By Force or By Choice: Ukrainian Settlement Patterns on the Canadian Prairies

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Between 1891 and 1914, 250,000 Ukrainian immigrants arrived on the Canadian prairies. They left difficult conditions in their homelands to chase the promises of Clifford Sifton, Minister of Interior in the government of Sir Wilfred Laurier, offering cheap land and excellent growing conditions. Immigration officials have been accused of pressuring or forcing Ukrainians to settle in particular areas with little regard for their opinions. While officials used many methods to encourage Ukrainians to assimilate, hoping to prevent the creation of ethnic enclaves, the newcomers attempted to recreate their old settlement patterns through kinship ties and chain migration. This paper demonstrates that immigration officials used varying degrees of force only in unusual situations and examines how and why, for all the pressure they may have been under from immigration officers, the Ukrainians pushed back in order to settle where they wanted to rather than where they were told to.

The first Ukrainian immigrants arrived in Canada in 1891, and by 1914, approximately 250,000 Ukrainians had made their homes there. Like so many other immigrant groups, they were drawn by the lure of large tracts of land and the promise of excellent growing conditions. For many, it was also an opportunity to escape from difficult conditions in Europe. The Canadian government in partnership with the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) recruited many newcomers from Europe and America to populate the prairies and create a grain-growing region that would supply the rest of the country. Some historians have argued that the government dictated where these newcomers could settle, attempting to contain less desirable ethnic groups in bloc settlements on marginal lands while allowing immigrants of more acceptable ethnicities to select their

own homesteads. But while the Canadian government did attempt to place the newcomers in certain areas, the Ukrainian immigrants had a voice in the issue. In fact, they had a good deal of control in where they settled.

Most of the Ukrainian immigrants came to Canada from Galicia and Bukovyna, where peasants struggled to support themselves. Many were deeply in debt from trying to pay the taxes which funded a program that freed them from the control of the landlords. Prior to this, many peasants lived in conditions that were reminiscent of feudal times; landlords controlled where people lived and worked, who they married, and required payment of *panshchyna*, three to six days of labour or monetary payments in lieu of work. This left many peasants with little time to tend their own crops or feed their families. The government program that eliminated this system imposed very high fees on the peasants in order to reimburse the landlords for the loss of labour. Many peasants were deep in debt and being charged 52% -104% in interest in order to pay these government fees. In addition, land holdings in Galicia were getting smaller. From 1859 to 1900 the average farm fell from twelve acres to six acres, greatly impacting how much a peasant could produce.[1] This left peasants looking for other ways to support their families. When the news began to spread that there was excellent agricultural land to be had in Canada many Ukrainians made the decision to move. Some, mainly single men, were only moving west temporarily in order to earn money that would help support family remaining behind in Europe, but many more were families making a permanent move to Canada.

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[1] Vic Satzewich, *The Ukrainian Diaspora* (London: Taylor and Francis Group, 2002), 28-29. All of the information about panshchyna and the landlord-peasant relationship in this paragraph came from this source.

The news of promising farmlands in Canada was first relayed by Wasyl Eleniak and Ivan Pylypiw, the first documented Ukrainian immigrants to settle on the Prairies. The two men left Nebyliv in Galicia and homesteaded near Edmonton.[2] They sent word back to friends and family about the great potential of the Canadian West for newcomers willing to work. Given how challenging farming had become in Galicia, this news proved to be a very powerful motivator. Another immigrant was an agriculture professor from Lviv, Dr. Oleskiw. During this time, many Ukrainians were leaving the country in search of a better life; some remained in Europe, some went to Hawaii, and others made their way to Brazil.[3] Oleskiw believed that there were better locations for Ukrainian peasants and decided the ideal place was on the Canadian prairies. He authored a pamphlet which was widely distributed among Ukrainians in Galicia, stirring up interest in the young country across the ocean. Vic Satzewich quotes a government official who explained that, "the bulk of Galicians came out. . .as a result of Olsekiw's work."[4]

Oleskiw recommended that those with "adequate means and temperament" would do well on the prairies and that a bloc settlement pattern would be best as it would provide the newcomers with practical as well as emotional support as they built their new homes.[5] He selected areas at Stuartburn and

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[2] Frances Swyripa, "Ancestors, the Land, and Ethno-religious Identity on the Canadian Prairies: Comparing the Mennonite and Ukrainian Legacies," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 21 (2003): 54-55. A bit of information about Eleniak and Pylypiw can also be found in the booklet *Ukrainians in Canada* published by the Canadian Historical Association.

[3] Oleh W. Gerus and J.E. Rea, *Ukrainians in Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1985), 5.

[4] Satzewich, *Ukrainian Diaspora*, 36.

[5] Gerus and Rea, *Ukrainians in Canada*, 5.

Dauphin in Manitoba and organized groups of immigrants, the first of whom arrived in Québec in May of 1896.[6] It is interesting to note that while these two areas were so highly praised by Oleskiw prior to settlement, they proved to be impractical for farming beyond the initial few homesteads. This was especially true at Stuartburn, where those who arrived later in the development of the settlement found that the lands to the west of the Ukrainians were already occupied and the agricultural potential of the land decreased as they moved further east, as it became boggy and more heavily treed.[7]

Of course, it was not only Ukrainians who were attempting to lure others to join them in Canada; both the Canadian government and the Canadian Pacific Railway expended considerable effort to attract newcomers who would make use of the new rail lines and populate the prairies. The CPR and the government worked together to spread an advertising campaign throughout Europe to attract agricultural settlers to the West. This included posters and brochures similar to the ones that caught Oleskiw's eye and had him singing the praises of the prairies to Ukrainian peasants. There were also agreements in place between the CPR and steamship companies in other countries whereby the steamship companies would be paid bonuses from the CPR for carrying agricultural immigrants to Canada. The purpose of this was to circumvent European governments who were opposed to the loss of what were perceived as the "anchors of social stability" leaving for Canada.[8]

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[6] Valerie Knowles, *Strangers at Our Gates: Canadian Immigration and Immigration Policy, 1540 – 2006*, rev. ed. (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2007), 102.

[7] John C. Lehr, "Governmental Coercion in the Settlement of Ukrainian Immigrants in Western Canada" in *Immigration and Settlement, 1970 – 1939*, ed. Gregory P. Marchildon (Regina: CPRC Press, 2009), 273.

[8] Reg Witaker, *Canadian Immigration Policy Since Confederation* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1971), 7.

Clifford Sifton, Minister of the Interior in Wilfred Laurier's cabinet, was determined to bring in farmers as he viewed them as the only desirable immigrants.[9] When the advertising failed to attract enough attention from Western Europeans and Americans, they shifted their focus to Ukrainians and others from Eastern Europe. Sifton was inclined toward the "peasants in sheepskins" who he felt had the work ethic to be successful in farming on the prairies. He summed up his preference for Ukrainian agriculturalists with a statement in a Macleans article in 1922, explaining that, "[t]hese men are workers. They have been bred for generations to work from daylight to dark. They have never done anything else and never expect to do anything else."[10] He was emphasizing hard working agricultural immigrants, believing that Canada needed a population of experienced farmers on the prairies.

However, these hard-working peasants arriving on the prairies needed to be controlled. While they had the work ethic that was so desirable, they were still seen as inferior to the preferred immigrants from America, Britain, and Germany and as such had to be carefully contained. It was a fine balancing act; immigration officials attempted to keep the newcomers in close proximity so they could support each other yet dispersed enough to assimilate into the acceptable British-influenced Canadian culture. According to John Lehr, large bloc settlements were undesirable to the government because they were "politically dangerous to Anglo-Saxon elites."[11] Officials needed to control how large the communities were becoming, given the influx of so many Ukrainians arriving on the prairies in such a short period

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[9] Gerus and Rea, *Ukrainians in Canada*, 7.

[10] David Hall, "Clifford Sifton's Vision of the Prairie West," in *The Prairie West as Promised Land*, ed. Douglas Francis and Chris Kitzan (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2007), 90.

[11] Lehr, *Governmental Coercion*, 281.

of time. Officials attempted to create new colonies by dissuading immigrants from selecting lands near already well-populated areas such as Stuartburn, Yorkton, or Star. Immigration Commissioner William McCreary and his staff, including Kyrilo Genik, one of the first of the Oleskiw settlers, attempted to convince settlers to take up homesteads and start new communities in different areas.[12] They were successful in establishing several communities, such as Fish Creek and Pleasant Home in Saskatchewan. This prevented the existing settlements from becoming a threat to the Anglophone residents nearby, but it was rarely an easy task.

Government policies which encouraged the practice of kin-based chain migration and the inclination to cling to the familiar meant that Ukrainian newcomers were reluctant to settle in areas where family and friends were not already present.[13] Immigration officials used various methods and varying degrees of force to coax settlers into new communities. Reports at the time claimed that agents were forcing immigrants off of trains at random locations, a charge denied by the government and likely a baseless rumour. The *Winnipeg Telegram* wrote that the Ukrainians were being forced onto marginal lands with no concern for their welfare or chances for success.[14]

Lehr claims that many immigration agents were interested in seeing the homesteaders do well on their new farms and that coercion was used in the best interest of the settlers but it was the exception to the rule. On one occasion, immigration officials ordered that the windows and doors of a train be locked and it be

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[12] Lehr, *Governmental Coercion*, 271.

[13] Royden Loewen, *Ethnic Farm Culture in Western Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 2002), 17.

[14] Lehr, *Governmental Coercion*, 272-275.

run through Winnipeg without stopping in order to prevent immigrants from falling prey to land speculators.[15]

There were other instances of McCreary ordering that trainloads of Ukrainian settlers be taken to sites which had been selected by the government, using either deception or force. In April of 1898 a group hoping to settle in Edmonton were unable to go farther than Saskatchewan when the CPR failed to have an engine on the north bank of the Saskatchewan River. Offers were made to place them at the new settlement at Pleasant Home, Manitoba and they were threatened with ejection from the immigration hall when they refused. Ottawa ordered McCreary to place them on the south bank of the Saskatchewan River, near water, by the unsettled Fish Creek area.[16]

While officials felt the need to take what Lehr calls "firm and arbitrary action," they appear to have only done so at times when large numbers of Ukrainians were arriving in an area and the immigration halls were already full. He also stresses that while immigration officials may have abandoned with indifference those homesteaders who insisted upon marginal plots, they seldom used violence. Local officials were responsible for most cases of violence against incoming settlers and any immigration agent who did so was removed from their role.[17]

This is not to say that the Ukrainian immigrants had no voice in where they settled. They were not merely led along by government and immigration officials who placed them in areas which were politically and socially safe. The offer of 160 acres of land for a ten dollar fee was enticing to peasants eking out an existence on plots one-tenth of that size. They tended to identify

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[15] Lehr, *Governmental Coercion*, 272.
[16] Lehr, *Governmental Coercion*, 276.
[17] Lehr, *Governmental Coercion*, 275.

by village or region while they were living in Europe and attempted to maintain those connections when they arrived in Canada. Newcomers wanted to remain in close proximity to those they knew for support and assistance as they built their new homes in a place that was very different and at times very hostile to them. As Oleh Gerus wrote, Ukrainian immigrants created bloc settlements to recreate the close-knit communities of Galicia and Bukovyna.[18] They were also willing to adapt their plans in order to maintain these relationships. When later settlers were not able to obtain good agricultural plots of land to the west of the Ukrainian group already at Stuartburn, they took marginal, heavily treed lands to the east and became farm labourers and sold cordwood. Ukrainian newcomers would also resist pressure to settle in areas where kin and community were not already present. When one group of immigrants arrived in Canada they were assigned by officials to the Fish Creek settlement but none of them remained there, choosing instead to move on to Edmonton, Dauphin, Yorkton, Pleasant Home, or Stuartburn where they had pre-existing connections. When another group arrived in Winnipeg, immigration agents were ordered to take them to the Fish Creek site; the Ukrainians had been led to believe they were bound for Edmonton or Dauphin. Upon arrival at Fish Creek they openly rebelled, demanding to be taken to their chosen destinations. Officials attempted to call in the Northwest Mounted Police (NWMP) who refused to become involved in the situation. Seventy-five of the settlers began to walk to Regina, complaining that there were no other Ukrainians in the area.[19] While a dozen families opted to stay at the new site, the immigrants' defiance demonstrates that officials did not

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[18] Gerus and Rea, *Ukrainians in Canada*, 7.
[19] Lehr, *Governmental Coercion*, 277-278.

exercise complete domination over submissive newcomers. The settlers knew what they wanted and were willing to push for it.

Beyond knowing who they wanted to settle near, the Ukrainians knew what types of land they wanted. While some wanted lands that would work for raising livestock, others preferred the wooded parklands of the upper prairies. The treed lands were familiar to some of the newcomers, but for settlers from other regions the trees were a welcome new resource that meant readily available building materials and firewood.[20] While some homesteaders were coaxed onto timbered lands that were not of their choosing, many welcomed the parkland as familiar, useful, and preferred.

There were many different parties involved in the Ukrainian immigration wave of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and all had their own motivations and agendas. It can be seen that the CPR and the government both attempted to control where the newcomers settled. The government certainly had an interest in keeping both the size and composition of the new communities acceptable to the predominantly English-speaking settlers who were also taking up homesteads on the prairies, knowing that their electoral success was at stake. But the Ukrainians were not always easily manipulated; they would take action if they felt pressured in order to retain familiar community networks from their old villages. They would also accept lands that were deemed marginal and find new ways to support themselves in order to maintain their relationships and they saw benefits to lands that others viewed as unacceptable.

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[20] Loewen, *Ethnic Farm Culture*, 9. John Lehr also writes of the immigrants' appreciation for treed parkland because of the lack of timber on the Galcian steppes from which they came.

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