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Deaths

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Scholar gave Ukrainians their own history

His 1988 work helped fuel the country's independence movement as the Eastern Bloc started to crumble

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For a historian, there's little more satisfying than being in the right place at the right time. Orest Subtelny hit both marks.

An expert in the history of Ukraine and Eastern Europe, Prof. Subtelny authored several scholarly yet accessible works.

But his crowning achievement is considered to be his *Ukraine: A History*, first published in 1988, just as Europe's Eastern Bloc began crumbling and heady talk of independence wafted over Ukraine, then one of the Soviet Union's 15 republics.

The timing was perfect.

It's surprising that a history written in Canada, in English, would have the impact that Prof. Subtelny's book did in the country it examined. Until then, histories of Ukraine, especially those officially permitted by Moscow, tended to paint a provincial picture, placing Ukraine squarely within a Soviet context.

Ukraine was the cradle of Slavic peoples and the breadbasket of the USSR, so the clichés went.

"There were no books on Ukrainian history that were objective being used in Ukraine," noted Dr. Jurij Darewych, president of the Ukrainian Canadian Research and Documentation Centre and a former physics professor at Toronto's York University.

In 1982, York's history department partnered with the Canadian-Ukrainian community to fund a three-year professorship to teach courses in Ukrainian history and Soviet nationalities.

With Prof. Darewych's support, Prof. Subtelny was hired. He later won a cross-appointment to the department of political science and continued teaching at York until 2015.

Until Prof. Subtelny's book came along, the story of Ukraine "was either ignored or very skewed," said Prof. Darewych.

"Young people were kept in the dark about Ukrainian history."

Soviet authorities, he said, suppressed a lot either by omission or a distinct slant. "It was government policy in the Soviet Union to present Ukrainian history in their own particular way," he said, and that included ignoring the struggle for Ukrainian independence during the First World War and denying or minimizing the Holodomor, the man-made famine imposed by Stalin's regime on Soviet Ukraine and ethnically Ukrainian regions in the northern Caucasus in 1932-33, in which up to seven million people died.

Published to international acclaim and hailed as the best history of Ukraine in English, Prof. Subtelny's 700-plus page tome went through four English editions. In 1990, the year Ukraine adopted its initial declaration of sovereignty, copies of the book's new Ukrainian-language translation were snapped up by the thousands.

The country declared full independence on Aug. 24, 1991, and celebrations marking the 25th anniversary of statehood are expected around the world this month.

Did Prof. Subtelny's book, refreshingly free of Soviet shackles and paternalism, seep into the consciousness of those at the forefront of the independence movement and embolden them?

"Unquestionably," Prof. Darewych responded. "I was there in late eighties and one could sense that something was going to change. People were looking for information other than the Soviet point of view. His book was very important, and was devoured by students, bureaucrats and those in diplomatic circles."

Prof. Subtelny's sweeping look at Ukraine covered everything from the ancient Greek colonization to the Orange Revolution of 2004-05 and the recent Ukrainian diaspora. "It contributed enormously to the process of intellectual and moral liberation of Soviet Ukrainians, of overcoming a sense of inferiority," noted Volodymyr Kravchenko, director of the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Alberta. "It was modern, fresh, a well-written historical bestseller. It made Ukrainian history attractive."

But Prof. Subtelny, who was personally pro-independence, was blunt in his assessment of the nascent country, which was characterized by both change "and the lack of it."

Although Ukraine was developing a middle class, a requirement for any European society, and had an elite, it was still "immature, self-centred and devoid of constructive goals," he wrote in the book's preface. The decline of the pillars of Ukrainian society - the village and the intelligentsia - continued. Corruption was "rampant," as it was in most post-Soviet societies.

Neither was Prof. Subtelny shy when it came to addressing controversial issues, such as Ukraine's relations with Russia, Poland and its Jewish population, Mr. Kravchenko went on.

"In fact, he departed from the traditional Ukrainian national narrative based on the heroization/victimization dichotomy, and presented Ukrainians' national history in the context of their statelessness and modernization."

Nevertheless, Ukraine was gradually becoming more like Europe, and that meant a turning point had been reached, he believed. And the Orange Revolution had been an engine of change, for it "propelled Ukraine out of a fog of incomprehension and ignorance that had so long surrounded it."

There is no doubt that a new generation of Ukrainian historians and their readers were inspired by the intellectual freedom of Prof. Subtelny's *Istoria Ukrainy*, Mr. Kravchenko noted in an online tribute.

"It was enthusiastically received by the Ukrainian educated community," he said.

Others also weighed in on the influence of Prof. Subtelny's history. "The book is considered to have greatly impacted the growth of Ukrainian national consciousness and identity," declared the website *Ukraine Today*.

Taras Kuzio, a senior research fellow at the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, said the book "made a truly enormous contribution to Ukrainian nation-building. Prof. Subtelny was not an ivory-tower academic. He was an internationally acclaimed historian, civic and community activist whose roots in the Ukrainian community meant his focus was on Ukrainian national identity, the struggle for independence and achieving statehood."

Prof. Subtelny's death in Toronto on July 24 of cancer at the age of 75 was widely noted in the Ukrainian diaspora and in Ukraine, including by President Petro Poroshenko. "His contribution to Ukraine's history is priceless," Mr. Poroshenko said in a statement. He "made an invaluable contribution to Ukraine acquiring statehood."

"The bright memory of Orest Myroslavovych will forever remain in our hearts."

Orest Subtelny was born in Krakow, in Nazi-occupied Poland, on May 17, 1941. His father, Myroslav, was a lawyer who had lived in the city in the mid-1930s and returned with his wife, Ivanna, in late August, 1939, to take a government job.

"The next day [Sept. 1, 1939], the Germans invaded [Poland] and the job fizzled," said Prof. Subtelny's wife, Maria, a University of Toronto scholar of Iran and classical Persia. The clan returned to Ukraine but Orest's mother later travelled to Krakow to give birth to her son because the city had a hospital.

The family spent the war years hunkered down in western Ukraine, then fled the Soviet Red Army, and spent 1945 to 1949 in a displaced persons camp in Germany before arriving in Philadelphia as refugees.

Prof. Subtelny earned a BA from Temple University in 1965, a master's degree from the University of North Carolina, and completed his PhD at Harvard University in 1973, in history and Middle Eastern studies.

A talented soccer player, he made the All-American team in college and while at Harvard, played with the Norwood Kickers of the Massachusetts state league.

From 2006 to 2011, Prof. Subtelny managed a development project funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). The \$1.65-million "Promoting Ukraine's Global Integration" project was aimed at increasing the capacity and effectiveness of Ukrainian foreign missions and promoting trade. It also provided

technical assistance to Ukraine's government to address boundary disputes with its neighbours.

"He was an outstanding soccer player and I think that's where he got his timing," his wife said.

"He always did things in the nick of time. The book was definitely perfect timing. The CIDA projects were perfectly timed.

His exit from Ukraine was perfectly timed."

There were many laurels: He was given the Order of Merit from the government of Ukraine in 2001; was named a Foreign Member of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences; and received an honorary doctorate from the Diplomatic Academy of Ukraine, and the Shevchenko Medal from the Ukrainian Canadian Congress, for his outstanding contributions to the domestic expatriate community in education.

Recent Russian military interventions in eastern Ukraine and Moscow's 2014 annexation of Crimea, left Prof. Subtelny "very disappointed and disillusioned," his wife said. Even when asked, he refused to speak about the unrest.

Prof. Subtelny leaves his wife, Maria; son, Dr. Alexander Subtelny; and sister, Dr. Oksana Isajiw.

The Ukrainian journalist Vitaly Portnikov summed up one view of Prof. Subtelny's influence: "He gave us Ukraine. Not the one that was. But the one that will be."

Ukrainian history expert Orest Subtelny's sweeping look at the country covered everything from the ancient Greek colonization to the Orange Revolution of 2004-05 and the recent Ukrainian diaspora.

Prof. Subtelny wasn't afraid to address contentious issues such as Ukraine's relations with Russia and Poland. HARVARD UKRAINIAN SUMMER INSTITUTE

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