

# A Ukrainian quest to shed light on horror Soviets kept in the dark

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WINNIPEG, MANITOBA - Dr. Stanislav Kulchytskyi, the Director for the Department of History of Ukraine for the 1920 and 30's at the Institute of History of Ukraine is photographed outside the Canadian Museum of Human Rights in Winnipeg.

When Ukrainian historian Stanislav Kulchytskyi began poring through thousands of declassified secret police files in Kiev, he felt as if his eyes had finally been opened.

The files contained reports, letters, telegrams and directives all relating to the famine in 1932 and 1933 that killed more than three million Ukrainians. Many historians like Prof. Kulchytskyi had long concluded that the famine was a man-made disaster and genocide, imposed by Soviet leader Joseph Stalin to squash growing Ukrainian nationalism. But it was only after the Ukrainian government recently opened up public archives and declassified hundreds of thousands of documents that researchers have started to get first-hand accounts of what really happened. And there is much more to come. Thousands of new documents are coming to light almost daily, offering more insights into the tragedy.

“It is a little bit like a vase that is broken into small pieces and we are trying to piece the various pieces together to create the full vase,” Prof. Kulchytskyi said through a translator from Winnipeg, where he is starting a Canadian tour to discuss the famine and his findings. “We are trying to understand, what was the original thinking that Stalin had?”

The work is not without controversy. Russia has rejected any notion that the famine was genocide and the issue has strained its relations with Ukraine. Several countries, including

Canada, have recognized the famine as genocide, but many others have not. The United Nations and the European Union also have not gone that far.

Some of the material has been put on display in a national memorial in Kiev that opened three years ago. "All of these documents are really very important to understand what really happened to the Ukrainian people in the early 1930s," said Lesya Onyshko, director of the memorial.

Ms. Onyshko has joined Prof. Kulchytskyi on the Canadian tour and she hopes to gather documents, letters and photos from Ukrainian Canadians to help further research on the famine, known as Holodomor in Ukraine. The museum is also sharing information and resources with the Winnipeg-based Canadian Museum of Human Rights, which is sponsoring the tour, which stops in Edmonton and Toronto as well.

"We feel that people have a right to know the truth about what happened," said Clint Curle, a researcher at the human rights museum. "We feel this is a story for everybody."

Among the material that has been uncovered recently are 3,000 death registration books, each listing the names of thousands who died. The memorial has used some of the declassified information to put together testimonials from survivors and photo exhibits. "We are working very hard trying to put to the public all the truth of Holodomor," Ms. Onyshko said.

The sheer volume of material that is being declassified is almost impossible to process, added Myroslav Shkandrij, a professor of Slavic studies at the University of Manitoba. Dr. Shkandrij spent several weeks in various archives in Ukraine last summer and uncovered extensive documentation about how the Soviets arrested and killed thousands of teachers, writers, poets and intellectuals in the early 1930s as part of its effort to crack down on nationalism.

Some other filings showed how, during the famine, secret police sealed off villages, confiscated food and closed the country's border. "There are masses of documents," he said. "For example, in the KGB archive in Kiev alone, there are 800,000 personal files. There is a lot to come out."

Thanks to the documentation being released, "it's beginning to tip towards people thinking that this was a deliberate policy and that it can be defined as genocide," Dr. Shkandrij said.

Prof. Kulchytskyi has no doubt it was genocide and he knows the Russians will not change their minds any time soon. He has come to Canada, he added, to better inform Canadians about what happened. "There is a lack of understanding [in many countries] about how the Soviets created an artificial environment which allowed the actions that led to the Holodomor."

For him the work is also intensely personal. He grew up in the Ukraine indoctrinated by Soviet propaganda that denied the existence of the famine. As a boy he'd been told his grandfather died in 1933 of lead poisoning, not famine, and he spent much of his early career as an official state historian. Everything changed in 1987 when the government told him to help write a report to dispute claims by Western researchers about genocide. Prof. Kulchytskyi delved into the topic and soon became convinced the Westerners were right. He conveyed his conclusions to local officials, but by then the Soviet Union was crumbling and Ukraine gained independence in 1991.

Even then, it took until 2006 before the Ukrainian government began declassifying documents and allowing access to archives.

Prof. Kulchytskyi, 75, says he'll keep pursuing his work, especially now that more information is becoming public.

"I'll keep researching as long as God allows me," he said. "As a result of having my eyes opened, I have gone from being a Soviet historian to an ordinary historian."