

RFE/RL Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine Report

Vol. 5, No. 9, 11 March 2003

UKRAINE

* OPPOSITION RENEWS ANTI-KUCHMA PROTESTS

* SHCHERBYTSKY Y ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATED FOR THE FIRST TIME

IN

UKRAINE

SHCHERBYTSKY Y ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATED FOR THE FIRST TIME IN
UKRAINE.

Taras Kuzio

In January, Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister for humanities Dmytro Tabachnyk signed a government resolution to celebrate the 85th anniversary of the birth of the longest-running leader of the Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU) Volodymyr Shcherbytsky. Shcherbytsky became first secretary of the KPU in 1972, after Moscow removed Petro Shelest, accusing him of "national deviationism" (a Soviet euphemism for nationalism). Shelest's removal was accompanied by what became known as the Great Pogrom of Ukrainian dissidents and the cultural elite. Shelest was accused of being too supportive of national communism because of his support for the Ukrainian language and culture and glorification of the Ukrainian Cossacks in his book "O Ukraine. Our Soviet Land," which was

published in Kyiv in 1970.

Shcherbytsky's rule lasted for nearly two decades from 1972 until 1989, when he was replaced by Volodymyr Ivashko. Shcherbytsky died a year later. Under Shcherbytsky's rule, there was a reorientation away from Shelest's national communism toward a so-called Little Russian, territorial patriotism devoid of any ethno-cultural content. Such Soviet territorial patriotism was allowed in Ukraine and other Soviet republics during Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev's "era of stagnation" as long as republican leaders remained loyal to Soviet nationality policy, where Russians were the unquestioned "elder brother" and Russian language and culture were understood to be on a higher plane than Ukrainian.

In Soviet Ukraine and other Soviet republics in 1976, Helsinki groups were created to monitor the Soviet Union's compliance with human rights standards. Ukraine created the largest Helsinki group (the Ukrainian Helsinki Group, or UHH), and its members, together with Ukrainian dissidents already in the Gulag, constituted proportionately the largest ethnic group of prisoners of conscience. In 1987, dissidents still alive in the Gulag, such as Vyacheslav Chornovil, were released. Others had already died in the Gulag, including the well-known poet Vasyl Stus (1986).

Chornovil and his colleagues created the Ukrainian Helsinki Union (UHS) as the continuation of the UHH and began to reissue the UHH samizdat journal "Ukrayinskyy visnyk." The UHH and the Writers Union became the driving force behind the creation of the Ukrainian Popular Movement (Rukh) in 1988-1989 in the teeth of opposition from Shcherbytsky. In September 1989, the same month Rukh held its first congress, Shcherbytsky left office. Ukraine's ability to introduce Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's policies became possible only in the post-Shcherbytsky period in 1990-1991.

How do these events relate to contemporary Ukraine? Those

with high positions in the Shcherbytsky era also hold high positions in post-Soviet Ukraine. During his trial, Stus, the poet-dissident, was given a state "defender" who was none other than Viktor Medvedchuk, currently the head of the presidential administration, the Union of Ukrainian Lawyers, and the oligarchic Social Democratic Party-united (SDPU-o). The Stus connection is sufficient reason for many national democrats to continue to dislike Medvedchuk. Worse still, the "battle lines" of the Brezhnevite era of stagnation and the late Soviet era have not changed. Opposed to Medvedchuk and his centrist oligarchic allies is today's Rukh, which has been reincarnated as Viktor Yushchenko's Our Ukraine.

Both former President Leonid Kravchuk and current President Leonid Kuchma were born in the 1930s and experienced their most important career advancement in the 1970s and 1980s under Shcherbytsky. Kravchuk became head of the KPU Central Committee in 1980, thus putting him in charge of ideology and propaganda, and he stayed there until Shcherbytsky's departure in 1989. In his 1994 book of interviews "Ostanni Dni Imperii...Pershi Roky Nadii," (Kyiv, Dovira, 1994), Kravchuk proudly says: "I had respect and still have respect toward Volodymyr Vasylovych Shcherbytsky. This is because he had stature." Kuchma also began his career at the same time in the KPU in 1975-1981 and then moved to the missile plant Pivdenmash (Yuzhmash), where he became director in 1986 and stayed until 1992.

Both Kravchuk and Kuchma went on to become presidents of independent Ukraine in 1991 and 1994, respectively. How then did they make the transition from being Shcherbytsky's allies to leaders of independent Ukraine? Ukraine's "centrists" advanced their careers during the era of stagnation, when Communist Party leaders lost any ideological (in contrast to career) commitment to communism. In the post-Soviet era, this has translated into an ideologically amorphous center within Ukrainian politics.

Current Verkhovna Rada speaker and former head of the presidential administration Volodymyr Lytvyn provides a clue to how individuals like Kravchuk and Kuchma evolved. Writing still as an academic in the journal "Politolohichne chytannya" (Nos. 1-2, 1995), Lytvyn described Kravchuk as a consummate "careerist" who had been loyal to all Soviet leaders he had served stretching from Nikita Khrushchev to Gorbachev. Kuchma was elected to the Verkhovna Rada in March 1990 as a "Russian" and then became a "Ukrainian" in 1992 as prime minister. After defeating Kravchuk, the incumbent, in July 1994, Kuchma became president; his second term will end in October 2004. Kuchma's first head of the presidential administration in 1994-1996 was Tabachnyk, who signed the January government resolution to mark the anniversary of Shcherbytskyy's birth.

Ukraine's celebrations of Shcherbytskyy's birth are multifaceted and consist of nine separate events. In January and February, information on Shcherbytskyy's life and work was prepared for the state media, and an article was commissioned for the 18 February edition of the government weekly "Uryadovyy kuryer." The article was written by Valentyna Shevchenko, the last head of the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet Presidium prior to semi-free elections in March 1990. Memoirs by Shcherbytskyy's colleagues were commissioned for an edited volume in his honor.

Official celebrations began on 14 February with a press conference in the Ukrainian Home building and with the placing of wreaths and flowers on his grave in the prestigious Baykov cemetery, which was followed by a conference and concert in his honor in the National Philharmonic. Streets are to be renamed after Shcherbytskyy, and monuments and plaques to him are to be erected in Kyiv, Dnipropetrovsk, and Dniprodzerzhynsk. Finally, a documentary film is to be made of his life.

The 80th anniversary of Shcherbytskyy's birth fell in

1998 but was never celebrated. Why then is the less important 85th anniversary celebrated? In Kuchma's first term in office (1994-1999), he relied on support from national democrats, such as during the constitutional debate of 1994-1996, as the centrists were unstructured and financially still weak. Ukraine's foreign policy was also pro-Western, as Russia hesitated in recognizing Ukraine's borders until 1997-1999.

In Kuchma's second term (1999-2004), these factors are no longer applicable. The centrists now control a Verkhovna Rada majority, and, as oligarchs, they have financial clout and possess many media outlets. As in the Brezhnev era, three clans --Medvedchuk's Kyiv-based SDPU-o, Tabachnyk's Dnipropetrovsk (Shcherbytsky's and Brezhnev's hometown), and Donetsk -- again rule Ukraine. The territorial patriotism developed in the Shcherbytsky era is the path proposed by Ukraine's centrist elites for post-Soviet Ukraine.

This report was written by Dr. Taras Kuzio, resident fellow,
Centre for Russian and East European Studies, University of Toronto.