Left-Right Camps: A Century of Ukrainian Canadian Internment

By Richard Sanders

Canada's WWI-era internment of about 5,000 Ukrainian immigrants is still memorialised as a defining moment in this community's history. Because the narrative of these forced-labour camps is so key to rendering this community's self-identity, many Ukrainian Canadians remain understandably indignant if not traumatised by this state-sponsored crime against humanity.

Canada's first slave-labour camps (1914-1920) were also a turning point in our national tradition of using mass internment to control perceived enemies of the state. By WWI, Canadian authorities were already entrenched in the genocidal habit of holding Aboriginals captive on reserves and in church-run boarding schools. However, the War Measures Act of 1914 ushered in a new, 20th-century pattern of physical containment that targeted European and Asian civilians.

WWI was not the last time that Ukrainians were corralled into Canadian prison camps. Over the ten decades since then, the guardians of Canada's "Peaceable Kingdom" have relied on three other major programs of mass civilian incarceration. These social-control programs to physically immobilise supposed threats to Canada's political and economic order, were also intended to intimidate and deter otyer members of the public from becoming (more) politically active.

To understand why some Ukrainian Canadians have been disproportionately targeted for internment, we must recognise that for more than a century this ethnic community has been sharply divided along political lines. By putting themselves on one side or the other of a political boundary separating Left from Right, Ukrainian Canadians have segregated themselves into two distinct, rival camps.

It is also instructive to understand the political alliances that these two factions have forged with those outside their shared ethnic base. For example, those on the Ukrainian-Canadian Right have built strong ties to successive, antiCommunist government bureaucracies and national security establishments, whether led by the Liberals or Conservatives.

Meanwhile, the Ukrainian Left has always worked with radical, multiethnic unions and political parties. In struggling for peace, justice, labour rights and other causes, progressive Ukrainian Canadians have teamed up with leftists of Finnish, Jewish, Russian and Anglo heritage, as well as with radical Croats, Serbs, Hungarians, Poles, and others. For their trouble, these leftists has been targeted for surveillance, intimidation and internment by Liberal and Conservative regimes alike.

The Ukrainian Canadian Left has included a diverse range of activists from moderate reformers and social democrats, to radical socialists and Marxists. Despite this, government authorities and the Ukrainian Right have denigrated the entire spectrum of Ukrainian progressives by labelling them all Communists.

Those on the Right side of the political fence have closely identified with Ukrainian nationalism and have found great unity in their fervent opposition to anything even hinting of socialism. To members of this camp, anyone entertaining Marxist ideas, or even willing to cooperate on a common cause with socialists, has been denounced as a Communist.

The Left-Right schism has also been reflected in differing attitudes to monarchism and imperialism. The nationalist camp has included those seeking a Ukrainian monarchy akin to the British system. This faction was led by veterans who came to Canada after losing the fight for independence during the civil war in Soviet Russia (1918-1921). (These nationalists, shared a keen interest in antiCommunism with the Canadian, British and other imperialist powers that intervened in this conflict to squash Russia's 1917 revolution.)

Ukrainian monarchist émigrés are said to have been "eager to demonstrate loyalty and commitment to Canada and the [British] Empire by participating in military exercises with the Canadian militia."[1] Meanwhile, the Ukrainian Left has long distinguished itself with decidedly anti-imperialist and anti-monarchist ideologies.

Religion has also been a major factor in the Right-Left schism. The Ukrainian Left has been skeptical of religious elites, if not prone to reject the church entirely for supporting slavery, imperialism and other crimes. Meanwhile, the Ukrainian Right has largely embraced either the Catholic or Orthodox faith. Ukrainian monarchists, for example, were tied to Catholicism which has long been this ethnic community's dominant religious force. Other Ukrainian Canadian nationalists embraced AngloProtestantism after conversion to evangelical churches. But, regardless of their religious leanings, ultranationalists have seen Leftists as reflecting the twin evils of communism and atheism.

Early Rifts and Alliances

The unscalable wall between Ukrainian leftists and their conservative brethren has been evident since the turn of the 20th century. At that time, Ukrainians in western Canada's urban centres were organising cultural, educational and artistic activities. By 1903, Ukrainian activists in Winnipeg formed social groups sponsoring concerts and plays. Peter Krawchuk, in his book, *Ukrainian Socialists in Canada, 1900-1918*, noted that:

> "these reading clubs or societies met with a great deal of opposition from reactionary groups and individuals who did not wish to see the Ukrainian immigrant workers organised, especially since most of these societies were under the leadership of radicals and socialists. Particularly strong was the opposition from the clerics of the Ukrainian Catholic...and Greek Orthodox... churches."[2]

This factionalism had its roots in the Ukraine. During the late 1800s, the Ukrainian Radical Party, in the Hapsburg provinces of Galicia and Bukovyna, confronted the Ukrainian Catholic Church's control over the peasant population. Divisions in Canada, explained Ukrainian Canadian historian Orest Martynowych,

> "first appeared within the immigrant community when members of the village intelligentsia [in Canada], who had been influenced by the Radical movement [in the Ukraine], attempted to establish the life of the Ukrainian peasant immigrant masses on enlightened and rational foundations."[3]

Martinowych has described several factions that "struggled to retain or to capture the allegiance of the immigrant masses" within Canada's Ukrainian community. Each of these "mutually antagonistic camps" used a unique narrative, he says, to "capture" the imagination of their fellow Ukrainians. To build identities and institutions free of Catholic control, these camps organised around three main *foci:* (1) conversion to evangelical protestantism, (2) solidarity among working-class socialists, and (3) Ukrainian nationalism associated with the Orthodox church.[4]

After the failed Russian revolution (1905-1907), thousands of Ukrainians fled Czarist repression. In 1907, when Ukrainians in Winnipeg formed a section of the Socialist Party of Canada (SPC), they pro-

vided a meeting place for radicals of other ethnic backgrounds. Before long, many Ukrainian socialists felt they were getting second-class treatment by the SPC's Anglo leaders. They also objected to the party's "Impossibilist" doctrine which opposed efforts to "reform" capitalism. (The SPC's antireformist views led it to reject international solidarity campaigns, oppose union activism and dismiss the idea of taking any steps towards women's equality.[5])

In 1909, when representatives of eleven Ukrainian socialist groups from western Canada met in Winnipeg to split themselves away from the SPC, they created the Federation of Ukrainian Social Democrats (FUSD).[6] The next year, the SPC's German and Jewish branches in Winnipeg also broke with the party and worked with the FUSD and others to build a multiethnic, social democratic party.[7]

Winnipeg was a centre for Ukrainian language publications including the *Canadian Farmer* (1903), the Presbyterian Church's *Dawn* (1905), the *Ukrainian Voice* (1910) for nationalists who later founded Canada's Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and the Ukrainian Catholic Church's *Canadian Ruthenian* (1911).[8] The first issue of FUSD's *Robochyi Narod* (*Working People*) in 1909, described the split between socialists and nationalists in the Ukrainian community.[9]

By 1911, many Ukrainians, Jews, Germans, Poles and other nonAnglos left the SPC to form the Social Democratic Party of Canada (SDPC). This reformist party vowed to "support any measure that will tend to better conditions under capitalism." It eventually elected an alderman and a Mayor in Ontario, two MLAs in BC[10] and two Manitoba MLAs in Winnipeg North (1915 and 1920). By helping build the SDPC, Ukrainian social democrats strengthened working-class solidarity across a variety of ethnic divides.

Ukrainians, both Left and Right, joined cross-cultural alliances that were defined by politics, not ethnicity. Ukrainian Social Democrats, said Martynowych, "were convinced that the interests of Ukrainian labourers and those of Ukrainian businessmen and government employees were fundamentally at odds." For this reason, he explained, they "refused to support 'bourgeois' Ukrainians who entered politics." For instance, during Winnipeg's municipal elections in 1911 and 1914, and the provincial race in 1915, they

> "opposed Ukrainian candidates like Theodore Stefanik, a Conservative

Nykyta Budka, Bishop of the Ukrainian Catholic Church in Canada (1912-1927)
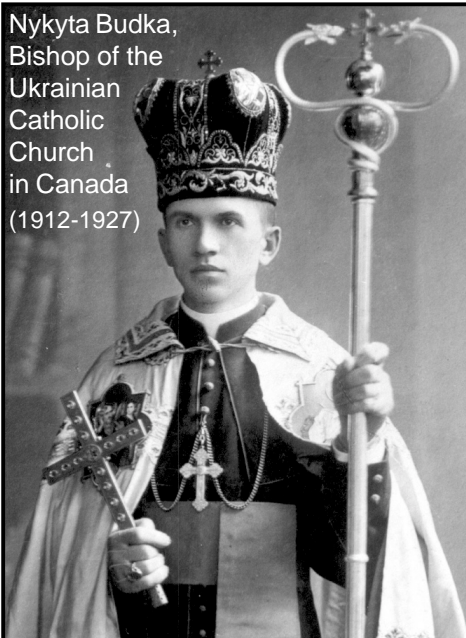
At first, he urged his flock to fight for the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Days later, he told them to fight for the British Empire. Ukrainian Canadian socialists said workers should not fight for either of the imperialist rivals.

agent, and Taras Ferley, an Independent Liberal, and chose...to support Anglo-Canadian and Jewish Social Democratic and Labour candidates."[11]

During Manitoba's 1914 election, the Ukrainian Right teamed up with former Premier Sir Rodmond Roblin's Conservative Party. Notably, Bishop Budka, the Winnipeg-based leader of Canada's Ukrainian Catholics, was credited with the Tories' re-election.[12] In fact, it "was generally conceded that the Roblin regime held on to office because of the [rightwing] Ukrainian vote."[13] However, within a year, a huge corruption scandal forced the Conservatives to resign and, in 1915, the Liberal's took power.

World War I
Conscription: For and Against
In 1915, with the help of Ukrainian radicals in Winnipeg North, the SDPC elected its first Manitoba MLA, Richard Rigg. In 1917, he resigned to run federally. Rigg and his Ukrainian allies, opposed Borden's WWI conscription policy and called for the nationalisation of banks and major industries. "[I]f the state had adopted the policy of the conscription of money, industry and natural resources," said Rigg, "there would be absolutely no necessity for the passing and enforcing of any scheme to conscript men."[14]

During WWI, Ukrainian social democrats spoke out against the war and conscription. "The war brings nothing good to the poor, only losses, and ever more victims," they said in September 1914. "From a moral point of view war is a crime of present-day society. For workers the war is of no use at all."[15]

In contrast, the Ukrainian Right supported WWI. To prove their loyalty to Canada, these nationalists still commemorate the Ukrainians who enlisted by anglicising their names or pretending they were Russians. One of their greatest heroes, Corporal Filip Konowal, received the Victoria Cross from King George V in 1917.[16]

Canadian governments have also raved about the Ukrainian Right's aid to imperialism. In 2014, Chris Alexander, Canada's first resident Ambassador to Afghanistan, stated that as Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, he was

> "very proud that in our *Discover Canada* guide...we recall that the first Victoria Cross anywhere in the British Empire awarded to one who was not born in that empire went to Corporal Filip Konowal, born in Ukraine, who showed exceptional courage in the battle of Hill 70 in 1917."[17]

But the Ukrainian Right was not always so sure which empire to support. On July 27, 1914, Ukrainian Catholic Bishop Nykyta Budka—who the Vatican sent to Canada in 1912—issued a pastoral letter to his flock of 80,000. In it he said that:

> "all...Austrian subjects ought to be at home...to defend our native country Whoever will get a call to join the colours ought to immediately go to defend the endangered Fatherland."[18]

Embarrassingly enough, just a few days later, on August 4, Britain declared war, and Canada stepped into line. Within two days, Budka issued a second letter stating:

> "We to-day, as faithful citizens of this part of the British Empire...have before us a great and solemn duty, to flock to the flag of our new land, and under this standard to give our blood and lives to its defence."[19]

Although Budka's flip-flop was a total about-face, he had remained entirely consistent in his decree that Ukrainian Canadians should fight. The Bishop had merely reversed direction on *which* imperialist army they should kill and die for. Many, like socialist Peter Krawchuk, thought Budka should share blame for the fact that Ukrainians were soon forced into Canadian internment camps. By his "chameleon-like action," Krawchuk said, the

> "bishop saved his own skin, but his first pastoral letter gave the Canadian government reason to regard all Ukrainian immigrants from Austro-Hungary as 'enemy aliens.'"[20]