



UNIVERSITY
OF MANITOBA

Centre for Ukrainian Canadian Studies
U of M
Bulletin - Winter 2011
(Vol.1, no. 2)



CUCS Co-Hosts in Winnipeg Conference on Ukrainians in Canada during WWII



Jars Balan

A conference held in Winnipeg on 11-12 November examined issues related to Ukrainian Canadians and the Second World War. The gathering was a joint initiative of the Kule Ukrainian Canadian Studies Centre at CIUS, the Centre for Ukrainian Canadian Studies at the University of Manitoba, and the ‘Oseredok’ Ukrainian Cultural and Educational Centre. Additional financial support was provided by the Wasyl Topolnicki Memorial Fund and the University of Manitoba’s Department of German and Slavic Studies. The well-attended event featured ten presenters from various parts of Canada, who addressed a wide range of topics that stimulated lively discussions which engaged the audience and session chairs alike.

The conference was introduced by Jars Balan (CIUS Kule Centre) with a recitation of a 1903 poem by pioneer-era community activist Michael Gowda, who argued in his work that Ukrainian immigrants would only be recognized as fully “Canadian” once they had fought—and were prepared to die for—their adopted country in battle. It was this notion of the need to make a “blood sacrifice” that partly inspired the title of the conference, “Becoming Canadian: Ukrainian Canadians and the Second World War”.



Orest Zakydalsky

The first session opened with a presentation by Orest Zakydalsky (UCRDC) about the oral interviews with Ukrainian-Canadian service personnel held by the Ukrainian Canadian Research and Documentation Centre in Toronto. Though small in number (37 in total) and not a truly representative sample, the collection nonetheless provides some revealing insights into the motivations and experiences of those who joined the Canadian Armed Forces. Dr. Serge Cipko (CIUS Kule Centre) followed with a look at the wartime coverage devoted to Ukrainian-Canadians in the *Edmonton Journal* and the *Edmonton Bulletin*, noting that two organizations in particular – the Ukrainian Labour-Farmer Temple Association and the Ukrainian Canadian Committee – received considerable attention from the mainstream press. Other articles of interest included death notices, obituaries, and wedding announcements (with a spike in 1939 and numerous reports of Ukrainian women marrying Americans stationed or working in the Edmonton area during the war years), as well as accounts of the involvement of Ukrainians in all aspects of the war effort.



Serge Cipko

A short Remembrance Day ceremony was held at 11 am, hosted by Borys Gengalo, a former Major in the Canadian Militia. The commemoration featured a video presentation about the participation of Canadian forces in conflicts and peacekeeping duties since the First World War; a reading of a memoiristic sketch describing the experiences of a Winnipeg veteran named John Malyna, who unsuccessfully tried to get selected for the elite “Devil’s Brigade”; and the recitation of a special prayer composed by the Chaplain Fr. Semen Sawchuk in 1957 for Remembrance Day ceremonies at St. John’s High School in Winnipeg.

The second session of the day focused on “the war before the war.” Myroslav Shkandriy (University of Manitoba) first examined events in Carpatho-Ukraine in 1938-39. He noted the huge expectations that Ukrainians in Canada and elsewhere beyond Ukraine had that this tiny territory would serve as the nucleus of a future Ukrainian state, as well as the general willingness of Western politicians and pundits to accept the legitimacy of this fledgling autonomous territory before it was militarily suppressed.

Jars Balan (CIUS Kule Centre) then discussed how the image of the Soviet Union evolved in the course of the 1930s from that of the “Red Scare” to what in time became the friendly “embrace of the Russian Bear.” Using stories drawn from the English Canadian press, he showed how with the help of skilful propaganda and thanks to the growing threat posed by Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. Joseph Stalin and his Bolshevik regime were gradually transformed from being a menace to Western democracies into a benign lesser of Evils - thus setting the stage for the Kremlin becoming a trusty ally during the Second World War.



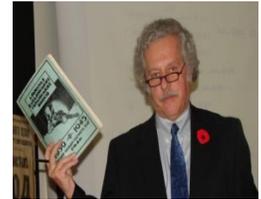
Myroslav Shkandriy

The third session put a distinctly human face on the war. Suzanne Hunchuck (Independent scholar, Ottawa) spoke about “Three Brothers in Service,” basing her presentation on her own family’s history, supplemented with contextual research.



Suzanne Hunchuck

Peter Melnycky (Alberta Community Spirit) then spoke about Alberta Ukrainians who had been awarded for distinguished service in the RCAF. His talk included the story of Russell Bannock (born in Edmonton in 1919 as Slawko Bahniuk), one of Canada’s most decorated but largely unrecognized war-time pilots. He also related excerpts from the poignant correspondence between another Alberta airman and his parents back home, in which the former made a conscious effort to write in Ukrainian even though his grasp of the language was imperfect.



Peter Melnycky



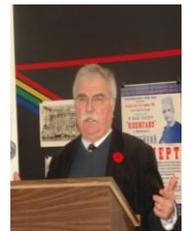
Andrij Makuch

The last session of the first day saw Andrij Makuch (CIUS Kule Centre) speak on the effect of Soviet foreign policy change in 1939 on the pro-Communist Left in Canada. He was followed by Jody Perrun (Royal Military College), who based his talk on research that he had done on the conflict between Ukrainian Canadian Nationalists and Communists during the war. The conference reconvened after dinner for a screening of the 1943 Hollywood curiosity, *The North Star*. Boasting an impressive array of talent in front of and behind the camera, the film ostensibly dealt with the impact of the Nazi invasion of 1941 on the inhabitants of a collective farm in Soviet Ukraine. In retrospect, the film was an obvious showcase for the views of Hollywood’s Leftist sympathizers at that time (among those involved in the production were the writers Lillian Hellman and the composers Aaron Copland and Ira Gershwin), and it comes across as a wooden, somewhat Soviet-style propaganda piece. Other highlights of the evening’s theme-related program were a contemporary newsreel and a Donald Duck cartoon ridiculing Hitler and the Nazis.



Jody Perrun

The sessions on the second day of the conference consisted of lengthier presentations. Roman Yereniuk (Centre for Ukrainian Canadian Studies, University of Manitoba) started off with a detailed examination of the Ukrainian chaplaincies in the Canadian forces during the Second World War. A total of seven Ukrainian clergymen – four Orthodox and three Catholic – served in this capacity in Canada (six), in England (only three) and on the continent (only two), none in the frontlines and all towards the end of the war, being especially active during demobilization. Two of the chaplains witnessed and reported on the refugee camps of the DPs in Western Europe and met with leaders of the two churches who informed them of the Soviet directed religious destruction in Ukraine.



Roman Yereniuk



Thomas Prymak

The final presentation was delivered by Thomas Prymak (Chair of Ukrainian Studies, University of Toronto), who spoke about Gabrielle Roy’s ‘Steven’ in her posthumously published memoir, *Enchantment and Sorrow*. Dr. Prymak sensitively documented the love affair between the Manitoba-born Roy and the Alberta-born Ukrainian Canadian Stephen Davidovich, who met in England on the eve of World War Two. However, the intense romance was shattered by the sudden and unexplained disappearance of Davidovich, an operative for the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists who was summoned for a secret assignment on the continent. As it worked out, things would never be the same once he had returned to England. Dr. Prymak had been tracing the contours of this story since the 1980s, when he was working on his book *The Maple Leaf and Trident*, and his thoroughly researched and moving tale was very well received by the audience.



Organizers of the Conference

Final comments were offered by Sophia Kachor (Oseredok), who noted that competing “nationalist” and “Canadian” threads often appeared in the presentations. As to the question of whether the conference reached its objective of stimulating new research on Ukrainian Canadians and the Second World War, she suggested that “time will tell” but that this event had demonstrated considerable interest and a remarkable level of knowledge about this field.

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The Centre for Ukrainian Canadian Studies exists to create, preserve and communicate knowledge relating to Ukrainian Canadiana through teaching, research and community outreach. The Centre is a leading multicultural institution of the University of Manitoba that specializes in matters pertaining to Ukrainians in Canada. For further information contact the Centre at (204) 474-8906 or cucs@cc.umanitoba.ca or view our website at: www.umanitoba.ca/faculties/arts/departments/ukrainian_canadian_studies.