

Ukrainian people are my people, too

By: **Niigaan Sinclair** | Posted: 7:00 PM CST Friday, Feb. 25, 2022

Last Modified: 10:50 AM CST Sunday, Feb. 27, 2022 |

OPINION

My birthday is Jan. 7 — the same day Ukrainians traditionally celebrate Christmas, according to the Julian calendar.

I know this because my best friend's family, the Kowalchuks, every year invited me for dinner at their home in Lockport. They would combine their most important day with mine — sharing perogies, cabbage rolls, and gifts alongside singing happy birthday.

In many ways, I was their fourth son — something I value to this day.

This is why I couldn't look away Thursday when Russian forces invaded Ukraine, for Ukrainians are my people, too.

I spent the day contacting every single Ukrainian-Canadian I knew, expressing my love and asking if there was anything I could do.



CP

Russia's attack on Ukraine has drawn condemnation from citizens and government officials around the world. (Chiang Ying-ying / The Associated Press)

What can one say to another person when a person's culture, society, and homeland is under attack?

"I'm sorry" doesn't begin to cut it. How does one talk about murder when it's happening on the evening news? What can one say when lands are being stolen before our very eyes? Which words do you use that show sensitivity and recognize devastation at the same time?

Turns out there aren't many words that can describe what's happening. (Words that can be published here, anyways.)

I was on the phone for a long time. My best friend and his family are only one of about two dozen Ukrainian Canadians I am close to.

My sister-in-law is another. Her family left Ukraine a long time ago, but she broke down in tears talking about the invasion.

My colleague. My ex-girlfriend from high school. My old teacher.

Ukrainians have been coming to Manitoba since the 1890s.

From the first moments they arrived here — just like what happened with Icelanders and other immigrants — Ukrainians relied on the knowledge of Indigenous communities to survive.

Indigenous peoples taught Ukrainians where to find fish, what berries to eat, and how to find food in this place.



The Sts. Vladimir & Olga Ukrainian Cathedral is an important landmark in Winnipeg. (Mikaela MacKenzie / Winnipeg Free Press)

In an amazing 2011 study by Maryna Hrymych (published at the University of Manitoba), she documents how "Indians" taught Ukrainians in Manitoba "how to trap, to hunt, and how to make your own moccasins... How to survive."

By the early 20th century — when my community of Peguis was thriving on its original homelands near what's now East Selkirk — Ukrainians were neighbours, running farms and businesses all along the Red River to Winnipeg.

Contact between our two cultures resulted in amazing collaborations. Besides a deep love for the land, our peoples share a love for feasting, dancing, beading, braiding, and intricate designs.

For instance, Cree and Anishinaabe people credit Ukrainians for gifting our communities the colourful hustka, which many Indigenous grandmothers wear on their heads today.

Powwow fancy dancers regularly "borrow" moves from Ukrainian dance — repeating similar patterns of rhythm repetition and even moves squat kicks.

I've had borscht and bannock more than once... You get the point.

Some Ukrainians also participated in racist acts, too, like advocating for the theft of Peguis land in 1907.

By 1914, more than 170,000 Ukrainians had settled in Canada, with the majority settling throughout the Prairies.

The reason this is so accurately known is because Ukrainians were persecuted during the First World War, feared because they were thought to be sympathizers of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Ukrainians share experiences of racism and oppression with Indigenous peoples, too.

The connections between Ukrainians and Indigenous peoples is so wide and

deep, I'd never be able to do it justice here, so I'll just say it's a big part of today's Manitoba.



CP

Ukrainians have a strong tradition in Manitoba. (Andrew Harnik / The Associated Press)

When I walk with the Mama Bear Clan volunteer patrol, I see Ukrainian Orthodox churches throughout the North End and North Point Douglas — the original communities that built this city. Most are as old as the city itself.

I meet dozens of people who have a Ukrainian and Indigenous parent.

I patrol past Ukrainian book shops. A co-op. A bakery... You get the point.

Winnipeg is not the only place where Ukrainian and Indigenous cultures have fused and found a home together.

In 2018, Edmonton's Shumka dance company performed with local Indigenous troupe Running Thunder on a series of collaborative displays featuring more than 100 knowledge keepers and artists showcasing the shared history between Indigenous and Ukrainian peoples in their city.

In Calgary, there is an Indigenous Ukrainian Relationship Building Initiative intended to advance knowledge about, explore, and on Ukrainian Canadian history and shared Indigenous-Ukrainian pasts.

Ukrainian people are my people.

This is why I can't look away when my relations are being bombed, attacked, and removed from their homes.

This is a pain, a trauma, a genocide I know all too well.

A destruction we all must stand up against. Together. In this place.

As we have before. As we will again.

niigaan.sinclair@freepress.mb.ca

Niigaan Sinclair

Columnist

Niigaan Sinclair is Anishinaabe and is a columnist at the Winnipeg Free Press.