

Oleh Wolowyna examines new Holodomor research findings



Dr. Oleh Wolowyna speaks at the University of Toronto on new research findings regarding the Holodomor.

TORONTO – Prof. Oleh Wolowyna of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill spoke at a seminar titled “What we now know about the Holodomor: New research results” at the University of Toronto on September 15.

His presentation addressed the results of research conducted in collaboration with a team of Ukrainian demographers at the Ptoukha Institute of Demography and Social Sciences of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine in Kyiv: Omelian Rudnytskyi, Nataliia Levchuk, Pavlo Shevchuk, Alla Kovbasiuk and Nataliia Kulyk.

The event was sponsored by the Holodomor Research and Education Consortium (HREC) of the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies (University of Alberta) and the Petro Jacyk Program for the Study of Ukraine at the Center for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies (University of Toronto).

Prof. Wolowyna began by noting the progress achieved in the study of the Holodomor, particularly since the opening of Soviet-era archives some 25 years ago. However, much is still not known, and some common assumptions about the Famine

have been shown to be inaccurate. His presentation focused on three topics: questionable “facts” about the Holodomor; direct losses by oblasts in Ukraine; and comparison of famine losses at the regional level in Ukraine and Russia.

Prof. Wolowyna described the work of his team in establishing a figure of 3.9 million direct Holodomor losses (deaths in excess of predictable death rates) in the years 1932-1934 in the Ukrainian SSR. Notably, 3.5 million of these losses took place in 1933, when famine mortality peaked at an average of 30,000 persons per day in June of that year.

Prof. Wolowyna noted that there is a consensus in the professional and academic communities that the Ukrainian SSR had the best demographic information available in the Soviet Union during the interwar period. Even though many statistical documents were destroyed (notably in Kyiv in 1941), copies remained in Moscow archives and in some Ukrainian oblast repositories.

Yearly rural and urban death and birth registrations for 1927-1939 are available for Ukraine and by oblast. These data are key for estimating Holodomor losses. Prof. Wolowyna explained that attempts to falsify demographic data in the Ukrainian SSR began when there was a political motivation – too late to prevent the processing of aggregate death and birth data that are used for estimating Holodomor losses.

A close examination of mortality trends showed that deaths in Ukraine were not most numerous in the highest grain-growing regions of the south as might be expected, but rather in the central heartland of Ukraine (Kyiv and Kharkiv oblasts, which at the time included much of today’s Sumy and Poltava oblasts). The Chernihiv region was less affected due to its habitat, which enabled the local population to find substitute foodstuffs. The industrialized Donetsk area may have received preferential treatment, although it too suffered substantially.

Dr. Wolowyna pointed to a possible correlation between the areas most affected by the Holodomor and higher levels of resistance to the Soviet regime – an aspect for further research. Another interesting finding is that the number of Holodomor losses is seemingly not directly related to levels of collectivization (i.e., people in collective farms were not spared the ravages of the Famine).

Dr. Wolowyna noted that even though the Holodomor predominately affected rural areas of Ukraine, there were also significant losses in urban areas. Analysis of mortality data by nationality shows that while ethnic Ukrainians were clearly the group most affected, non-Ukrainian populations in Ukraine also suffered major losses.

In addressing the issue of the limited food assistance allotted to Ukraine in 1933, Prof. Wolowyna noted that this assistance was prioritized to the grain-growing regions and restricted mainly to collective farm members slated to work on the next harvest. The oblasts with the highest death rates received much less food assistance

and at a later date. In other words, the objective of the food assistance was not humanitarian – to prevent widespread starvation – but rather, utilitarian – to ensure a workforce to reap the next harvest.

Finally, Prof. Wolowyna compared the famine losses in Russia to those in Ukraine. He noted that all regions in Ukraine were affected in the Holodomor. In Russia, on the other hand, only two main regions – the Northern Caucasus and the Lower Volga – were significantly affected by famine; three sub-regions – Krasnodar krai (in the Northern Caucasus), the German Volga Republic and the Saratov region (in the Lower Volga) – experienced very high mortality rates. Each of these represents a grain-growing region, which puts the famine dynamic at variance with that in Ukraine. Nationality was likely a major factor in the losses in the German Volga Republic and in the Krasnodar region (where Ukrainians formed approximately 50 percent of the population). The high famine losses in the Saratov Oblast, which was 69 percent Russian in 1926, deserve closer attention, he said.

The presentation provided a clear indication of how far Holodomor research has progressed over the years. Nonetheless, Prof. Wolowyna pointed to the value of studying the Famine in Ukraine in the context of the USSR overall and in comparison to the Russian SFSR to promote a fuller understanding of the uniqueness of the Ukrainian Holodomor.

Prof. Wolowyna has been working on this project with his Ukrainian colleagues for about four years. His project has been supported by two Fulbright grants and financial assistance from the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute and the Ukrainian Studies Fund.