

THE POLITICAL LEADERS OF UKRAINE, 1938-1989:

The Burden of History

Hiroaki Kuromiya
University of Indiana



The National Council for Eurasian and East European Research
910 17th Street, N.W.
Suite 300
Washington, D.C. 20006

TITLE VIII PROGRAM

Project Information*

Principal Investigator:	Hiroaki Kuromiya
Council Contract Number:	819-21g
Date:	October 25, 2004

Copyright Information

Scholars retain the copyright on works they submit to NCEEER. However, NCEEER possesses the right to duplicate and disseminate such products, in written and electronic form, as follows: (a) for its internal use; (b) to the U.S. Government for its internal use or for dissemination to officials of foreign governments; and (c) for dissemination in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act or other law or policy of the U.S. government that grants the public access to documents held by the U.S. government.

Additionally, NCEEER has a royalty-free license to distribute and disseminate papers submitted under the terms of its agreements to the general public, in furtherance of academic research, scholarship, and the advancement of general knowledge, on a non-profit basis. All papers distributed or disseminated shall bear notice of copyright. Neither NCEEER, nor the U.S. Government, nor any recipient of a Contract product may use it for commercial sale.

*The work leading to this report was supported in part by contract or grant funds provided by the National Council for Eurasian and East European Research, funds which were made available by the U.S. Department of State under Title VIII (The Soviet-East European Research and Training Act of 1983, as amended). The analysis and interpretations contained herein are those of the author.

Executive Summary¹

Where is Ukraine going as a newly independent state? This question has been asked by numerous observers ever since Ukraine's independence in 1991. Yet the question appears to have become even more complex in recent years than before. The present working paper attempts to answer the question indirectly by contextualizing the political thinking of the Ukrainian political leaders who preceded Ukraine's independence.

In the thinking of Westerners, the choice of a "Western" orientation is obvious, because Ukraine's geopolitical situation is obsolete. Such a choice is possible, but the historical trajectory of Ukraine suggests that Ukraine is likely to meander politically for some time between "West" and "East" (an orientation towards Russia).

¹My thanks go to my colleagues in Kyiv, Roman Podkur, Yuri Shapoval, and Valerii Vasil'ev as well as Professor Amir Weiner of Stanford University, all of whom have contributed to this essay by providing to the author archival documents they have collected and engaging me in stimulating discussions. Part of this essay was presented at a working seminar "From Document Collections to Writing History," Moscow, Russia, 15-18 June 2004.

Introduction: Past as Prologue in Ukrainian Politics

Who will succeed Leonid Kuchma as the president of Ukraine after the presidential election this coming autumn? Will Kuchma manage to manipulate the constitution and the court to stay in power for another term? Will he succeed in placing his favorite in power, just as Boris Yeltsyn did Vladimir Putin in Russia almost five years ago? What is the possibility of an opposition leader emerging as a decisive winner with a clear and determined vision for the future of Ukraine? The prospect, as expected, is not clear. On the one hand, the influence of Ukraine's former "overlord," Russia, remains strong. Russia courts Ukraine intensely (especially through Russian business concerns), and Ukraine appears to flirt politically with its eastern neighbor. On the other hand, the lure of the West (represented by the European Union and the United States) remains equally strong. In March 2004, for instance, Ukraine had 2,000 soldiers deployed in Iraq, the third largest (except for the U.S. and U.K. troops) after Italy (2,700) and Poland (2,400), whereas Russia had none.

The present preliminary report on the the project in progress "The Political Leaders of Ukraine, 1938–1989" does not pretend to predict the future of Ukraine, but it does analyze some long-term trends in the political thoughts of Ukrainian leaders.

Ukraine is one of the largest countries in Europe, much larger than Poland (which is by far the largest among the recent European Union entrants) in geographical and population terms and even larger than France in geographical terms. Ukraine is a new country and, in general, little understood: even specialists of Russia in this country often have only the vaguest of ideas about Ukraine and its history; a great majority of textbooks still refer to Kiev Rus' as Kiev Russia (Russia as such did not exist then.) The field of Ukrainian studies, in turn, tends to be both isolated and isolationist. This state of affairs obtains in many fields, from international

security and political economy to literature and culture. Yet it is inconceivable to envision a stable “*Mittleuropa*” (or “Eastern Europe” however one may define these terms) without a finer and more profound understanding of this big yet obscure country called Ukraine.

The present project concentrates on the post-Great Terror leaders of Ukraine. No part of history is truly discrete. Although the Great Terror of 1937–38 had liquidated most of the Ukrainian political leadership who had believed in the pro-Ukrainian policy of Moscow (“Ukrainization”), it was the post-Great Terror leadership who defined the complex course of history leading to the 1991 independence of Ukraine. Their term of tenure coincided roughly with the unification (in 1939 under Stalin) of most Ukrainian ethno-linguistic territory which had been divided among several neighboring powers.

Ukrainian Identity and Soviet Leaders

Some top Ukrainian political leaders are well known, but many others are not. Nikita S. Khrushchev and Lazar M. Kaganovich (who led Ukraine in the 1920s and briefly in the 1940s) are perhaps the most famous. The political records of both are infamous in Ukraine: their roles in political repression are widely documented. Yet it is little known that, for example, Kaganovich, a native of Ukraine and perhaps the most ruthless executioner of Stalin’s policy, spoke the Ukrainian language and, according to his own account, became a professional revolutionary inspired by the literary work “Talisman” (whose hero was a Jew, like Kaganovich himself) by none other than the Ukrainian nationalist and writer Volodymyr Vynnychenko, Kaganovich’s political enemy.²

²“Dve besedy s L. M. Kaganovichem,” *Novaia i noveishaia istoriia*, 1999, no. 2, 120–21. Kaganovich fondly shared this critical episode in his life with his interviewer seventy years after the fact!

As this story of Kaganovich suggests, a preliminary picture of the Ukrainian leaders that emerges from our work to date is that they were violently anti-separatist³ but not necessarily anti-Ukrainian (in fact, many had very fond feelings for Ukraine and its people), promoted Ukrainian interests so long as they did not interfere with all-Union interests, and were very proud of the fact that it was under the Soviet regime that Ukraine achieved a stable “statehood.”

However, they remained ambivalent about Ukraine’s future in world history, a reflection of Ukraine’s precarious position between the “East” (a Russian orientation) and the “West” (a European orientation). This ambivalence accounts at least for the enigmatic course of post-Soviet leadership in Ukraine. It is not clear yet whether future Ukrainian leaders will be able to extricate themselves from this historical bind.

Khrushchev, who ruled Ukraine from 1938 to 1949 (with a short hiatus after the war when Kaganovich replaced him), may have been purely hypocritical when, at the beginning of WWII, on 6 July 1941, he addressed the Ukrainian people as “Comrades Workers, Peasants, Intelligentsia of the Great Ukrainian people! ”, using the heroic history of the Ukrainian people to full effect:

The cursed enemy has captured part of our native Ukraine by a perfidious attack. This cannot frighten our mighty militant people. The German dog-knights were slashed by the sword of the warriors of [Prince] Danylo of Galicia [who founded L’viv in the thirteenth century], by the sabres of Cossacks under Bohdan Khmel’nyts’kyi, and the kaiser’s hords were destroyed by the Ukrainian people under the leadership of Lenin and Stalin in 1918.⁴

³According to Khrushchev, Kaganovich “was fond of saying that every Ukrainian is potentially a nationalist.” *Khrushchev Remembers*, tr. and ed. Strobe Talbott, introduction, commentary, and notes by Edward Crankshaw (Boston, 1970), p. 172.

⁴Tsentral’nyi derzhavnyi arkhiv hromads’kykh ob"iednan’ Ukrainy [TsDAHO] (Kyiv, Ukraine), f. 1, op. 13, spr. 17, ark. 11–12.

True, Khrushchev did not fail to remind the “great Ukrainian people” of their “brother, the great Russian people.” Yet it was also Khrushchev who consciously promoted the awakening of Ukrainian national sentiments (within certain limits) to win the war.⁵

This new awakening led to serious complications after the war, and a civil war against the Ukrainian nationalists was fought ruthlessly, mainly in western Ukraine. Khrushchev made it clear that the independence of Ukraine was anathema. As soon as Western Ukraine was liberated from the Germans, Khrushchev addressed the population, “Dear Brothers, Ukrainians, and All Citizens who Reside in the Western Region of Our Native Ukraine! ” Emphasizing the Soviet liberation of Ukraine, Khrushchev challenged the Ukrainian nationalists:

What [kind of] independent Ukraine can exist, when now Ukraine already is free and Soviet, where the Ukrainians are the masters of their situation? Everything is set to serve the Soviet Ukrainian people: our workers live by the laws decided according to their will, develop their own native culture, speak in their native tongue, lay their own national cultural foundations, create their own poems, their own arts. All that the people have achieved by their own labor is inscribed in the great Stalin constitution.⁶

Independence was anathema, but “statehood” was something to be propagated because it was the Soviet power that had created a Ukrainian “state” in the form of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. In 1947, in discussing the letter of the “Ukrainian people” (drafted by the famous writer O. Korniiichuk) to be sent to Stalin on the commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the October Revolution, Khrushchev and others (such as his deputy D. S. Korotchenko) made

⁵Khrushchev is also known to have often visited Taras Shevchenko’s grave and praised this “great Ukrainian poet, revolutionary and democrat.” See Borys Lewitzkyj, *Politics and Society in Soviet Ukraine, 1953–1980* (Edmonton, Canada, 1984), p. 50.

⁶*Ibid.*, f. 1, op. 25, spr. 780, ark. 122 and 136.

the point of emphasizing the “statehood” (*gosudarstvennost’*) of Ukraine, as something given by Lenin and Stalin. They even went so far as to claim that Ukraine was an “independent” (*samostoiatel’noe*) state.⁷

Of course, it was not the kind of statehood the nationalists wanted, but it was also the case that Ukraine, united for the first time since the seventeenth century, had acquired a degree of international legitimacy by securing a seat in the United Nations. (Perhaps this new role encouraged Stalin to allow Ukraine to have its own Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense.) Indeed, Ukraine sent its own delegation to the founding conference for the United Nations, held in San Francisco in April–June 1945. Upon returning from the conference, the head of the delegation, D. Z. Manuil’skii (1883–1959), an old Ukrainian hand and a former Comintern leader, submitted a report to Khrushchev:

The Ukrainian delegation regarded its role as follows: in fundamental issues in which our Soviet state has a vital stake we will support the line of the [Soviet] Union delegation by all means. In secondary issues, however, both in discussion and voting we will hold an independent position. Indeed our delegation carried out this role from the beginning to the end.⁸

Manuil’skii reported with some satisfaction that the fact that the Ukrainian delegation disagreed with the Union delegation on certain issues raised the curiosity of other participants of the conference.⁹ The debut of Ukraine on the international scene, an unprecedented event for Ukraine, also highlighted Ukraine’s lack of experience as an “independent” international force. Manuil’skii pointed out that because of a lack of diplomatic experience, the Ukrainian

⁷Ibid., f. 1, op. 23, spr. 4472, ark. 28.

⁸Ibid., f. 1, op. 25, spr. 1447, ark. 32.

⁹Ibid., ark. 83.

delegation, somewhat timid and unsure, missed out on many opportunities for asserting its views and positions and that the delegates' inadequate knowledge of the English language hampered their effectiveness.

Evidently encouraged by their experience, however, Manuil'skii proposed that Ukraine exchange diplomatic representatives with other countries to strengthen the prestige of Ukraine and pave the way for other Union republics to enter the United Nations. Without an exchange of diplomats, Manuil'skii warned, the entry of Ukraine and Belarus would be regarded by the USA and UK as a mere concession to gain two extra votes for the USSR at the UN.¹⁰

Manuil'skii's euphoria over Ukraine's "independent" role on the international scene led to very little substantive change, however. Clearly Moscow did not intend for Ukraine to play such a role, and the Ukrainian Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense had no independence at all. Ukraine's international ambitions, however limited, were frustrated.

Post-War Soviet Leaders of Ukraine

Shortly after Stalin's death in March 1953, Khrushchev placed the first ethnic Ukrainian in the political leadership of Ukraine, Oleksii I. Kyrychenko.¹¹ Yet the first Ukrainian leader of Ukraine was a firm believer in Soviet Ukraine, not independent Ukraine. His rule, like that of Khrushchev in the 1950s and 1960s, was full of contradictions. Ironically, Kyrychenko, vocal

¹⁰Ibid., ark. 37 and 39.

¹¹For Kyrychenko, see Iu. I. Shapoval, *Liudyna i systema* (Kyiv, 1994), pp. 241–54.

about Ukraine's interests, fought against Moscow's "de-Stalinization policy." In September 1956, for example, Kyrychenko argued forcefully that Moscow's "de-Stalinization" policy was de-stabilizing Ukraine:

Recently, according to the decision of the Commissions of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union and judicial organs concerning amnesty and the serving of prison terms as well as by the Order of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union dated 10 March 1956 and the decision of the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union dated 15 May 1956, a large number of former bandits, participants in the underground OUN [Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists], bandit accomplices, and Uniate [Greek Catholic] priests (from 1954 to August 1956 alone more than 20,000) have returned from the place of imprisonment and exile to the western *oblasts* of Ukraine.

In a number of districts and cities in the western *oblasts* of Ukraine, the return of such a large number of these people is creating a tense situation with regards to securing work placements and living quarters for them: the houses which had belonged to these people are now distributed to re-settlers from Poland and Czechoslovakia, collective farm activists who suffered at the hands of bandits, and a number of administrative, cultural, and educational institutions such as village Soviets, collective farm administrations, hospitals, schools, libraries, and kindergartens. Moreover, a significant number of houses were torn down and transported when collective farmers of the western *oblast's* were resettled to other *oblasts* of Ukraine.

The return of former members of nationalist organizations to the western *oblasts* of Ukraine from the place of imprisonment is not desirable also for political reasons: in these *oblasts* the primary rings of the organized underground and armed bands of the OUN were defeated only in 1951 and finally eliminated at the end of 1955.¹²

Kyrychenko sought to convince Moscow that the political situation in western Ukraine was still unstable, and was only exacerbated by the return of nationally minded Ukrainians. Also, seeking to shield Ukraine from the unruliness of neighboring countries in Eastern Europe in the wake of Stalin's death, Kyrychenko vigorously fought against Moscow. Perhaps surprisingly,

¹²Ibid., f. 1, op. 24, spr. 4265, ark. 12.

Kyrychenko's understandable fears were not widely shared by the powers that be in Moscow, with the result that a significant number of former camp inmates continued to return to western Ukraine where the grip of Soviet power was still weak.

Like Kyrychenko's, the leadership of Petro Iu. Shelest was fraught with inconsistencies. Shelest, who ruled Ukraine as the first secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party from 1963 to 1972 (his tenure therefore spanned parts of both the Khrushchev and the Brezhnev eras), is often credited by Western scholars with the promotion of Ukrainian interests in the face of growing pressure for Russification. When Ukraine's economic interests were at stake, Shelest fought determinedly against the central authorities of Moscow. Like Manuil'skii, Shelest was tempted by the prospect of Ukraine's rise to the international stage. In 1965, for example, Shelest wrote a letter to Moscow:

In conversations [with foreign countries at various meeting and conferences of the United Nations] the representatives of these countries noted that for a variety of reasons they cannot conduct direct trade with the Soviet Union. So they are forced to have trade with the Soviet Union through neutral countries which involves many difficulties, but trade through Ukraine, as a member of the UN, would eliminate these difficulties and would have a positive impact on the development of foreign trade.

In my opinion, the question of facilitating Ukraine's direct economic links with foreign countries deserves attention in the overall plan for foreign trade of the Soviet Union. In recent years the international authority of Soviet Ukraine as a sovereign state (*suverennaia derzhava*), founding member of the UN, and a participant in numerous international organizations has grown immeasurably.¹³

This letter alarmed Moscow, and, like Manuil'skii, Shelest failed in his "statist" ambition.

Many Ukrainians believe that Shelest promoted Ukrainian interests boldly by, for example, organizing the publication of the famous massive multi-volume *Istoriia mist i sil Ukrain'skoi RSR* (The History of Cities and Villages of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic)

¹³Ibid., f. 1, op. 24, spr. 5991. ark. 81–82.

and himself authoring the famous book, *Ukraino nasha Radians'ka* (O Ukraine, Our Soviet Land, 1970). In the latter Shelest deplored the inadequate attention given to Ukrainian history and culture in Soviet Ukraine. Referring to the supposedly democratic nature of the Zaporizhian Cossack Sich, for example, Shelest, a descendant of Cossack families, even quoted both Karl Marx on the Sich and Taras H. Shevchenko, the nineteenth-century Ukrainian national poet whose denunciations of the eighteenth-century Russian autocrat (Catherine “the Great”) for disbanding the Sich were well known.

Shelest’s promotion of Ukraine’s Cossack origins (which implied Ukraine’s difference from the supposedly autocratic Russia) annoyed Moscow greatly.¹⁴ A special Russian translation was prepared for the party leaders in Moscow, who then attacked Shelest and instructed that existing copies of the book be burned. Still, Shelest did not capitulate easily. When M. A. Suslov, Brezhnev’s ideological spokesman, dismissed the Cossacks as an “archaism,” Shelest taught him a lesson: without the Cossacks, Suslov would not have been there; it was the Cossacks that saved the country from the hordes and Turks, and it was they who conquered the southern lands. Along the way, Shelest deplored Suslov’s “great-state nationalism.”¹⁵ Like Kaganovich, Shelest also liked Volodymyr Vynnychenko, whose works he wanted to publish in Ukraine. Moscow did not give permission.¹⁶

¹⁴His son believes that Shelest considered the Sich as the ideal of a social system. See Iurii Shapoval (ed.), *Petro Shelest: “Spravzhnii sud istorii shche poperedu”* (Kyiv, 2003), p. 750.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 221, 310, 651.

Shelest's attitude towards the Ukrainian language is also interesting. His son testifies that at home he spoke Russian exclusively. The father's gift to his son was a book of Shevchenko in Russian.¹⁷ Ukraine was dear to Shelest ("exiled" in Russia, he requested, like Shevchenko, that he be buried in Ukraine when he died), but he could not separate Ukraine from the Soviet Union (or Russia). Nevertheless, he fought for the Ukrainian language, especially against the Russian "chauvinist" claim that the Ukrainian language was merely a "half-breed" (*surzhyk*) of the Russian language.¹⁸

Shelest was no friend of Ukrainian nationalism, however. He thought of nationalism as something "scary" and disliked both chauvinism and nationalism, whether separatism or open dissidence¹⁹ All the same, after his fall in 1972, Shelest was criticized for fostering nationalism and the dissident movement (which was particularly strong and intense in Ukraine).

In other political respects, Shelest acted as a hard-line Stalinist Communist. Shelest supported Brezhnev's "coup" against Khrushchev. Yet Shelest was not in favor of Brezhnev's détente. His attitude stemmed from Ukraine's position as a republic situated between Russia and Eastern Europe. Eastern Europe's influence on Ukraine was much greater than on Russia. The 1956 Hungarian Revolution deeply affected Shelest who was convinced that such occurrences had to be avoided by all means. It has also become known that it was Shelest who, fearful of the spillover of the Prague Spring into Ukraine, became the architect of the infamous Brezhnev

¹⁶ibid., pp. 15, 310, 714.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 744.

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 216 and 657. At least initially when his power in the Kremlin was relatively strong, Shelest's predecessor M. V. Pidhornyi supported him in these issues regarding Ukraine.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 423 and 652.

doctrine.²⁰ However, by the late 1980s, Shelest came to the conclusion that it was a mistake that diminished the role of the Soviet Union as a socialist state.²¹

In 1972 Shelest, relieved of his post as the first secretary of the central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine, was removed from Ukraine and, like Shevchenko and the famous Ukrainian film director O. Dovzhenko, virtually exiled to Russia and not permitted to go back to Ukraine. He later recalled that his departure for Moscow was the darkest day of his life. When in 1991 the Soviet Union collapsed and Ukraine became an independent country, Shelest remained a divided personality, at once a Stalinist Communist and a Ukrainian patriot. When asked about his sentiment on the day Ukraine attained its independence, Shelest answered:

I don't know. Should I be pleased that my country has become independent, or should I be distressed that my other country which I have served all my life has perished? ”²²

This divided sentiment symbolized the complex position of Ukraine with regard to Russia.

The “last of the Mohicans” Volodymyr V. Shcherbyts’kyi, who was the first secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party from 1972 to 1989. He came to power in the wake of Shelest’s forced departure for Moscow. Shcherbyts’kyi had worked with Shelest for some years and

²⁰In his subsequent publications, *Da ne sudimy budete. Dnevnikovyie zapisi, vospominaniia chlena Politbiuro TsK KPSS* (Moscow, 1995) in particular, Shelest proved less than honest. For this point and excerpts from his original diary entries, See Mark Kramer, “Ukraine and the Soviet-Czechoslovak Crisis of 1968,” *Cold War International History Bulletin*, no. 10. Now more complete records of Shelest’s “diary,” which is the source of Kramer’s important essay, is published in Ukrainian translation in Shapoval (ed.), *Shelest*.

²¹Shelest’s interview to the newspaper *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, Shapoval (ed.), *Shelest*, p. 698.

²²Shapoval (ed.), *Shelest*, p. 754.

shared many of his policies. Like Shelest, of Cossack descent, Shcherbyts'kyi was an ardent Ukrainian patriot. Yet the fall of Khrushchev in 1964 is said to have changed his attitudes about things Ukrainian, making him much more cautious.²³

Indeed, he remained so cautious that he is said to have refused all unofficial interviews. His caution probably helped him survive in power: his tenure spanned the Brezhnev-Andropov-Chernenko-Gorbachev administrations. Hailing from Dnipropetrovs'k *oblast'*, Shcherbyts'kyi retained much respect for his fellow countryman and his Moscow boss, Leonid I. Brezhnev, at least in his early years: he was a member of the Brezhnev "Dnipropetrovs'k mafia."²⁴ The Ukrainian "mafia" was so strong that a joke went around: "In the history of Ukraine there is the pre-Petrine period, then the Petrine period, and now the dnipro-petrine period."²⁵

Shcherbyts'kyi promoted the anti-Shelest campaign, treating numerous Ukrainian dissidents harshly, a policy generally characteristic of the Brezhnev period. Shcherbyts'kyi believed that such national questions as existed before the revolution were solved fully under the Soviet government. In his mind there was no room for nationalism in any form (even though he defended the use of the Ukrainian language, promoted the particular interests of Ukraine, and defended certain aspects of Ukrainian culture such as Shevchenko's poems).²⁶ When faced with

²³Iu. I. Shapoval, *Nevyhadani istorii* (Kyiv, 2004), p. 278.

²⁴*Volodymyr Shcherbyts'kyi: Spohady suchasnykiv*(Kyiv, 2003), p. 300.

²⁵Shapoval, *Nevyhadani istorii*, p. 262.

²⁶Knowledge of the Ukrainian language, with some exceptions, was a requirement for officials of the Central Committee of the Ukrainian Communist Party. See Vitalii Vrublevskii, *Vladimir Shcherbitskii: pravda i vymysly. Zapiski pomoshchnika: vospominaniia, dokumety, slukhi, legendy, fakty* (Kyiv, 1993), p. 128. This is a valuable book by Shcherbyts'kyi's assistant.

the demands of the Crimean Tatars to return to their native lands, however, Shcherbyts'kyi maintained that it was a union-wide (not just Ukrainian) problem.²⁷

Unlike Brezhnev, Shcherbyts'kyi appears to have maintained some principles. He forbade his family and relatives to enjoy special privileges, for example. Upon taking office, he reportedly closed a special store for the Central Committee bosses.²⁸ Shcherbyts'kyi's respect for Brezhnev apparently declined as the Brezhnevite "stagnation" became entrenched. When he was asked to serve in Moscow (as Shelest was before him), Shcherbyts'kyi, unlike Shelest, refused to go by any means. Calling the Moscow leaders "Moscow boyars" (*moskovskie boiare*), he confided to his men that he did "not play Moscow games": "I don't want to take part in this political game."²⁹

So it appears that Shcherbyts'kyi welcomed Gorbachev's perestroika as inevitable. Yet it also broke Shcherbyts'kyi as a politician in the end. The 1986 Chernobyl' (Chornobyl' in Ukrainian) catastrophe was probably the turning point. Shcherbyts'kyi understood that Ukraine would not be able to do without nuclear power stations, but some years before the Chernobyl' affair took place, Shcherbyts'kyi and other Ukrainian leaders as well as Ukrainian scientists had expressed great concern about the state of nuclear power stations in Ukraine. Faulty design, low quality of plant parts, and inadequate qualifications of the operating staff combined to create some serious (albeit not as serious as the Chernobyl' accident) accidents in nuclear power stations (in Chernobyl' among others). Shcherbyts'kyi complained to Moscow (which centrally controlled and managed nuclear energy) about the lack of concern on Moscow's part, and

²⁷Ibidi., p. 129.

²⁸Ibidi., p. 112.

²⁹Ibidi., pp. 36 and 40, and *Volodymyr Shcherbyts'kyi*, p. 42.

demanded immediate action, warning Moscow of possible “catastrophic consequences.”
Moscow did very little.³⁰

When the worst nuclear accident in human history took place in April 1986 in Chernobyl, not very far from the capital of Kyiv, Moscow did not keep Kyiv fully informed of the extent and the nature of the accident.³¹ It is not entirely clear who collected information and how Moscow and Kyiv dealt with the information. Undoubtedly however, the state security organ (KGB) played a central role. On 26 April, soon after the accident took place, the Kyiv KGB filed urgent and secret reports with the KGB in Moscow and the Ukrainian KGB, which only two days later reported to the Central Committee of the Ukrainian Communist Party.³²

Shcherbyts’kyi’s actions in these tense days are not entirely clear. Nuclear specialists reported with relief to the Central Committee that the capital Kyiv had escaped heavy radiation (at the cost of other parts of Ukraine and the Soviet Union).³³ Yet the danger of the accident to the capital was plainly clear. There was a panic situation.

Given the extraordinary circumstances, Shcherbyts’kyi wanted to cancel one of the most important events in Soviet Ukraine, the May Day demonstration. (In fact, the day before, on 30 April, the radiation level in the city had begun to rise significantly.) When he called to clear it with Moscow, he was told by Mikhail S. Gorbachev that if the parade were canceled, Shcherbyts’kyi would be expelled from the party. Shcherbyts’kyi, dedicated as he was to the party, felt obliged to hold the demonstration. The Ukraine party leaders, including

³⁰Brublevskii, pp. 204–206.

³¹See Brublevskii, pp. 212 and 215.

³²Note the special issue of *Z arkhiviv VUChK-HPU-NKVD-KHB*, 2001, no. 1, pp. 65–71.

³³See 4 May 1986 report in TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 25, spr. 2994, ark. 31.

Shcherbyts'kyi himself, brought their families to the event as if to demonstrate to the Kyiv population and the world that all was well.³⁴

The terrible history of the Chernobyl affair changed Shcherbyts'kyi completely, according to his aide.³⁵ Records show that when, shortly thereafter, he attended the 5 May 1986 meeting in Moscow of the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, of which he was a member, Shcherbyts'kyi, the man who should have played a central role in the meeting devoted to the Chernobyl' affair, hardly spoke.³⁶

Shcherbyts'kyi nevertheless continued his work. On 7 May, despite optimistic reports on the situation in the capital, he ordered the evacuation of children from the capital.³⁷ In his 22 May report to the Central Committee in Moscow, Shcherbyts'kyi noted that by 22 May 89,360 people had been evacuated from the dangerous zones and that, in general, people appreciated measures taken by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Yet perhaps in veiled criticism of Moscow, he also noted that Moscow's failure to respond promptly to Kyiv's inquiries regarding admissible radiation levels had caused "serious difficulties"³⁸

A serious "internal crisis" deprived Shcherbyts'kyi of his dynamism. He seemed to fear some unexpected, decisive event. He became disillusioned with Gorbachev. He resigned from his post in September 1989. He died a broken politician, the last of Soviet Ukrainian Mohicans,

³⁴Brublevskii, p. 211 and *Volodymyr Shcherbyts'kyi*, p. 37.

³⁵Brublevskii, p. 216.

³⁶See " 'Chtoby pokoleniia ne zabyli ob etom fakte'. Pervye dni posle chernobyl'skoi avarii," *Istochnik*, 1996, no. 5, pp. 93–103.

³⁷*Volodymyr Shcherbyts'kyi*, p. 221.

³⁸TsDAHO, f. ' , op. 25, spr. 2995, ark. 8-11.

in February 1990, before the Soviet Union collapsed.³⁹

The Soviet Legacy of Ukraine's Political Future

Shortly after Shcherbyts'ky's death, Ukraine declared independence in the wake of the failure of a coup in Moscow. It was a decisive event with the overwhelming support of the people of Ukraine, even from the heavily Russified east and the Crimea. It was also a strange event in that the independence was enacted by Communists who appeared to have turned nationalist overnight. In fact, the former Communists saw independence as the only opportunity for self-preservation in the wake of the failed coup by Moscow's hard-line Communists. This picture may be compared with Russia's "independence" from the Soviet Union in which the former Russian Communists played a similar role. The ubiquitous amalgamation between political leaders and organized crime seems also common to both post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine.

For all its troubles and difficulties, Russia seems to have largely shed the old political elite, symbolized by the accession to power of Vladimir Putin (born in 1952). Putin, a former KGB functionary, is in a sense a product of the Soviet system, yet his rise and the emergence of numerous political and economic leaders in Russia marks a significant generational and historical break with the Communist past even if one discounts Putin's nostalgia for the "glorious" past of the Soviet Union. One does not detect explicit manifestations of Russian imperialist ambitions towards Ukraine in the current political leadership of Russia (just as generally former colonial powers do not aspire for the resurrection of their empires).

By contrast, Ukraine has not shed its old power elite. The current president Leonid

³⁹For the last few years of his life, see Brublevskii, pp. 243–253.

Kuchma, born in 1938, is slightly younger than his predecessor, Leonid Kravchuk, born in 1934. In spite of the rise of numerous political and economic leaders in Ukraine, the old political elite is still in power. While some observers argue that Russia has developed a semblance of a functioning democracy, Ukraine's current political system is widely regarded as completely corrupt and dysfunctional. Tellingly, Putin is popular in Russia, while Kuchma is disliked in Ukraine.

It is possible that it will be a matter of time before the old guard retires from the political scene, whoever is elected president this autumn,. Does the new, younger generation of Ukrainian political leaders have new visions? New visions and new options are available, therefore what future Ukraine makes for itself is an existential question for Ukraine (both for the leader and the led). Yet in history hardly any choice is purely existential. The present work on the Ukrainian political leaders reveals the constraints under which they operated.

Ukraine's geopolitical position between "east" and "west" has been the most constant constraint. The pull towards Russia in particular has, since the seventeenth century, defined Ukraine's position in the world. Few Ukrainian leaders have rejected Ukraine's particular interests as opposed to those of Russia, but few have escaped the allure of federalism, Ukraine within the greater framework of "Russia."

The "founding father" of modern Ukraine and the great historian of Ukraine, Mykhailo Hrushevs'kyi, hesitated long before declaring independence in early 1918, well after the Russian Provisional Government had been toppled by the Bolsheviks. Those Communist leaders discussed in this paper never dreamed of Ukraine beyond the embrace of "Russia" (or the Soviet Union). President Kuchma, like the Cossack hetmans of the old days, sits on the fence, trying to please both Russia and the West: in recent years Kuchma has been criticized by his opponents

both for visibly orienting Ukraine towards Russia and for sending Ukrainian soldiers to Iraq in order to “buy amnesty from the United States.”⁴⁰ Ilya Prizel has aptly noted:

In a way, the proclivity of the Ukrainian elite to swing from one foreign sponsor to another is reminiscent of the policies conducted on behalf of Ukraine by Pavlo Skoropadsky during the country’s brief independence following the collapse of the tsarist empire, a policy that discredited the reliability of Ukraine and hastened its demise as an independent state.⁴¹

As Prizel notes, the demise of independent Ukraine is highly unlikely this time around, but he is right about the reliability of Ukraine on the international scene. Prizel could have added that Skoropads’kyi’s swing is not peculiar to him. Hrushevs’kyi, in the end, made a decisive break with Russia, only to seek Germany’s help against Russia. (Then Germany removed Hrushevs’kyi and placed Skoropads’kyi in power.) In the seventeenth century, Hetman Khmel’nyts’kyi, like many others, manipulated the surrounding powers (Muscovy, Ottoman Turkey, and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth) to survive. In other words, the geopolitical constraints on the Ukrainian leaders are well and alive.

It is true that Ukraine could easily do away with these constraints, as many commentators urge, by making an existential decision to turn decisively “West.” Whatever turning “West” may mean, Russia’s allure will not disappear, just as for Canada, which may feel more affinity with Europe than with the United states, the allure of the US is irresistible and, in many respects, rational economically. Ukraine’s dilemma, however, may become moot if Russia turns into the “West.” In this sense, Ukraine’s future may still (though need not) depend, to an extent, on Russia’s future.

⁴⁰Madeleine K. Albright noted that this latter assertion “cannot be true, but the perception discourages opponents.” *The New York Times*, 8 March 2004, Section A, p. 19.

⁴¹Ilya Prizel, “Ukraine’s Hollow Decade,” *East European Politics and Societies* 16: 2 (2002), p. 384.