

Ukrainian studies initiative launched at Cambridge University

by Yuri Shevchuk

TORONTO - 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. This was the principal argument of the lecture "The Making of Modern Ukraine: the European Dimension" delivered by Prof. Roman Szporluk of Harvard on February 28, at Cambridge University.

The event did not qualify as a sensation neither by the number of people in attendance - about 70 - or by the fact that the invited speaker was an academic celebrity in his field. Over its 700 - year history Cambridge University had seen greater audiences and heard from many a scholar of great prominence. Yet the purpose of this undertaking singles it out in the busy program of events at Cambridge as a pioneering and auspicious initiative.

Prof. Szporluk's appearance launched the first ever Annual Lecture Series in Ukrainian Studies at Cambridge University. Organized by the Cambridge Committee for Russian and East-European Studies (CREES), with the support of the Cambridge University Ukrainian Society and the sponsorship by the Stasiuk Program for Contemporary Ukraine at the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Alberta, this series pursues the ambitious goal of boosting academic interest in Ukrainian studies and making them a permanent presence in the curriculum of Cambridge University.

Dr. Szporluk, the Mykhailo Hrushevsky Professor of Ukrainian History at Harvard University and director of the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, needs no introduction for those interested in modern East European, Ukrainian and Russian history. His bibliography includes books, articles, chapters in collective monographs, essays, book reviews and interviews published in several languages. His most recent book "Russia, Ukraine, and the Breakup of the Soviet Union" (Hoover Institution Press, 2000) saw its second printing in 2002.

In March 2003 a collection of his essays "Imperium, Komunizm, i Narody" (Empire, Communism, and Nations) was published in Krakow, Poland (Arcana Publishers, 237 pages). In recent years Dr. Szporluk has been working on a book tentatively titled "The Making of Modern Ukraine: A History and an Interpretation," which covers the period from the late 18th century to 1991.

"One of Roman's major achievements in Ukrainian history was his re-contextualization of it," noted the editors of "Cultures and Nations of Central and Eastern Europe. Essays in Honor of Roman

Szporluk" (Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 2000). "Those outside the field had tended to regard Ukrainian history ... as an appendage of Russian history ... Roman's innovation was to insist on examining Ukrainian history as a component of East Central European history, to be studied particularly in connection with developments in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia."

The inaugural lecture

As a point of departure for his presentation, Prof. 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 revolution of 1848. Namier's life and thought readily lend themselves to the argument Dr. Szporluk was about to make. Namier grew up in Eastern Galicia, in what today is the Skalat district of the Ternopil region in Ukraine. During the Polish-Ukrainian conflict of the 1918-1923 he spoke for the Ukrainian side and throughout his life had preserved a strong sentiment for Ukraine. Just as Ukraine was an important formative influence for the prominent British and European historian, so has Ukraine been a constant presence in European history.

In the opinion of the speaker, 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 and intellectual courage of this statement, one has to bear in mind that it was made in a British setting. As Dr. Simon Franklin admitted, "by contrast with North America, Ukrainian studies barely figures at all in British universities, and the public awareness of Ukraine is very low."

Challenging the British scholars to start paying "attention to matters Ukrainian" was another important message of Prof. Szporluk's presentation, a message that could not be more appropriate for the aim and purpose of the Stasiuk-Cambridge Lecture Series. In addition to Namier, the speaker reminded his audience of such fine historians of the past as R .W. Seton-Watson, one of the founders of the School of Slavonic Studies in London, and his son, Hugh Seton-Watson, who did research on Ukraine of a considerable staying power and initiated the British tradition of Ukrainian studies that still has to find due recognition among their countrymen.

Dr. 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 Dr. Szporluk argued that Ukrainians, as a distinct historical actor, have participated in this journey since 1848, have acted out its many versions and have risen to "modern nationhood with others."

According to Dr. 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 an independent Ukrainian state was to emerge. In order to do this ... they had to break away, intellectually and politically, from the

already ongoing 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 and, what would for many be, unexpected place in Dr. Szporluk's scheme. Ukrainian history in the 20th century, he argued, was closely connected to the histories of not only Russia and Poland but also Germany. The unification of Germany in 1990 - and thus the solution of the German crisis that began in 1848 - coincided in time and was causally connected to the emergence of an independent Ukraine in 1991. Thus 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 for the solution of the German problem, which began in 1848 and caused so many tragedies for others, including Ukraine in World War II, Dr. 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.

Keenly aware of the "battle about European orientation" that is now under way in Ukraine, Dr. Szporluk deconstructed persistent clichés and outdated assumptions concerning Ukrainian history and identity that have lately gained increasing currency, for example, the notion that Ukraine is an Austrian invention and/or Galician conspiracy, or that Ukrainians are essentially southwestern Russians, without any distinct identity.

Most importantly he offered some lessons of history for those involved in the making of Ukraine today. One such lesson is that such Ukrainian nation-builders of the past as Taras Shevchenko, Panteleimon Kulish, Mykhailo Drahomanov, Lesia Ukrainka, Olha Kobylanska, 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."

Another such lesson, said Dr. Szporluk, is that 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."

A pioneering initiative

It is emblematic that the two biggest Ukrainian research centers in the West - the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies (CIUS) and the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute (HURI), combined forces in this pioneer initiative. CIUS provided the funding and vision, and HURI the academic star power.

Within a matter of days, the Internet announcement of Prof. Szporluk's lecture generated the much-

needed buzz for the initiative that began as an enthusiastic idea. In the spring of 2001, a group of Ukrainian students at Cambridge University, a.k.a. the Cambridge University Ukrainian Society (CUUS), came up with the idea of organizing a Ukrainian lecture. It seemed odd and unacceptable that 10 years after its emergence as an independent state, Ukraine as a country and Ukrainian studies as an academic discipline were absent from the university curriculum.

An invitation was sent to David Marples, professor of history at the University of Alberta, to deliver a lecture to the CUUS. Dr. Marples' lecture, "Ukrainian Politics and the Future of the Kuchma Regime," took place in July 2001 in front of a small and enthusiastic audience. Its success only further fueled the desire for a larger-scale Ukrainian initiative; the consensus was that an annual lecture series with an across-the-board appeal should be established at Cambridge University.

Dr. Marples recalled: "Talking to a group of Ukrainian students after my lecture, I asked about the state of Ukrainian studies at Cambridge. They told me it was non-existent and that the Center for Russian and East European Studies focused only on Russia. After further talks with Alex Orlov, who is from Kyiv, we hit on the idea of an annual lecture on Ukraine which I could fund from the Stasiuk Program that I direct at the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies."

The idea of the Ukrainian annual lecture series found support from Dr. Simon Franklin, chairman of the Committee for Russian and East European Studies, and a recognized expert on Kyivan Rus' history and culture. Subsequently, a lecture organizing committee was formed. Chaired by Dr. Franklin it consisted of Dr. David Lane, Dr. Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov, and the indefatigable Mr. Orlov, a Ph.D. student of chemistry and a native of Kyiv, who represented the Cambridge University Ukrainian Society.

The final plan boiled down to two main stipulations: first, the Annual Lecture in Ukrainian Studies Series would have a grace period of five years and its continuation would be contingent on its success; second, the speaker should be a renowned academic to give the initiative a good start.

Said Mr. Orlov, "It is quite appropriate that the first speaker of the series is Prof. Szporluk, director of the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute. The two universities are very interconnected in their history. John Harvard, the first benefactor of Harvard University, was a student at Cambridge University. And although Cambridge (U.K.) and Cambridge (Mass.) are miles apart, it is wonderful to have a Ukrainian link between them. Hopefully, some day, Cambridge University will have its own Institute of Ukrainian Studies of such stature and influence as the one in Cambridge, Mass."

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According to its organizers the lecture was a success that surpassed even the most optimistic expectations. Given the relatively limited appeal of its subject matter for a wider English public - Ukraine still remains a largely "unsuspected nation, a tabula Russa," to use Dr. Szporluk's characterization - the 70-strong audience was a healthy turn-out.

In attendance were university faculty members, including Dr. Franklin, Dr. Chaikov, university lecturer, social anthropology; David Lane, senior associate, School of Social and Political Sciences; Hubertus Jahn, university lecturer in History; Dr. Marples; Andrew Wilson of the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London; and Vera Rich, London-based analyst of Ukraine and Belarus; as well as students and members of the broader Ukrainian community.

Some had even come from as far as London and Oxford (a three-and-a-half hour bus ride), others took a day off from work or cancelled other plans. In a show of support for the auspicious academic initiative, the Embassy of Ukraine dispatched three of its officials to the event. The lecture was followed by a reception for the public and a formal dinner at Emmanuel College hosted by Dr. Franklin.

Prof. David Marples, Simon Franklin, Alex Orlov and Andriy Ivanchenko contributed to the writing of this article by Yuri Shevchuk from Toronto.

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