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Roman Szporluk Lectures on Modern Ukraine at Cambridge University

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The formation of modern Ukraine has been the result of a complex interaction between Ukrainians and other European nations, and the "Ukrainian factor" should be recognized as an indispensable dimension in the making of modern Europe. So argued Professor Roman Szporluk in his lecture, "The Making of Modern Ukraine: the European Dimension," delivered on February 28, 2003 at Cambridge University. His presentation was the first in an annual lecture series in Ukrainian Studies at the University. Organized by the Cambridge Committee for Russian and East European Studies, supported by the Cambridge University Ukrainian Society, and sponsored by the Stasiuk Program for Contemporary Ukraine at the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Alberta, this series seeks to boost academic interest in Ukrainian Studies at Cambridge University.



During the reception from left: David Marples, Roman and Mary Ann Szporluk, Simon Franklin.

As his point of departure Szporluk chose another lecture, one delivered in February 1948 by the eminent British historian Sir Lewis Namier (1888-1960) to mark the centennial of the European revolutions of 1848. Namier's life and thought readily lend themselves to the argument Szporluk made. Namier grew up in Eastern Galicia, in what is today the Skalat district, of the Ternopil region in Ukraine. As an advisor to the British government during the Polish-Ukrainian conflict of 1918-1923 he spoke for the Ukrainian side, as he did throughout his life. Just as Ukraine was an important influence for the prominent British and European historian, so has Ukraine been a constant presence in European history.

In Szporluk's opinion, this influence has been so great that to understand the modern history of Europe it is necessary to recognize "the Ukrainian factor." The formation of modern Ukraine took place in a setting in which others had an impact on Ukraine, but Ukraine and Ukrainians also played a role in the histories of

others.

To appreciate the challenge of this statement we should bear in mind that it was made in a British setting. As Dr. Simon Franklin of Cambridge University observed, "By contrast with North America, Ukrainian Studies barely figures at all in British universities, and the public awareness of Ukraine is very low." Szporluk challenged the British scholars to start paying "attention to matters Ukrainian."

Szporluk based his analysis of the European dimension of modern Ukraine in the making on Namier's assertion that "every idea put forward by the nationalities of the Habsburg Monarchy in 1848 was realized at some juncture, in one form or another. It determined the course of the century which followed." Reviewing Namier's scenarios of Europeans' journey to modernity, Szporluk argued that Ukrainians, as a distinct historical actor, have participated in this journey since 1848, acted out its many versions, and risen to "modern nationhood with others." According to Szporluk, "the 'plot' of Ukrainian history is the story of how some people wanted to chart out a specifically Ukrainian path to modernity at the end of which path an independent Ukrainian state was to emerge. In order to do this, they had to break away, intellectually and politically, from the already on-going other national projects --the Russian, Polish, and 'Austrian.' ... Ukrainian nation-builders wanted their people to enter the world directly -- thus rejecting the status of a provincial or regional subdivision of Russia, Poland, Hungary or Germany."

Germany holds a special place in Szporluk's scheme. Ukrainian history in the twentieth century, he argued, was closely connected to the histories not only of Russia and Poland but also of Germany. – The unification of Germany in 1990 and thus the solution of the German crisis that began in 1848 – coincided and was causally connected to the emergence of an independent Ukraine in 1991. The realization of the Ukrainian program of 1848 at the same time gave us also a democratic Poland free from Soviet control.

Noting that it took about 150 years to solve the German problem of 1848, the problem that caused so many tragedies for others, including Ukraine, in World War II, – Szporluk asked whether it is possible to consider the establishment of an independent Russia in 1991 as the solution of the Russian problem that will also mean the acceptance by Russia, finally, of an independent Ukraine. Or are the Russian elites still searching for an answer to the question "What is Russia?" by restoring Moscow's control over Ukraine? Is there a seed-plot of Russian history now springing up after the German story has had a happy ending?

Keenly aware of the "battle over European orientation" now underway in Ukraine Szporluk deconstructed persistent, outdated assumptions concerning Ukrainian history and identity that have lately gained increasing currency. Examples include the notion that Ukraine is an Austrian invention or Galician conspiracy, and that Ukrainians are essentially southwestern Russians, without any distinct identity. Most important, he offered a lesson of history for those involved in the making of



Members of the Cambridge University Ukrainian Society, from left, Alex Orlov (Kyiv), Zoryana Oliynyk, President (Lviv), Andriy Nevidomskyy (Lviv), and Andriy Ivanchenko (Kharkiv).

Ukraine today – namely that Ukrainian nation-builders of the past such as Taras Shevchenko, Panteleimon Kulish, Mykhailo Drahomanov, Lesya Ukrainka, Olha Kobylianska, Ivan Franko, Mykhailo Hrushevsky, and Mykola Khvyliovyy “appear to have thought that in order to become European it was not necessary to be a Russian, or a Pole, or an 'Austrian' subject of His Imperial Majesty. They wanted to be Ukrainian Europeans or European Ukrainians. Moreover, Szporluk argued, the rulers of Ukraine, “and just as importantly the new generation of Ukraine’s citizens, need to be raised in a national spirit – that is in a liberal, democratic, pro-Western spirit.”

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According to its organizers the lecture was a success beyond all expectations. Despite the fact that for many in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, Ukraine still remains, in Szporluk's characterization, a largely “unsuspected nation, a tabula russa,” more than seventy University faculty, students, members of the Ukrainian community attended his lecture. Some came from as far away as London and Oxford (a 3.5-hour bus ride); some took a day off work or cancelled other plans. In recognition of this auspicious academic initiative, the Embassy of Ukraine dispatched at once three of its officials to the event. Clearly everyone in the audience found something to learn about modern Ukraine in the making.

Yuri Shevchuk, Toronto, Canada; yurkosh@hotmail.com

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