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Woods, Water, and Meadows: The Formation of Ukrainian-Canadian Identity Through Land and Settlement

Feature Article

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Abstract

This paper explores the development and persistence of Ukrainian-Canadian communities in the West using a combination of archival documents, township maps, homestead records, and contemporary census data. These sources allow us to trace the historical settlement patterns of Ukrainian immigrants, understand the socio-economic dynamics that shaped their communities, and analyze how these patterns have evolved over time. Additionally, this paper addresses the limitations of historical census data in capturing the ethnic origins of early Ukrainian settlers and highlights the importance of archival research in filling these gaps. Through this multi-faceted approach, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Ukrainian-Canadian communities have maintained their cultural identity and adapted to the changing socio-economic landscape of the Canadian prairies.

Introduction

Ukrainian block settlements in the Canadian prairies are a unique and significant phenomenon shaped by a mix of historic, social, and geographic factors. These communities, formed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, offer a compelling look at how immigrant populations adapt to and transform new environments while maintaining cultural cohesion. The initial wave of Ukrainian immigrants were drawn to the Canadian prairies by the promise of land and opportunity under the Dominion Lands Act, which allowed them to establish close-knit communities that preserved their cultural traditions and language.

The research aims to shed light on the factors that contributed to the formation of these block settlements, the challenges and successes experienced by the Ukrainian settlers, and how the legacy of these early settlers continues to influence the region today. This paper will also address the limitations of historical census data in capturing the ethnic origins of early Ukrainian immigrants and highlight the importance of archival research in filling these gaps.

History Of Ukrainian Block Settlement

Block settlement is a term used to describe the establishment of immigrant communities within a close geographical proximity (Borrie et al. 263). Ukrainians who came to Canada in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were able to settle in blocks because of the Dominion Lands Act, which afforded new immigrants relative freedom in where they chose to live (Lehr 37).

Ukrainian immigrants were mostly farmers who came to Canada to escape poverty, the lingering effects of serfdom, and political turmoil in their homeland (Himka 11–12). They first settled on the Canadian Prairies, which offered vast tracts of land that could be developed into homesteads for farming and other agricultural practices. Block settlement was attractive to Ukrainian immigrants because it allowed them to maintain their cultural traditions and language, and benefit from the support and cooperation of their fellow settlers (Katz and Lehr 79). This practice also allowed for the efficient use of resources and the development of a strong sense of community (Bilash, "Ukrainian Rural Communities in East Central Alberta Before 1930" 67; Lehr 51).

A Mari Usque Ad Mare and the Dominion Lands Survey System

A Mari Usque Ad Mare, or 'from sea to shining sea' is Canada's national motto. The desire for a nation that stretched from the Atlantic to the Pacific led the Canadian government to an ambitious plan to quickly settle the West. Over 1.4 billion acres in the prairies and the North were estimated to be available for settlement. To facilitate the massive project of immigration, the government first required detailed maps of Rupert's Land, which had been purchased from the Hudson's Bay Company in 1869 (Ballantyne 17). It goes without saying that this 'purchase' occurred despite the land already being occupied by Indigenous peoples (Anderson 19).

Surveyors with the Dominion Lands Branch began their work in 1871 using a survey system already established in the US (Ballantyne 19). The Dominion Lands Survey System consists of meridians (running north-south), ranges (running north-south between meridians), and townships (six-mile-wide rows running east-west) that enabled surveyors to demarcate prairie lands into an organized grid. The square block created by the intersection of north-south range lines and east-west township lines is itself called a township. Each township, depending on the landscape, is split into 36 equal sections. One section of land, represented by a single square on a township map, is one square mile, or 640 acres. Quarter sections, which were available to homesteaders,

are 160 acres. Each meridian, range, and township are labelled numerically, while quarter sections are described in quadrants (NW, SW, NE, SE). For example, NW-20-53-12-W4 describes the location of the northwest section 20, township 53, range 12, west of the 4th meridian. This alphanumeric code is called a legal land description (Wolfe and McKercher 2).

Township Maps and Homestead Records

The map shown here is an example of an annotated township map from 1905 (Department of the Interior). Section 1 is located at the bottom right of the map, with subsequent numbers weaving back and forth up the map until Section 36 at the top right. Many quarter sections are labelled with the name of the homesteader and a number that corresponds to the sworn statement in their homestead record (shown in Figure 2). Only even-numbered sections were available to homesteaders, and the majority of the odd-numbered sections were set aside for the Canadian Pacific Railway Company for potential future development (Wolfe and McKercher 10). These are labelled C.P.R.C. on the map.

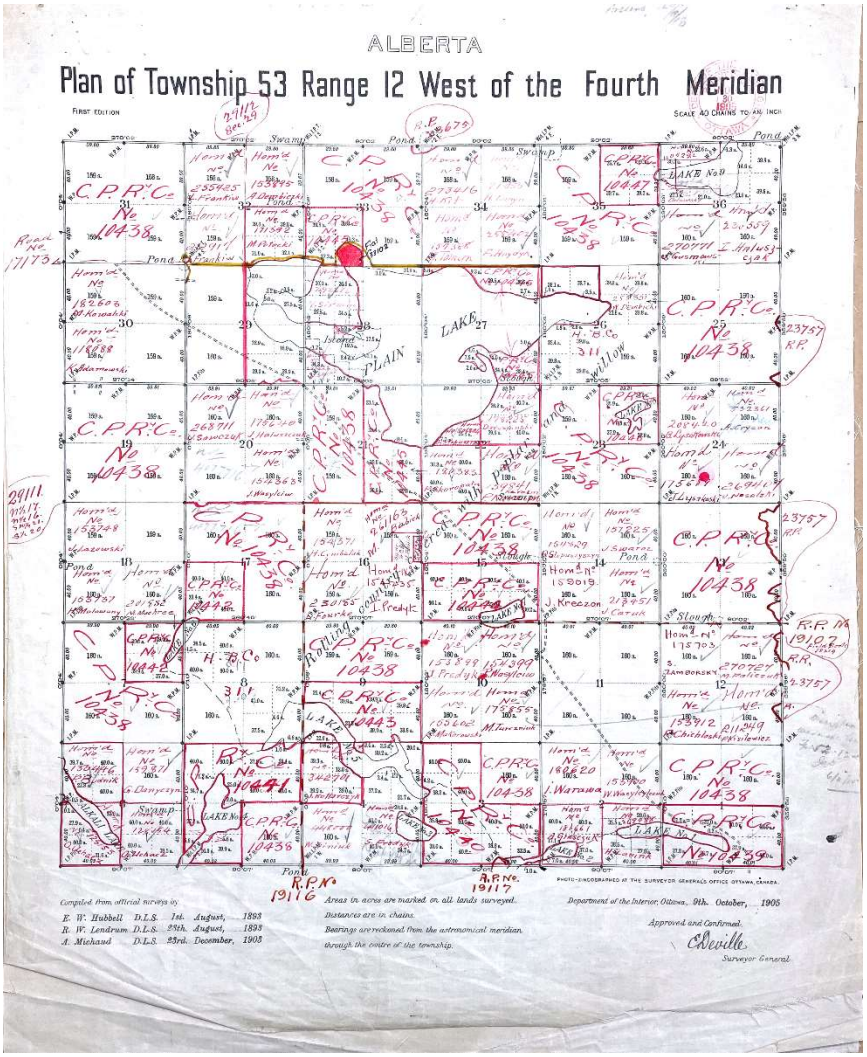
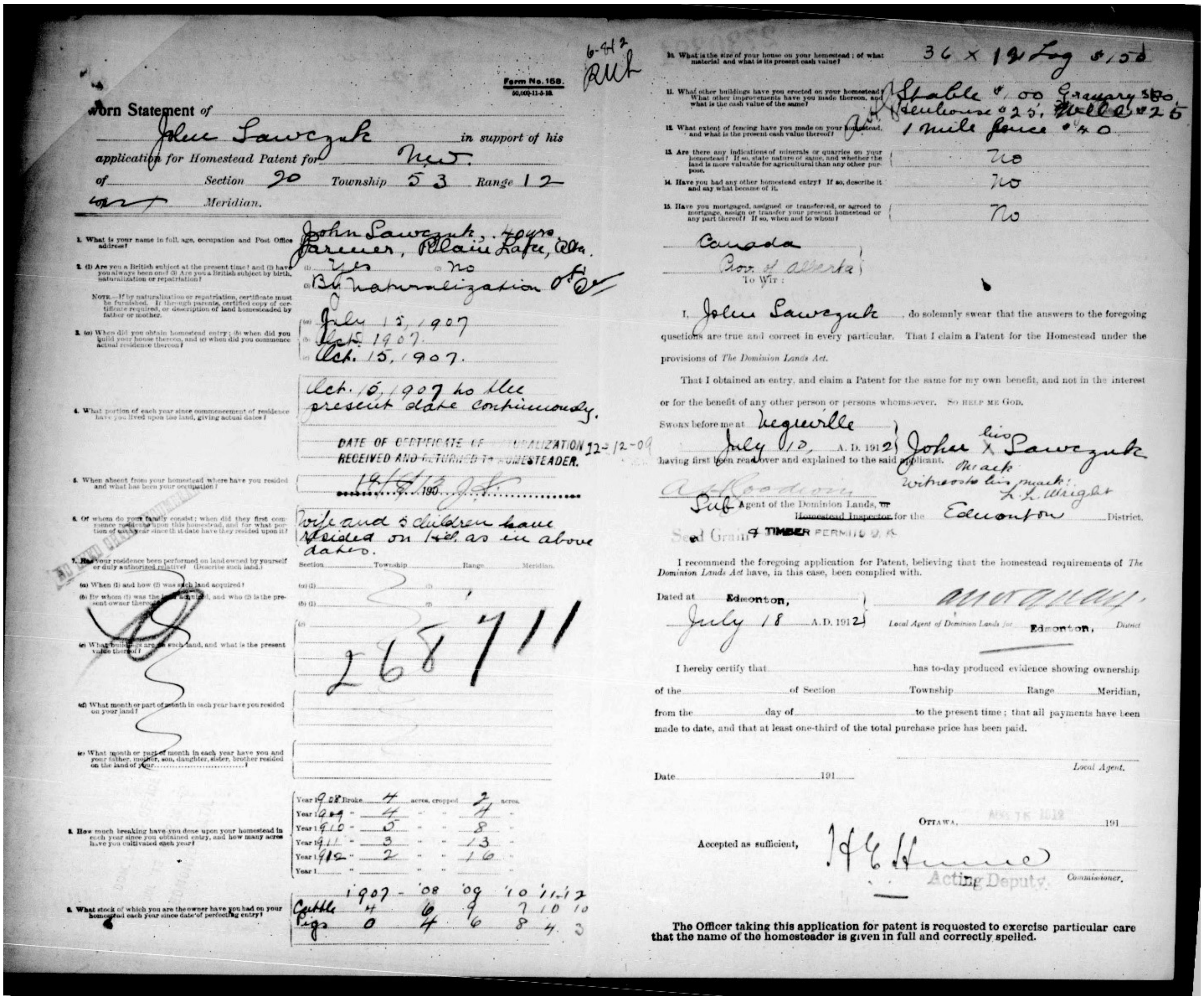


Figure 1 – Plan of Township 53 Range 12 West of the Fourth Meridian

The NW quarter-section at section 20 on the map bears the label "Hom'd no. 268711 J. Sawczuk". This number appears on the corresponding homestead record in Figure 2. The homestead record includes information about naturalization and citizenship status, the date of arrival on the homestead, the work undertaken to improve the land, and a report of agricultural activities. The handwritten number in the centre-left of the page matches the number shown above on the township map.


Sworn Statement of John Sawczuk in support of his application for Homestead Patent for NW of Section 20 Township 53 Range 12 West Meridian.

I, John Sawczuk, do solemnly swear that the answers to the foregoing questions are true and correct in every particular. That I claim a Patent for the Homestead under the provisions of The Dominion Lands Act.

That I obtained an entry, and claim a Patent for the same for my own benefit, and not in the interest or for the benefit of any other person or persons whomsoever. So help me God.

I recommend the foregoing application for Patent, believing that the homestead requirements of The Dominion Lands Act have, in this case, been complied with.

Dated at Edmonton, July 18 A.D. 1912

Accepted as sufficient,

Acting Deputy Commissioner.

The Officer taking this application for patent is requested to exercise particular care that the name of the homesteader is given in full and correctly spelled.

268711

Figure 2 A sworn statement of John Sawczuk in support of his homestead patent of NW section 20 township 53 range 12 of the W4 meridian

Early census documents used legal land descriptions to describe the geographic location of Canadian residents who lived in rural areas. The de-anonymized census (from pre-Confederation to 1931), along with homestead records and township maps, can show us exactly where Ukrainian immigrants chose to settle during this early period of immigration.

Woods, Water, and Meadows

When serfdom was abolished in Ukraine in the middle of the 19th century, peasants lost access to the ponds and forests in their communities when their landlords declared these areas as private property (Himka 12). As a result, when new settlers arrived in the prairies, they were drawn to the aspen parkland belt. This arc-shaped region stretches from central Alberta (through Edmonton) east to the Manitoba / North Dakota border. This landscape, while not known for its fertile farmland, contained woods, water, and meadows in abundance (Lehr 35).

Between the 1890s, when the first Ukrainian settlers arrived in Alberta, and 1905, when the railway finally reached Edmonton, it was neither easy nor affordable for homesteaders to procure the goods and services they required to develop their land (Bilash, "Ukrainian Rural Communities in East Central Alberta Before 1930" 65). This is why they chose the parkland belt, an area where wood provided timber for structures, but also income, as cord wood could be cut and sold to other settlers for a profit. Water and meadows provided sustenance in the way of fish, wild fruits, berries, fungi, and game (Lehr 42).

Informal Rural Communities

The highly structured grid of the township system and the large size of individual homesteads did not allow for the development of formalized villages like those in Ukraine. New immigrants recreated the structure of their social milieu in the Old Country through the creation of informal rural communities in their new home. These communities were comprised of structures that supported socialization, such as churches and halls, and collections of service providers, such as weavers and spinners, that replicated traditional Ukrainian culture (Bilash, "Ukrainian Rural Communities in East Central Alberta Before 1930" 67). Though informal, the boundaries of rural communities were well-known by local residents. They were most often named after villages in Ukraine (Brody, New Kiew), Ukrainian language slogans (Myrnam, meaning 'peace be with us'), topographic features (Two Hills, Three Hills), or prominent settlers (Shandro, one of the first postmasters) (Martynowych 40; Bilash, The Colonial Development of East Central Alberta and Its Effect on Ukrainian Immigrant Settlement to 1930 67). Many of these place names still exist today.

An Obstinate Group of People

The block settlement patterns of Ukrainian immigrants did not go unnoticed. The Commissioner of Immigration at the time, W.F McCreary, found the Ukrainian's choice of less-desirable farmland to be peculiar, and tried unsuccessfully to convince new settlers to choose different locales (Katz and Lehr 79). According to McCreary, Ukrainian immigrants were ignorant, obstinate, and unmanageable, in part due to their unwillingness to settle in the areas that he suggested. He complained that Ukrainian immigrants were worse than cattle, because they wanted to follow each other rather than heed the advice of the government (McCreary). In a letter to James Smart, Deputy Minister of the Interior, dated May 15, 1897, McCreary writes that Canada should not permit the Austrian government to "get rid of their human weeds by throwing them over the ditch into our Canadian Garden" (McCreary)

The land that Ukrainian immigrants chose, against recommendations from government agents and interpreters, was not ideal. While the earliest settlers were driven by a desire for self-sufficiency, subsequent groups were motivated by their need for connection and kinship ties. These ties led to the creation of vibrant rural communities, but for many of the early farmers, this meant a life of hardship, and in some cases, destitution (Lehr 51). By the time immigration was

halted at the onset of the First World War, Ukrainian immigrants had settled over 4,000 square kilometres in 70 townships across the arc-shape of the aspen parkland (Martynowych 30).

The Problem of the Ethnic Origin Variable

How do we know which ethnic groups settled in specific parts of the country? One of the primary sources of these data should be the Canadian Census of Population. A question about ethnic origin has been included in every census since before Confederation.

The ethnic origin variable in the census is not easy to use because the question that Statistics Canada is trying to ask is not easy to answer. What is ethnicity, really? How can one quantify their origins, especially in a country such as Canada? This difficulty is shown in the number of changes that have been made to the ethnic origin question, and how it has been reported, over the past 30 years and beyond.

At its core, the ethnic origin question is an exercise in understanding the history of immigration in Canada. The 2021 question asked, *"What were the ethnic or cultural origins of this person's ancestors?"* Below the question, a note further explains that "*Ancestors may have Indigenous origins, or origins that refer to different countries, or other origins that may not refer to different countries"* (Statistics Canada, "Ethnic or Cultural Origin Reference Guide, Census of Population, 2021"). Rather than provide a list of examples, as was the practice in previous years, the 2021 Census linked out to a webpage with over 500 potential ethnic and cultural origins along with a more fulsome description of what the question means, notably that *"other than Indigenous persons, most people can trace their origins to their ancestors who first came to this continent"* (Statistics Canada, "Ethnic or Cultural Origin Reference Guide, Census of Population, 2021").

How the question was asked in 2021 marked a dramatic change from previous years, enough that analysts with Statistics Canada warned that the changes would make 2021 incomparable with past data. This is particularly the case with the ethnic origins that were previously listed as exemplars directly on the questionnaire, one of which was Ukrainian (Statistics Canada, "Ethnic or Cultural Origin Reference Guide, Census of Population, 2021"). It begs the question, what is the point asking about ethnic origin on every census if the results can't be used over time?

The problem with this variable is not a new one. In 1951, demographer and sociologist Norman B. Ryder wrote:

> *It seems fair to conclude that the usefulness in research of Canadian statistics on origins is probably limited for the most part to the dividing of the population into four broad groups: the British, the French, the other whites, and the non-whites, and that attempts to carry out serious, more detailed research on origins require extreme caution, particularly with regard to variations through time (477).*

Throughout the author's research, it has become clear that the historic census, at least in its aggregated form, cannot be used to understand the ethnic origins of Canada's population, especially for Ukrainians. When Ukrainians first came to Canada in the late 19th century, they arrived as immigrants from the Austro-Hungarian empire. Census documents from the early 20th century report a number of responses to the ethnic origin question, including Austrian, Austro-Hungarian, Polish, Galician, and Russian. When asked about their mother tongue, many of these respondents reported that they spoke Austrian. The term Ukrainian wasn't widely used in this

country until 1910, and the settlers themselves did not arrive in Canada with a clear sense of their Ukrainian identity (Kaye xxvi).

Since the census is unreliable for early population counts based on ethnic origin, the next best way to get these data is from archival sources. However, in order to conduct research in the archives, we must either know in advance what we are looking for or have the resources to make unexpected discoveries. In either case, archival research requires a significant time commitment and the use of methodologies that do not easily lend themselves to the computational exploration afforded by the census.

We know about the settlement patterns of Ukrainian immigrants because of a large body of archival research on the Ukrainian community that occurred between the 1950s and 1990s. These documents include shipping company manifests, annotated township maps, homestead applications, government documents, and personal letters that are found in community, provincial, and federal archives. It is this scholarship, in particular work by geographer John C. Lehr, that clearly shows the historic and distinctive pattern of settlement along the arc-shape of the aspen parkland belt in the Canadian prairies.

30 Years of Population Data

Now that we know the ethnic origin variable is not a terribly accurate metric for determining the precise counts and locations of ethnic groups let us use this variable to look at the population of Ukrainians in Canada and the provinces over the past 30 years of the census (1991 - 2021). Why is 1991 significant? It was the year Ukraine became independent from the Soviet Union. It also marks approximately 100 years since the first critical mass of Ukrainian settlers arrived on the prairies.

Rather than look at the data for each census year individually, the following table shows the population averages for the entire 30-year period. While the ethnic origin variable may be problematic for a year-over-year comparison, surely the average compiled from six Census of Populations (1991-2006, 2016-2021) and one National Household Survey (2011) can produce a fairly reliable indicator of where Ukrainians have been living during that time. The complete dataset, available at the level of census subdivisions with the exception of 2021 (which has only been released for populations over 5000 people), is available in Dataverse.

Table 1 - Ratio of Ukrainian Population to Total Population: Canada, Provinces, and Territories, 1991-2021

	Total Population, averages: 1991-2021	Ukrainian Population, averages: 1991-2021	Ratio Ukrainian Population, 1991-2021 (%)
Manitoba	1,162,734	167,266	14.4%
Saskatchewan	1,007,452	132,331	13.1%
Alberta	3,301,389	314,454	9.5%
Yukon Territory	32,148	1,748	5.4%
British Columbia	4,097,308	195,101	4.8%
Canada	31,434,727	1,175,766	3.7%
Northwest Territories	46,004	1,371	3.0%
Ontario	11,979,998	320,054	2.7%
Nova Scotia	908,850	7,679	0.8%
Prince Edward Island	136,584	726	0.5%
Nunavut	31,975	161	0.5%
Quebec	7,489,046	31,065	0.4%
New Brunswick	730,174	2,914	0.4%
Newfoundland	520,201	939	0.2%

The table shows that over the past 30 years, Manitoba has had the highest population of people with a Ukrainian ethnic origin in Canada, followed closely by Saskatchewan. The provinces of Alberta and Ontario, while similar in their population counts of Ukrainians, differ in their ratios, with the former in third place and the latter in seventh (not including Canada). Yukon and B.C. are also similar in ratio, but again, they have different population counts. The remaining provinces and territories are below the national average of 3.7%. The mean ratio of Ukrainians to the total population across all provinces and territories matches Ontario's ratio at 2.7%.

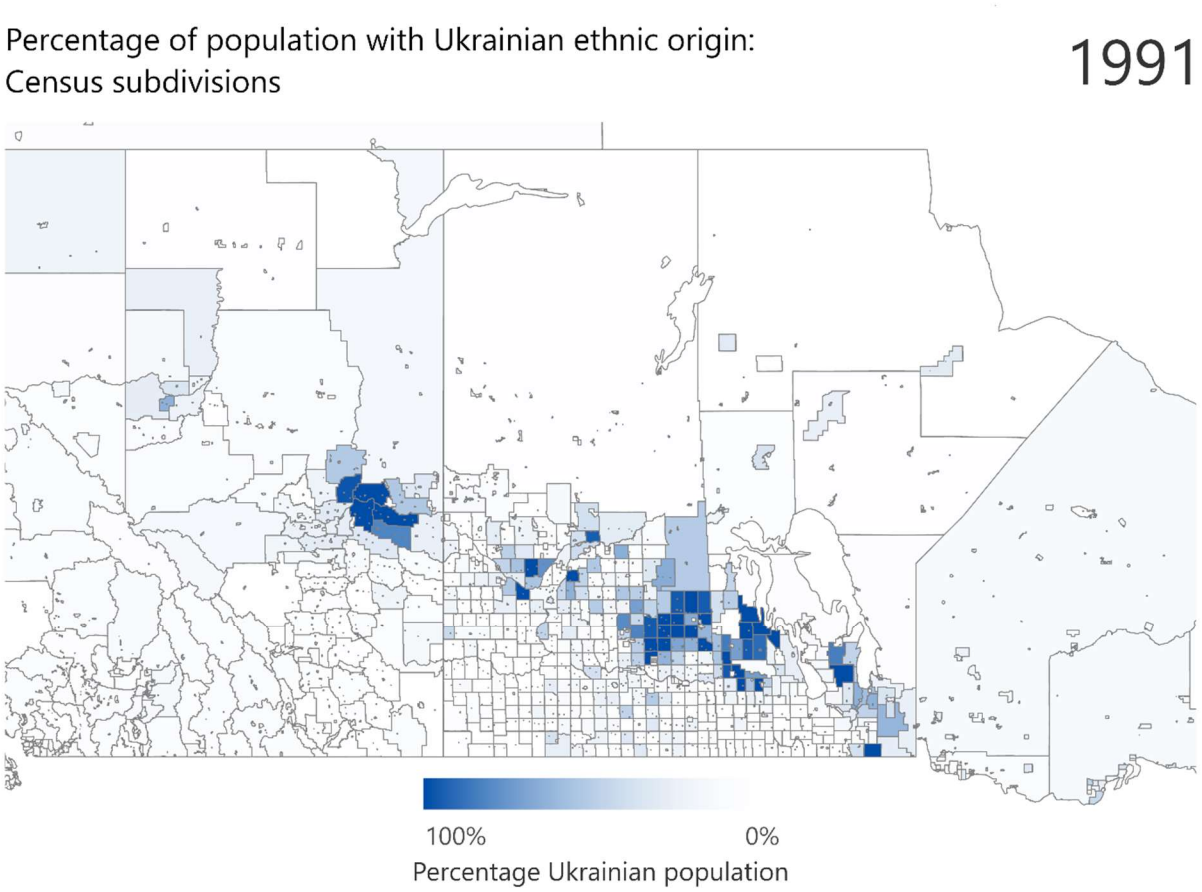
The Prairie Provinces

Ontario may have the highest population count of people with a Ukrainian ethnic origin in Canada. However, it is clear that the prairie provinces are the most visible home of the Ukrainian community due to the high ratios. Previous research shows that early settlers lived along the arc-shaped parkland belt, but where have Ukrainians in the prairie provinces been living for the past 30 years? As it turns out, they are still living close to where their ancestors settled over 100 years ago.

The following maps show the percentage of people with Ukrainian ethnic origin at the census subdivision level. Census subdivisions are generally understood as municipalities (or equivalent) based on provincial and territorial designations (Statistics Canada, Dictionary, Census of Population, 2021 – Dissemination Area (DA)). The maps shown here are from the 1991, 2006, and 2016 censuses and have been selected to show the trend, but all of the maps have a similar, though steadily declining, distribution. The complete series of maps (1991-2021) is available in Dataverse.

Census subdivisions were chosen as a unit of analysis because they represent municipalities, which offsets the influence of small pockets of populations in rural areas. Using ratios rather than raw population numbers ensures consistency in the data analysis, making comparisons across different census years and geographic regions more reliable. It also adjusts for varying population growth rates to normalize differences, which provides a clearer picture of Ukrainian community concentrations.

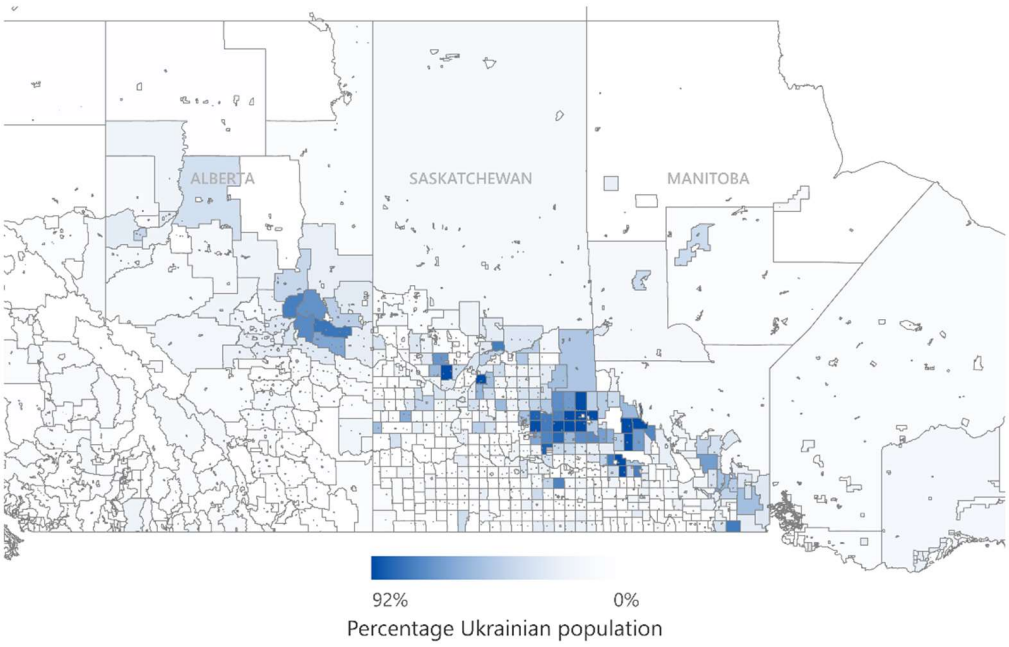
The settlement pattern illustrated here is unlike any other region in the country. Again, while it is important to use caution in making comparisons year-over-year, as explained earlier, it is clear to see that the arc-shaped pattern of settlement remains.



Statistics Canada, 1991 Census of Population, Catalogue no. 1004351.

Ratio of Ukrainian ethnic origin to total population:
Census subdivisions

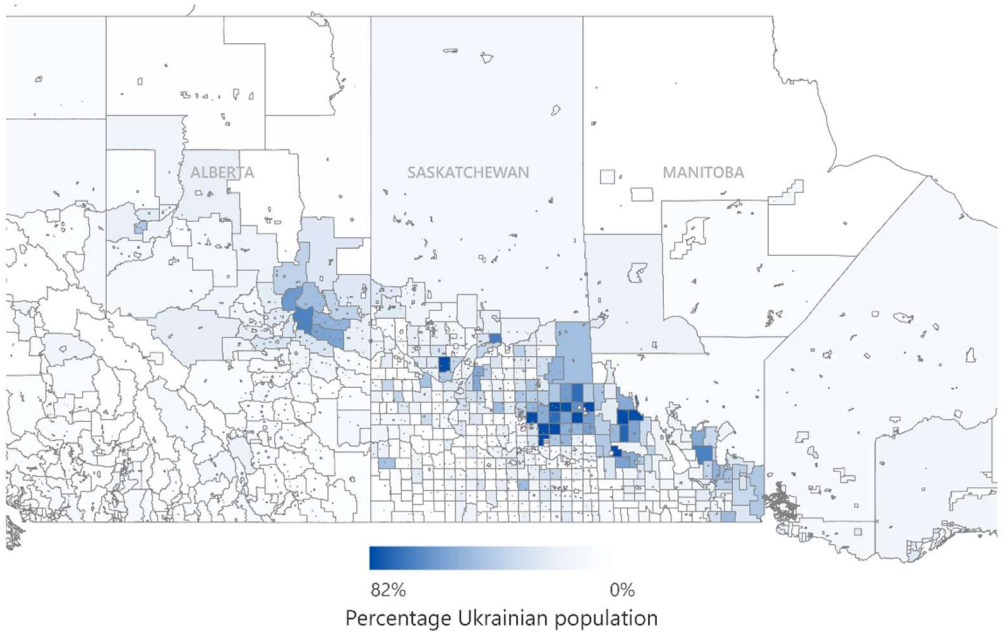
2006



Statistics Canada, 2006 Census of Population, Catalogue no. 94-580-XCB2006001.

Ratio of Ukrainian ethnic origin to total population:
Census subdivisions

2016



Statistics Canada, 2016 Census of Population, Catalogue no. 98-400-X2016354.

While 1991 is an interesting starting year of this analysis for the above reasons, 2021 is also significant. Population data for 2021 was collected before the escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian war in February 2022. In response to the conflict, the Canadian Government launched the Canada-Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel (CUAET) program, which fast-tracked immigration for Ukrainian nationals fleeing their homeland. Successful applicants are eligible for a 3-year visitor visa, though some may be able to apply for permanent residence under other immigration programs (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada). This means that we may see a significant shift in the population of Ukrainians and where they live by the next census in 2026.

The 'Arc' Persists

Throughout this paper, we have explored the patterns of Ukrainian block settlements in Canada, focusing on their historical development, current demographic trends, and cultural significance. The enduring nature of existing Ukrainian-Canadian communities, their cultural cohesion, and their demographic evolution form an arc that not only persists but also shapes the multicultural fabric of Canadian society.

It has been suggested that Ukrainians did not form a cohesive identity as Ukrainians until they arrived in Canada (Kaye xxvi; Satzewich 41). Archival research has shown us that they settled together because the Dominion Lands Act afforded them the opportunity, that they faced hostility from government officials and a segment of Canadian society, a situation which is known to encourage immigrants to physically settle together (Borrie et al. 278); that they worked together to create informal rural communities, some of which, at least in name, exist today; and finally, that the land they chose, though close to woods, water, and meadow, was not fertile enough to produce widespread wealth.

However, external hostility, proximity with other settlers, and economic challenges cannot fully explain the formation of an identity that led to the distinctive arc-shaped pattern of settlement that has lasted over 130 years. The author argues that the Ukrainian-Canadian identity was formed because of the land, not in spite of it. To unpack this argument, the author draws on the work of social scientist and geographer Doreen Massey.

She says that "places as depicted on maps are places caught in a moment," but that they exist more accurately as "constantly shifting articulations of social relations through time" (188). This perspective allows us to see Ukrainian block settlements not merely as static locations on a map but as dynamic spaces where identity is continuously negotiated and reshaped.

Upon arriving in Canada, Ukrainian immigrants encountered a new landscape that demanded adaptation and collaboration. The shared experience of settling and cultivating the land fostered a sense of community and collective identity. This was not a simple transplantation of an Old World identity but the creation of a new one, born out of the specific social, economic, and environmental conditions of the Canadian Prairies.

Massey's theory helps us understand that the Ukrainian identity in Canada was not just a preservation of pre-existing cultural elements but was actively constructed through the interplay of the settlers' social relations and their interactions with the land. The unique challenges and opportunities of their new environment necessitated new forms of social organization, mutual support, and cultural expression. These interactions and adaptations, in turn, forged a distinct

Ukrainian-Canadian identity, illustrating Massey's idea that places are defined by the ongoing, dynamic relationships that occur within them.

The fact that these settlement patterns persist today shows that the Aspen Parkland belt is not merely a place where Ukrainians chose to live but where their identity was continually shaped and reaffirmed through their connection to the land and each other. This long-standing relationship between people and place underscores the significance of the land in the formation of cultural identity, demonstrating how this region has become an integral part of the Ukrainian-Canadian narrative.

Archival Collections as Data

None of this research would be possible without access to our cultural heritage through the preservation of archival collections. Some of the resources used for this paper came from collections that have yet to be digitized, whereas others have been digitized poorly. For example, the Alberta homestead records are now hosted in large, poorly scanned, hard-to-navigate collections on the Internet Archive, and the original documents have been destroyed (Wolowyk).

Archival research allows us to see fragments of the past, but rarely does it afford us the opportunity to see a bigger picture. Real digitization, rather than just the creation of scanned images, would make this type of research more accessible and open to discovery. While it is time-consuming to transcribe these artifacts, it is not impossible. This is proven by the existence of the Alberta Homestead Index, a basic transcription (name, legal land description, and archival file number) of all homestead records in Alberta (Provincial Archives of Alberta).[1]

The opportunities for linking data between historical documents such as homestead records and the de-anonymized census are vast. From the digital humanities perspective, stable computational access to these collections, even if imperfect, will provide for the discovery of new questions about our shared cultural heritage. Furthermore, large-scale digitization opens up channels for the transmission of data in reciprocal directions, as data users can work with data repositories to improve the usability and design of collections. As historian Tim Sherratt says,

> *The struggle for access might not always be comfortable, but it can be productive. If data is a problem to be engaged with, rather than a service to be consumed, then we can see how researchers might help institutions to see their own structures differently (150).*

[1] This database is a curious example because it is currently hosted on a private web server and because it is coded in JavaScript. I recently scraped the entirety of this database, a project I will address in a future paper.

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