

In Memory of Irwin Wall, Professor Emeritus in History, by Piotr Gorecki on behalf of the History Department

Sadly, in a space of one month the History Department has lost a second colleague and top scholar in late modern European history. Irwin Wall, Professor Emeritus, died on January 26, 2023 in New York City—his birthplace, and his primary place of residence since his retirement from the University over twenty years ago. Irwin joined our faculty in 1970, and retired in 2001. His association with the University and its community continued thereafter, briskly and regularly. His life in New York was interspersed with annual winter visits to his other home, here in Riverside, where, for over one decade after his retirement, he continued teaching a wide array of undergraduate courses; and where, over an even longer period, he offered a similarly broad range of community-based courses through our Osher program—with massive enrollments and to great acclaim. He coupled these activities with large numbers of other visits, lectures, and workshops related to his expertise in and near the Riverside community. Over the same years, he was similarly engaged on the East Coast, most notably (and over many years) as Visiting Professor at New York University, and as a member of the community of modern Europeanists there, at Columbia, in other universities, and beyond.

His area of expertise was late modern France, above all in the two decades after 1945—though, in a subset of his publications, he moved forward all the way to the present, thereby contributing to the innovative field of current history. In that subject, he specialized in political history—of a strongly non-traditional kind, not centered to institutions, diplomacy, or warfare, but placing such phenomena at the nexus of collective behavior, ideas, and dynamism of social opinion and practice. The specific subjects toward which these interests gravitated are: French electoral politics, as affected by that multidimensional context; and the international scene, especially between France and the United States. Apart from prolific article production, his scholarship is marked by five substantial monographs (two of them a succession from a major book originally published in France to an English translation), all superbly received and influential in France and the United States. This brings us to Irwin's third home over these long years. While he spoke about this with characteristic modesty, he achieved eminence and thrived in Paris and its intellectual world. Irwin was global before we had that word.

These qualities sum up Irwin's entire professional life—indeed, his persona. He seamlessly combined scholarship and civic engagement at the highest level—previewing by decades the public and civic aspects that we now explicitly recognize as a key part of what we do. Over his years in the department, this kind of passionate engagement was always present in his research, teaching, and service. He chaired the department in the early 1990s, a challenging time right after we completed a rapid acceleration in the hiring of new faculty. His support of the newly hired, especially junior, colleagues, was a model of generosity and kindness. The stuff of legend. His teaching, ranging across the undergraduate and graduate curriculum, was always—every single time—spectacularly effective and successful. We miss Irwin greatly, and are thankful for his past roles and legacies in our department, right into the present. As a person, he was marked by kindness, an instinct for inclusivity and progressive social justice, concern with peace and democracy, integrity, strength, and an especially endearing mix of humility and a sense of a life well lived.