped with the Nazi occupation as a communist state. One could only imagine which boundaries Alexander would have crossed were he still with us.

Alexander was thus a role model for other scholars who wished to emulate his erudition, intimate knowledge of the sources, and sharp analytical approach, which could shift between varied lenses: macro and micro, Ukraine-Poland and Serbia, the 1920s and the 1940s, violence and coping with the past. He took his job as a role model seriously. While his position at New Mexico Tech did not summon many opportunities to serve as an advisor to graduate students, he served as an informal mentor and advisor for young scholars all around the country and the world. Reading and commenting on drafts, holding Skype talks to discuss ideas, and offering other kinds of generous feedback were just a part of the tasks he avidly undertook within the scholarly community.

Within New Mexico, Alexander taught in a multidisciplinary unit, the CLASS (Communication, Liberal Arts, and Social Sciences) Department. Such a department forced him to be the leading Europeanist, teaching courses on medieval Europe, the Middle East, World Civilization to 1500 AD, and a variety of courses more akin to his fields of expertise and interest. He took teaching seriously. His teaching assignments allowed him to express the breadth of his thought and knowledge while serving as a meaningful figure within the institution for his students. And indeed he was: strict, but fair; demanding, but kind; deadly serious while utilizing a solid Russian sense of humor.

Alexander is survived by his wife Elena (herself a Leopoldian), who was the subject of many anecdotes and stories that demonstrated how much he adored her. He will be sorely missed by friends and colleagues for his good heart, wonderful scholarship, and kind mentorship.

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