

DANYLIW RESEARCH SEMINAR



Regionalism's Long Shadow: Local Elites, Emergent Politics, and Infrastructural Impediments to Change in Soviet Dnipropetrousk, 1954-2014"

by **Orysia Kulick**
Stanford U, US
omkulick@gmail.com

presented at the



Ukraine 2014: Maidan, War, Geopolitics
30 October-1 November 2014

A popular Brezhnev-era anecdote offers succinct evidence of the Dnipropetrovsk elite's influence in the late Soviet period. As General Secretary, Leonid Brezhnev had consolidated power by surrounding himself with loyal, albeit aging, functionaries, who had become firmly entrenched by the 1970s. Vladimir Shcherbitskii, another member of the Dnipropetrovsk elite, was appointed first secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party in 1973, after a sustained attempt to oust his predecessor Petro Shelest. This lack of dynamism in leadership, and the preponderance of elites from Brezhnev's native Dnipropetrovsk at the pinnacle of power in Kyiv and Moscow, prompted Soviet citizens to lament openly that "[their] nation's history [was] divided into three epochs: *do-petrovskii*, *petrovskii*, and *dnipro-petrovskii*.¹ Rather than inviting serious comparison with the pre-Petrine and Petrine periods, here this anecdote underscores the extent to which the Dnipropetrovsk elite had permeated Soviet corridors of power.

Popular perceptions largely coincide with scholarly analyses of patron-client relationships in the Soviet Union, which demonstrated the scale of Brezhnev's bureaucratic beneficence.² More recent scholarship has shown that, as a result, Ukraine played a more central role in governing the union. Serhii Plokhyy suggests that the Ukrainian elite was, in fact, a "junior partner" in ruling the Soviet Union under Khrushchev and Brezhnev, its push for independence playing a pivotal role in toppling the empire. Ukrainian elites had brokered a deal with Moscow that demanded "loyalty in exchange for unlimited rule at home and power sharing in the center." The KGB abrogated this arrangement upon taking control of the Kremlin after Brezhnev's death in 1982. One of the first things Mikhail Gorbachev did

-
1. Leonid Mlechin, *KGB: Predsedateli organov gosbezopasnosti. Rassekretchennii Sud'by* (google ebook).
 2. Many works have been devoted to this crucial issue, of particular interest are: Merle Fainsod, *How Russia Is Ruled* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963); Beissinger, Mark "Ethnicity, the Personnel Weapon, and Neo-imperial Integration: Ukrainian and RSFSR Provincial Party Officials Compared," *The Soviet Nationality Reader: The Disintegration in Context* (Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford: Westview Press, 1992); Michael Urban, *An Algebra of Soviet Power: Elite Circulation in the Belorussian Republic, 1966-86* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Yoram Gorlitzki, "Too Much Trust: Regional Leaders and Local Political Networks Under Brezhnev," *Slavic Review*, Vol. 69, Issue 3, 2010; Kotkin, Stephen. *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). _____ and Jan Tomasz Gross. *Uncivil Society: 1989 and the Implosion of the Communist Establishment* (New York: Modern Library, 2009).

upon becoming General Secretary was “block the pipeline that was bringing Ukrainian functionaries to Moscow.”³

Understanding how “provincial” elites from Dnipropetrovsk came to rule the roost in Moscow requires taking a much closer look at the region’s evolution in the postwar period. That the center—guided by KGB chief Yuri Andropov—felt it necessary to shut out Ukrainian elites, who had shared power in Moscow for decades, in order to reassert central control seems especially telling. It may also provide some insight into why Ukraine’s turn westward this past year proved to have such violent consequences. Some of the institutions that bound Ukraine most tightly to the Soviet Union have been slow to reconfigure after independence, chief among them the military-industrial complex, as well as intelligence and security services. Dnipropetrovsk’s long-term association with Soviet defense makes the decision of its regional elites to firmly defend Ukrainian sovereignty all the more remarkable.

Dnipropetrovsk’s position within in the Soviet system is clearly a complicated one, especially from the mid-1950s onward, opening a host of questions of how power was distributed within the Soviet system. To frame my discussion of the relationship of regional functionaries to the center of power, I refer here to Mayhill Fowler, who shows in her work how twin processes of ‘officialization’ and ‘provincialization’ fundamentally transformed the relationship between the state and the arts in the Soviet Union. She underscores the importance of the center-periphery dynamic in shaping Soviet culture—the steady flow of artists from the borderlands to Moscow allowing culture in the center to flourish, while it struggled in the periphery. This understanding of the relationship between ‘center’ and ‘periphery’ as constitutive of one another is essential for any discussion of officialdom in Ukraine.⁴ Many of the same processes acted on party and state officials, and were also reproduced within party-state structures.

The predominance of Ukrainian functionaries in Moscow under Khrushchev and Brezhnev was not just the result of patronage networks that transcended national and

-
3. Serhii Plokyh, *The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union* (Basic Books, New York, NY, 2014), 54.
 4. Mayhill Courtney Fowler, “Beau Monde State and Stage on Empire’s Edge, Russia and Soviet Ukraine, 1916-1941,” Unpublished PhD Dissertation. Princeton University, 2011.

institutional boundaries, although they certainly played crucial role. Merle Fainsod's *How Russia is Ruled* is a classic work underscoring the power of patrons in the Soviet system, arguing that below the placid exterior of the party, there was "a constellation of power centers," of varying degrees of magnitude, "each with its entourage of satellites, with fields of influence extending through the Party, police, and the administrative and military hierarchies." Careers were made by "clinging to the coat tails of the Great Lords of Communism...cliques ris[ing] and fall[ing] in the Soviet hierarchy depending on the fortunes of their patrons."⁵

In Fainsod's story, the center always managed to reassert itself despite the all the regional imperfections in implementing Stalin's will. The experience of Ukrainian elites under Stalin reveals that modes of management in the Soviet Union differed depending on the place. To manage Ukraine, Stalin also resorted to pitting regional elites—in Kyiv, Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, the Donbass—against one another in order to prevent one leader from consolidating the powerful Ukrainian *apparat* and challenging his grip on power in the center. This provided a robust training ground for Ukrainian elites, who in John Armstrong's analysis, came into the post-Stalin period with a much more nimble approach to bureaucratic politics.⁶ Particularly significant to the Ukrainian story is the fact that its leadership was annihilated by the Stalinist purges of 1937-38. More than 160,000 people were arrested in 1938 in Ukraine after the nomination of Khrushchev as head of CPU; the majority was executed, and only three of 200 Central Committee members survived.⁷ This created a power vacuum at the top that would require sweeping infusions of personnel in the 1960s and 1980s, and at a much faster rate than in the RSFSR. Taken together, John Armstrong argued long ago that these factors allowed a new cohort of Ukrainians to rise rapidly into high-ranking positions in both the republic and the center. Their success under Khrushchev was also an indicator of "an overall strengthening of oligarchic control of the USSR."⁸

-
5. Merle Fainsod, *How Russia Is Ruled* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), 263.
 6. John Armstrong, *The Soviet Bureaucratic Elite: A Case Study of the Ukrainian Apparatus* (New York: Praeger, 1959).
 7. Stéphane Courtois, Jonathan Murphy, and Mark Kramer, eds., *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 192.
 8. Armstrong, 142-150.

This oligarchization of Soviet bureaucracy—before the oligarchs were even a glimmer in the historical imagination—points to something essential about the Soviet system that comes into view through studying regional institutions. With a comparatively limited source base that relied heavily on newspaper accounts of personnel changes in the Soviet Union, Armstrong’s close attention to Ukrainian elites offered key insights into how new cadres might transform the Soviet bureaucracy. Higher levels of education would likely cause a rift between generations of leaders, and widen the gap between party and state bureaucracies, whose members had been interchangeable in an agricultural Ukraine run by generalists. A more complex economy required much greater specialization and technical knowledge, and encouraged greater autonomy of local elites. By the mid-1950s, the industrial Donbas coal region had already developed *cross-institutional alignments between Party, state and industrial manager groups*, which created a “partially distinct” party-state grouping in the Donbas, facilitating a level of insularity that undermined central control.⁹

In the years following Armstrong’s study, many of Ukraine’s Eastern regions expanded their industrial production; their cities swelling with workers that needed to be housed and fed. Some of them began large-scale production in support of Soviet defense. Dnipropetrovsk, in particular, became home to one of the Soviet Union’s prized rocket-making facilities—Yuzhmash. The political economy of Soviet Ukraine was clearly changing and the skill with which regional elites were able to adapt was a measure not just of their effectiveness as managers, but for their ability survive and advance their careers within the institutions governing the Soviet Union.

Top-level personnel appointments in Ukraine in the late 1960s and early 1970s show that Ukraine was critical to Brezhnev’s efforts to consolidate political control, and his efforts to sideline his primary co-conspirators in Moscow one by one. Vladimir Shcherbitskii rose steadily through the party ranks at that time. After being exiled to Dnipropetrovsk by Khrushchev due to his open resistance to the bifurcation of the party in 1962, Shcherbitskii returned to the post of chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Ukrainian SSR in 1965, became a candidate member of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the CPSU in 1965 and 1966, and was chosen as a candidate member of the Politburo of the Central

9. Ibid.

Committee of the CPSU in 1966. He also became a Politburo member in 1971, which gave the Ukrainian republic two representatives in that political body for the first time in its history.¹⁰ This series of appointments culminated in Petro Shelest's replacement by Shcherbitskii in 1973, and was followed by Nikolai Podgorny's forcible removal from the Politburo in 1977, marking the end of a major phase in Brezhnev's efforts to consolidate power.¹¹

Also figuring prominently was the demotion of KGB chief Vladimir Semichastnyi from Moscow to Kyiv in 1967, replacing him with Yuri Andropov. This was a reassignment that reverberated throughout the union, mentioned in all the memoirs I have read thus far by Ukrainian *apparatchiki*. Many party members (as well as outside observers) felt that the reason for the removal of Semichastnyi was that he was privy to too many intimate details about the plot surrounding Khrushchev's removal in 1964. In light of other appointments happening at that time, it was clear that Brezhnev was eroding the influence of the Kharkiv region, both in Moscow and Ukraine, one post at a time, in order to erode the party-networks supporting Shelest and his patron Podgorny. In fact, Shelest was approached by Brezhnev to find an appropriate assignment for Podgorny in Kyiv, one that did not involve party work. They ultimately settled on the post of first assistant to the head of the Council of Ministers of the Ukrainian republic, a serious demotion for someone who had been at the helm of the KGB.¹²

My research agenda this summer further explored two key issues that shaped the regional politics in Dnipropetrovsk—housing construction and defense—to more fully understand the rise of Dnipropetrovsk, not from the perspective of high politics, but from a regional level. Partly, this focus on defense was made possible due to a new cache of files found at the party archives (TsDAHOU) that dealt expressly with military industrial production in Ukraine, and highlighted the centrality of many Ukrainian regions to the Soviet Defense industry. Housing was a recurring theme during my year of dissertation research in 2012-2013, and as one of the most enduring problems faced by Soviet elites, it provided a particularly sharp lens for viewing elite behavior. Taken together, materials

10. Andrienko, Viktor and V. Kyiashko. *Volodymyr Shcherbytskyi: Spohady Suchasnykiv* (Kyiv: Vydavnychi dim "In lure, 2003), 245.

11. Liashko, *Gruz Pamiaty*: Vol. 3, Book 2, 183-191; Shelest and Shapoval. *Petro Shelest*, 7.

12. Shelest, *True Judgment of History*, 238-241.

on military-industrial production, hitherto inaccessible protocols and stenograms of the Dnipropetrovsk obkom from the 1960s and 1970s, and documents from the state archives in Dnipropetrovsk (DADO) on housing construction, gave shape to the institutional *milieu* in which regional elites operated.

The Dnipropetrovsk *obkom* (regional party committee) protocols and stenograms from the 1960s and 1970s covered a range of subjects vital to politics and management at the regional level, including intraparty democracy, how to sanction violations of the principle of collective leadership and party members who were abusing their position of power, how best to educate and recruit of cadres who would be faced with managing and increasingly complex economy, how to address problems with discipline and production in key sectors of the economy, and how to implement new civilian defense protocols (which may have been drafted in response to the Prague Spring).¹³

These *obkom* protocols highlighted the complexities of regional governance, while also revealing that, even though regional party elites held privileged positions, various institutions—*sovnarkhozes*, *oblispolkoms*, *gorkoms*, factories, design bureaus, the military—tugged at party supremacy.¹⁴ Files from the *osobaia papka*—Politburo materials assigned “special-folder” status due to their especially sensitive content—confirmed that, in the Khrushchev period, even the defense industry was not immune to coordination with these local institutions, as well as a host of relevant ministries in the RSFSR and Ukraine, and *Gosplan*. Four large *spravy* were needed to outline the production plan for 1959. The involvement of Ukrainian industry in Soviet military production was staggering—turbines in Kharkiv, rockets in Dnipropetrovsk, ships and submarines in Kherson (and later Mykolaiv), aviation in Kyiv, with affiliates in Lviv, Zaporizhia and other cities.¹⁵

This snapshot of military-industrial production in 1959 is dated, in the sense that it does not reflect the current state of military production in Ukraine, or shed light on the extent to which the Ukrainian and Russian militaries are intertwined today. These materials do lend some evidentiary support to claims by one of my interlocutors in Dnipropetrovsk

13. TsDAHOU 1/53/52/92-95; 220-224; 1/53/2598; 1/54/35/1-15, 98-115.

14. The *sovnarkhozes* were Khrushchev-era regional economic councils. *Oblispolkoms* are the regional executive committees (or soviets) and *gorkoms* are city-level committees of the Communist Party.

15. TsDAHOU 1/16/92; 1/16/93; 1/16/94; 1/16/95; and 1/16/96.

this summer that by the late 1980s roughly 70-80% of Ukrainian industry had worked toward Soviet defense. That observation would be difficult to corroborate in the archives, as much of the material on the defense industry after 1959 remains classified. In addition, the defense ministry was among the first to be recentralized under Brezhnev, as such, materials after 1965 are housed in the Moscow archives in Moscow and even the relevant *opisi* remain classified.

That said, these files in the *osobaia papka* point to Ukraine's deep involvement with one of the most crucial and conservative ministries in the Soviet Union. As Khrushchev-era documents, they also offer a window into the massive institutional experimentation undertaken during his tenure, much of which was driven by the desire to devolve power to the regions. The party under Brezhnev would fight mightily for years to undo the damage this devolution of power to the regions had on central control. Among the key players in these files are representatives from the *sovnarkhozes*, regional economic councils, whose comparatively brief existence in 1957-1962 engendered tremendous confusion about spheres of responsibility and authority, by placing civilian industrial and building enterprises under the control of *sovnarkhozes*.¹⁶ *Sovnarkhozes* included more than one *oblast*—the Dnipropetrovsk *sovnarkhoz*, in particular, encompassing Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhia and Kirovograd oblasts. They expanded and contracted over time further muddling the institutional relationships at a local level.

The *sovnarkhoz* reforms did more than blur geographies of power in the Soviet Union, they reinforce a problem at the center of my inquiry—that spatial relationships to the center of power can vary differently even if the players are located in the same place. The director of Yuzhmash had a direct line to the General Secretary, while the local party or state functionary charged with managing housing construction had to navigate incredible amounts of red tape, counteract theft of materials, while also adhering to construction plans shaped more by ideology than city planning.¹⁷

Nowhere were shifting institutional hierarchies and proximity to power expressed more clearly than in the ability to secure and provide housing. As one of the most enduring

16. Alec Nove, *An Economic History of the USSR*, (Hazell Watson & Viney Ltd.: Great Britain, 1969), 357.

17. Vladimir Gubaryev, *luzhnii Start* ("Nekos": Moscow, 1998), 37-39.

problems faced by Soviet leadership, housing provides a unique window into the Soviet system. Housing was a mark of privilege. Party members were notorious for using their influence to help family and friends secure apartments, often with egregious disregard for Soviet citizens struggling to put their lives back together in the postwar period. Scientists and engineers were known to choose one design bureau over another if it would help more quickly secure an apartment.¹⁸

Without expressly looking for references to Yuzhmash in the documents on housing construction, the frequency with which it surfaced in reports on meeting production targets served as reminder of how a powerful local player could change the contours of a city. Its apartment buildings were (and remain) comparatively more attractive. They are made of higher quality materials—bricks instead of concrete slabs—and are thus warmer in winter. More thought was put into the layout of neighborhoods, transportation, and the location of shared spaces and children’s playgrounds. There also appeared to be more oversight and quality control as well as a larger construction budget.¹⁹

In this light, William Taubman’s assessment that ‘Soviet-style city government’ was more of a political process than an administrative one seems particularly apt. The materials I obtained this summer in Dnipropetrovsk support his view that the party *apparat* increasingly staffed by men and women with advanced technical education, and that they functioned as mediators and integrators among rival bureaucratic agencies and conflicting social forces. Taubman also makes another observation that is crucial for understanding what followed. Complex modern societies require *both* increased autonomy for managerial specialists and increased political authority for the central political leadership. “Meeting this latter need is the principal function of the Party apparatus. It is as essential to the system as the expert bureaucracy.... The innovators are not the reds but the experts. *The party apparatus, on the other hand, becomes a gyroscope instead of a motor.*”²⁰ The problem with the Soviet system was that in order to hold it together the gyroscope had to continu-

18. Vitaly L. Katayev, unpublished memoirs, June 2011. Kataev was a designer at Yuzhmash, whose career path led to the Central Committee in Moscow. He would become deeply involved in nuclear disarmament in the 1980s and early 1990s.

19. State Archive of Dnipropetrovsk Oblast (DADO), Fonds 5727 and 5773.

20. William Taubman, *Governing Soviet Cities: Bureaucratic Politics and Urban Development in the USSR*, pp. 6-7.

ously ramp up and reassert the political authority of the center, a process made much more difficult by Khrushchev's reforms.

My thinking on the ways in which Moscow recentralized was deeply influenced by two additional factors from my trip this summer—my work in the KGB archives and also Ukraine's escalating conflict with Russia, whose president Vladimir Putin is also a former lieutenant colonel in the KGB. The language of these Soviet-era KGB documents was reminiscent of the current propaganda emanating out of the Kremlin, especially the fixation on foreigners, bourgeois nationalists, Zionists, and “banderite fascists.” Equally disconcerting were the similarities in the anxieties expressed in the Prague Spring documents and the language used to describe the current crisis in Ukraine. The threats to central control were uncannily familiar, the solutions equally extreme. There was also documentation about problems endemic to the Soviet economy—reinforcing that poor resource management, absenteeism, theft of state property, accidents at factories, smuggling, illegal black market sales, and concerns about the security at military production facilities and the loyalty of personnel all worked to erode central control.²¹

Regionalism is essential for understanding the relationship between Ukraine and the Russia for many reasons. With regard to Dnipropetrovsk, analyzing the region's relationship to the Moscow and Kyiv in the postwar period brings into sharp focus the scale of Ukraine's entanglement with powerful all-union ministries—especially in the sphere of defense. Studying institutional matrices at the regional level revealed that Khrushchev-era reforms, however confusing, fostered considerable political and economic improvisation by local leaders. They also underscore that greater complexity in the Soviet economy after the war required *more* flexibility for industrial managers. The rise of the Dnipropetrovsk elite in this light appears to be more than the result of Brezhnev's patronage; their specialized technical knowledge was needed to run a more multifaceted union.

That said, Moscow's isolation of the Ukrainian elite on the even of the Soviet Union's collapse showed that, when faced with an existential crises, the center had means to reestablish control. In the Ukrainian case this meant, unleashing the Soviet Union's

21. The pejorative “banderite fascist” is an old Soviet favorite, referring to WWII-era supporters of Stepan Bandera, head of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (Bandera wing).

most pervasive institution—the KGB—to forcefully bring local officials back into line. Vitalii Fedorchuk’s appointment as new Ukrainian KGB chief in 1970 was by no means coincidental. None of the Ukrainian *apparatchiki* recall Fedorchuk’s arrival fondly in their memoirs. Yakiv Pogrebniak, whose long career traversed many regions—Donetsk, Ivano-Frankivsk, Mykolaiv and Poltava, in particular, noted that Fedorchuk had almost no knowledge about the particularities and traditions of the Ukrainian people, and exhibited a heightened interest in the affairs of Central Committee secretaries, obkom leadership, and members of the Council of Ministers. Fedorchuk issued an unequivocal warning to them all: “we work for the entire Soviet Union and there is no room for any Ukraine in our work.” Pogrebniak suggested this approach had the opposite effect, bolstering nationalist sentiment in the party and society more broadly.²²

Ramping up the KGB’s visible presence in Ukraine produced mixed results in Soviet Ukraine, because as argued above, Ukrainian officials had been operating with comparatively greater autonomy for decades. By restricting their access to Moscow, the center produced an unintended effect, encouraging local leaders to accelerate the move to sovereignty. All of this should serve as a cautionary tale not just for the man at the helm of the Russian Federation, but Ukrainian leaders as well. From a historical perspective, the Kremlin’s unwillingness to adjust is risky, because this current conflict is not just about Ukraine’s geopolitical orientation, but also the ongoing dissolution of intransigent and poorly understood late Soviet-era institutions. Those institutions still reach all the way into Moscow. For Ukrainian leaders, the experience of their predecessors also has some profound lessons about the limitations tied to the Soviet institutional legacy they inherited. Ukraine was never peripheral to the Soviet project; it was a powerful player at the core of the empire. As a result, building a Ukraine that is really sovereign requires more than a passionate populace, the real work must be undertaken by those with firsthand knowledge of how Ukraine’s institutional landscape has evolved in the post-Soviet period.

22. Pogrebniak, Yakov, *Ne Predam Zabveniu: Zapiski Professional'noho Partiinogo Rabotnika* (Kyiv: IPTS Letopis -XX, 1999), 173-174.