

**Andrii PORTNOV  
Tetiana PORTNOVA**

**SOVIET UKRAINIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY IN  
BREZHNEV'S CLOSED CITY:  
MYKOLA/NIKOLAI KOVALSKY AND HIS "SCHOOL"  
AT THE DNIPROPETROVSK UNIVERSITY\***

Recent scholarship on Ukrainian Soviet historiography is gradually abandoning simplistic generalizations (such as presenting the entire history profession as a collective victim of the regime) and is now looking for ways to provide a more differentiated account of specific situations in which historians made a choice between different forms of “complicity” and “protest” and invented strategies to coexist and interact with the regime.<sup>1</sup>

---

\* This article was written within the research project *Divided Memories, Shared Memories. Ukraine / Russia / Poland (20th–21st centuries): An Entangled History*, supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation at the University of Geneva, and first presented as a paper at the conference *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Fabric of Academic History*, University of Geneva, March 8–9, 2017. We would like to thank Katharina Biegger and Serhii Plokhyy as well as the peer reviewers of our article for all their suggestions and comments. We are also grateful to Maria Solovieva and colleagues from the Institute for Advanced Study (Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin) for their highly valuable assistance with the stylistic improvement of our text.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Serhy Yekelchuk. *Stalin's Empire of Memory: Russian-Ukrainian Relations in the Soviet Historical Imagination*. Toronto, 2014; Vitaly Yaremchuk. *Mynule Ukrainy v istorychnii nautsi URSS pisliastalinskoi doby*. Ostroh, 2009; Volodymyr

In the 1970s–1980s, a special role in history writing and teaching was played by Dnipropetrovsk State University, the birthplace of the so-called Kovalsky school, which focused on the study of primary sources on early modern Ukrainian history. In recent publications, the Kovalsky school has been called “perhaps the only” and “the most ‘real’” university-based school of history writing in Soviet Ukraine from the 1930s to the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> Mykola (Nikolai) Kovalsky is credited with putting Dnipropetrovsk’s Ukrainian studies on the map of Ukrainian historiography, and Ukraine on the map of Soviet historiography.<sup>3</sup>

The personality of the school’s creator – Professor Kovalsky – is the main focus of this article. We would like to show how Kovalsky, given his origin and education, academic position and research ambition, time and place, had to negotiate among several forces, pressures, and constraints to develop his research agenda and his own “school.” An important characteristic of the Kovalsky school was that it originated and developed at a university directly subordinated to Moscow, and not to a republican ministry in Kyiv. This university (its full name was Dnipropetrovsk State University Named for the Tricentenary of Ukraine’s Reunification with Russia, hereafter referred to as DSU) was located in the city that was home to the Soviet Union’s foremost missile-building facilities and that foreigners were not allowed to visit. In this article, we analyze this context and show the connection between the development of historical research and the special status of the university within the “closed city”; describe relations along the Dnipropetrovsk–Kyiv–Moscow axis as an example of “center–periphery” interactions in Soviet historiography; demonstrate the potential and limitations of source studies (*istochnikovedenie*) as a variety of the “ideology of professionalism” in the Ukrainian context; and show what happened to Kovalsky and his school after Dnipropetrovsk was “opened” and the USSR collapsed.

---

Masliychuk, Andrii Portnov. *Sovetizatsiia istoricheskoi nauki po-ukrainski // Neprikosnovennyi zapas*. 2012. No. 3. Pp. 245–276; Svitlo j tini ukrains’koho radians’koho istoriopsannia / Ed. Valerii Smolii. Kyiv, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Yaroslav Hrytsak. *Ukrainskaia istoriografii: 1991–2001. Desiatiletie peremen // Ab Imperio*. 2003. No. 3. P. 430; Yaremchuk. *Mynule Ukrainy v istorychnii nautsi URSR*. P. 421. Cf. Iryna Kolesnyk. *Istoriografichna topografii: Dnipropetrovs’kyi fenomen // Ejdos*. 2013. No. 7. Pp. 355–370.

<sup>3</sup> Serhii Plokyh. *Zhyttieva misiia Mykoly Kovals’koho // Dzerkalo tyzhnia*. 2006. No. 43. P. 6.

***The Closed City of Dnipropetrovsk***

After World War II, Dnipropetrovsk, an industrial city in the lower reaches of the Dnieper in southeastern Ukraine, became the biggest Soviet center for the design, production, and testing of missile systems. Missile production was the reason that Dnipropetrovsk was designated a special status in 1959. With a population close to 600,000 in the early 1950s and more than 1 million in the late 1970s, Dnipropetrovsk became the largest of the eleven “semi-closed” cities in Soviet Ukraine. This status entailed a regime of total secrecy concerning the military complex facilities in the city and forbade foreigners – even tourists and students – to enter. Moreover, international football competitions and other athletic contests were interdicted, stores accepting foreign currencies were nonexistent, and access to “Western” cultural products was not easy to gain.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, many of the city’s residents viewed this “relatively closed” status as a privilege – a sign of recognition of Dnipropetrovsk’s special role and the reason they enjoyed a better supply of food products in local stores than did many “open” Soviet cities.

Restrictions on communication could not undermine the self-perception of Dnipropetrovskians that they were living in one of the most important Soviet cities in the 1970s. Since 1964, the Soviet Communist Party (and, therefore, the Soviet state) had been headed by “a man from Dnipropetrovsk” – Leonid Brezhnev – and this semi-mythological connection was vastly publicized. In 1938–41 and 1947–50, Brezhnev, a native of Dniprodzerzhinsk (Kamenskoe), an industrial town near Dnipropetrovsk, had worked in the Dnipropetrovsk Regional Committee of Ukraine’s Communist Party. Brezhnev’s time in Dnipropetrovsk was only one step in a career that peaked when he rose to the post of general secretary of the Central Committee of

---

<sup>4</sup> On the typology of Soviet closed cities, see T. S. Kondratieva, A. K. Sokolov (Eds.). *Rezhimnye lyudi v SSSR*. Moscow, 2009; Thomas M. Bohn. *Das sowjetische System der “geschlossenen Städte”*. *Meldewesen und Wohnungsmangel als Indikatoren sozialer Ungleichheit* // Friedrich Lenger, Klaus Tenfelde (Eds.). *Die europäische Stadt im 20. Jahrhundert. Wahrnehmung – Entwicklung – Erosion*. Köln–Weimar–Wien, 2006. Pp. 373–386; Sergei I. Zhuk. *Closing and Opening Soviet Society* (Introduction to the Forum: *Closed City, Closed Economy, Closed Society: The Utopian Normalization of Autarky*) // *Ab Imperio*. 2011. No. 2. Pp. 123–158. For more on the closed city of Dnipropetrovsk, see Sergei I. Zhuk. *Rock and Roll in the Rocket City: The West, Identity, and Ideology in Soviet Dnipropetrovsk, 1960–1985*. Washington – Baltimore, 2010; Sergei I. Zhuk. *Popular Culture, Identity, and Soviet Youth in Dnipropetrovsk, 1959–1984*. Pittsburgh, 2008. Pp. 9–25; Tetiana Portnova. *Tema “zakrytoho” mista v istorii radians’koho Dnipropetrovska 1950–80-kh rokiv* // *Historians in UA*. <http://bit.ly/2CFba4I>.

the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup> Yet it is Dnipropetrovsk that Brezhnev was often associated with both during and after his lifetime, and the city itself was called “the Party’s talent pool” (*kuznitsa kadrov*).<sup>6</sup>

This was the type of city that the young historian Mykola Kovalsky arrived in from Lviv in the second half of the 1960s.

### *Mykola Kovalsky and His Academic Career*

The future professor was born on March 19, 1929, in the town of Ostroh, then a part of Poland’s Volhynian Voivodeship.<sup>7</sup> As a child, Kovalsky was already fluent in Ukrainian, Polish, and Russian.<sup>8</sup> Before 1940, he attended a Polish school, where he also studied French, German, and English.<sup>9</sup> When Soviet troops occupied Poland in 1939, for the first time in his life Kovalsky experienced a change in the political regime. In 1947, he enrolled in the history faculty of the University of Lviv.<sup>10</sup> This was the period when western Ukraine was undergoing Sovietization, most notably through the suppression of the nationalist underground and the Greek Orthodox Church. Sovietization also implied Ukrainianization (but only inasmuch as Ukrainian culture was molded into the Soviet shape) and the elimination of Polish cultural domination.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> For details, see the recent biography of Brezhnev: Susanne Schattenberg. Leonid Breschnev. Staatsmann und Schauspieler im Schatten Stalins. Eine Biografie. Köln–Wien–Weimar, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> For more, see Andrii Portnov, Tetiana Portnova. *Stolitsa zastoia? Brezhnevskii mif Dnepropetrovska // Neprikosnovennyi zapas*. 2014. No. 5. Pp. 71–87.

<sup>7</sup> Biographical publications on Kovalsky include O. A. Udod. *Istoryk: duchovnist’, pratsia, samoviddanist’ (Do 40-richechia naukovoï diial’nosti M. P. Koval’s’koho) // Dnipropetrovs’kyj istoryko-archeohrafichnyj zbirnyk [DIAZ]*. Vol. 1. Dnipropetrovsk, 1997. Pp. 29–40; V. Trofymovych, O. Mel’nyk. *Zhyttia zarady nauky (do 85-richechia z dnia narodzhennia vydatnoho ukrains’koho istoryka Mykoly Koval’s’koho) // Naukovi zapysky Natsional’noho universytetu “Ostroz’ka Akademiia”: Istorychni nauky*. 2014. Vol. 22. Pp. 49–86.

<sup>8</sup> N. P. Kovalsky: *O vremeni i o sebe* (published by E. A. Chernov) // DIAZ. P. 20. Kovalsky wrote this most important self-reflective and autobiographical text in 1995 in response to questions formulated by his colleague, Evgenii Chernov.

<sup>9</sup> In the questionnaire he answered in 1993, Kovalsky mentioned his knowledge of English and German “with a dictionary”: The Dnipropetrovsk National University Archive (ADNU). Fond 1. Opys 4. *Odynytisia zberihannia 7507*. Ark. Izv.

<sup>10</sup> For more on Kovalsky’s student years, see V. Yaremchuk. *Students’ki roky M. P. Koval’s’koho // Osiahnennia istorii. Zbirnyk naukovykh prats na poshanu prof. Mykoly Pavlovycha Koval’s’koho z nahody 70-richechia / Ed. Liubomyr Vynar. Ostroh – New York, 1999*. Pp. 18–29.

<sup>11</sup> For details, see William Risch. *The Ukrainian West. Culture and the Fate of Empire in Soviet Lviv*. Cambridge, MA, 2011.

On October 24, 1949, Yaroslav Halan, a writer famous for his anti-nationalistic pamphlets, was killed with an axe in his study in Lviv. The murder, which drew much attention from the highest Soviet authorities, was blamed on nationalists. One of the identified killers happened to be a student at the local agricultural institute. In October–November 1949, the Soviet secret police arrested more than 100 university students and employees, and by the end of the year up to 2 percent of Lviv’s students were affected by the purge.<sup>12</sup> In the fall of 1949, Kovalsky was removed from his post as head of a student trade-union cell; in March 1950, he joined the Komsomol; and in the summer of 1950, after submitting a request to transfer to a distance learning program (*zaochne navchannia*), started working as a schoolteacher.<sup>13</sup> He was not a member of the underground, but his decision helped him avoid expulsion from the university (something that happened to several of his colleagues).

Kovalsky graduated with honors from the University of Lviv in 1952 and it was recommended that he continue his studies in graduate school. Six years later in Lviv he successfully defended his Candidate of Sciences in History dissertation, “Ties of Western Ukrainian Lands with the Russian State (second half of the 16th century–17th century).”<sup>14</sup> The study primarily concerned the initial stage of book printing in Ukraine and the publisher Ivan Fyodorov’s activities in Lviv, but in order to ideologically legitimize his research, Kovalsky had to add the phrase “ties with Russia.” After defending his dissertation, he worked at the Ukrainian State Museum of Ethnography in Lviv.

By then, Kovalsky was married and had two daughters. The meager salary at the museum and poor housing conditions in Lviv compelled him to seek a better-paid job. He applied for a teaching position in Kryvyi Rih – a big industrial center in the Dnipropetrovsk region, very distant from Lviv in every sense. In 1963, Kovalsky was appointed an associate professor (*dotsent*) at the Kryvyi Rih branch of DSU’s Faculty of General Sciences. Two years later, the history department was established at DSU, within its Faculty of Philology. The opening of new positions gave Kovalsky the chance to move to the region’s capital – Dnipropetrovsk.

---

<sup>12</sup> Serhii Plokyh. *The Man With a Poison Gun: A Cold War Spy Story*. New York, 2016. Pp. 21–22.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> N. P. Kovalsky. *Sviazhi zapadnoukrainskikh zemel’ s Russkim gosudarstvom (vtoraia polovina XVI–XVII vv.) / Avtoreferat dissertatsii kandidata istoricheskikh nauk*. L’vov, 1958.

In 1967, Kovalsky moved to Dnipropetrovsk at the invitation of the head of the Department of Soviet History, Dmytro Poida (1908–1992).<sup>15</sup> Four years later, in 1971, DSU's Faculty of History became an autonomous division within the university, with departments of Soviet and World History. In 1972, the faculty set up yet another division – Historiography and Source Studies – which was chaired by Valentyn Borshchevsky (1910–1989), a historian of Ukraine's working class and revolution. The Department of Source Studies at DSU became the second of its kind in Soviet Ukraine: the first one was established in 1964 at the University of Kharkiv, thanks to the efforts of Victor Astakhov (1922–1972). In the 1970s, historiography and source studies were considered elite subdisciplines, and the establishment of corresponding departments signaled the scholarly ambitions of the history faculties (perhaps it was not by chance that in Soviet Ukraine such departments were set up at the two universities under Moscow's direct control).

In 1978, dotsent Kovalsky, who by then had tried his hand at administrative work and served a term as chair of the Faculty of History and Philology (1970) and chair of the Distance Learning Faculty (1973), replaced Borshchevsky as head of the Department of Historiography and Source Studies. On the one hand, as a promising scholar with administrative experience who was also a member of the Communist Party (since 1959), dotsent Kovalsky was a good fit for the high office. On the other hand, in the eyes of many, he was an odd duck among his colleagues at the faculty and undoubtedly stood out among the other faculty members.

One of Kovalsky's graduate students described him in her memoir as “a tall, handsome man with noticeable streaks of gray” whose “mane of hair and overly stern countenance immediately drew the students' attention.”<sup>16</sup> A memoir written by a professor of archaeology who taught in the same department as Kovalsky describes him as a “gracefully built man, with his head proudly held up and with the expressive features of an aristocratic face, [who was] always accompanied by an old briefcase packed with

---

<sup>15</sup> For a detailed reconstruction of Kovalsky's work at DSU, see O. V. Mel'nyk. *Naukova i pedahohichna diial'nist' profesora Mykoly Koval's'koho u Dnipropetrovsk'komu universyteti (1967–1994)* // *Naukovi pratsi istorychnoho fakul'tetu Zaporiz'koho natsional'noho universytetu*. 2015. Vol. 44. No. 2. Pp. 163–172. Dmytro Poida, an agrarian historian, graduated from Kharkiv Pedagogical Institute. He lectured at DSU beginning in 1937. See Kovalsky's memoirs about his colleague: M. P. Kovalsky. *Do pytannia pro osoblyvosti stylu naukovi tvorchosti prof. D. P. Poydy* // *Pytannia ahrarnoi istorii Ukrainy ta Rosii. Materialy naukovykh chyhan', prysviachenykh pam'iaty D. P. Poydy*. Dnipropetrovsk, 1995. Pp. 9–16.

<sup>16</sup> Hanna Shvyd'ko. *Mynule u promeniakh pam'iaty*. Kyiv, 2004. P. 50.

books brought for demonstration to students at the lectures,” and his “long hair made him look like scholars, writers, and artists of the prerevolutionary era.”<sup>17</sup> Kovalsky’s first graduate student, too, evoked in his memoir a “prerevolutionary,” “non-Soviet” academic tradition – according to him, students sensed in their teacher “the schooling of an ‘old-time intellectual’” – “old-time” meant his schooling was different from Soviet education. Often somewhat gruff, professors schooled in the Soviet tradition had “an air of provincialism and were prone to demonstrate Stalinist attitudes of uncompromising dogmatism toward all things prerevolutionary,” whereas Kovalsky apparently knew and respected the traditions of historiography.<sup>18</sup> Kovalsky produced a similar impression on DSU students of the 1980s to early 1990s: “He seemed like a person from a different era, different times,” fluent in several foreign languages, very knowledgeable about archives, and presenting material at his lectures in an original fashion.<sup>19</sup>

In the department, Kovalsky was called *Pan*,<sup>20</sup> a nickname that referred to both his manners and West Ukrainian/Polish origin and to the themes he researched. He seemed to be a grand figure that DSU did not really deserve, with a stature unusual for a university of this caliber.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Professor Kovalsky and His School***

In his research, Kovalsky specialized in Ukrainian historical sources of the sixteenth- to the first half of the seventeenth century. As department chair, Kovalsky wanted to create “a team of like-minded colleagues united in their desire to show their students not only factual knowledge, but the very spirit of history.”<sup>22</sup> As academic adviser, Kovalsky sought not only to create a community of researchers committed to common themes and sharing a common love for historical sources and their analysis, but also to lay the foundation for corporate solidarity. Teaching the basics of “the historian’s

---

<sup>17</sup> Irina Kovalieva. *Zhizn', provedennaia v mogile. Ispoved' arkeologa*. Dnipropetrovsk, 2008. P. 180.

<sup>18</sup> Viktor Yakunin. *Istoriia, ideologii, politika. Zhizn' i poznanie istorii*. Dnipropetrovsk, 2013. P. 17.

<sup>19</sup> V. Vashchenko. *Profesor M. P. Koval'sky: liudyna, vykladach, naukovets (Retrospektsii ta refleksii) // Osiahnennia istorii*. Pp. 67–69. Cf. D. Belkin. *N. P. Koval'sky glazami studenta nachala 90-kh // Istoriohrafichni ta dzhereloznavchi problemy istorii Ukrainy. Teoriia. Metodyka. Praktyka*. Dnipropetrovsk, 2009. Pp. 3–6.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Serhii Plokyh, 16 June 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Oleh Zhurba, 5 April 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Kovaliova. *Zhizn', provedennaia v mogile*. P. 180.

craft” – quote only original sources, always treat the sources of a publication carefully, and so on<sup>23</sup> – at all times he cultivated the ethos of professionalism. Kovalsky disliked cronyism – in particular, the practice of accepting graduate students “on recommendation” by Party functionaries and fictitious coauthorship (although he often and willingly published articles and even books in coauthorship with his students). At the same time, he encouraged mutual assistance and support among students.<sup>24</sup>

As an academic adviser, Kovalsky spent a great deal of time with his students, inviting them to his home to discuss their research and helping them in any way he could to get access to archives and establish personal contacts with colleagues in other cities. Personal communication was of paramount importance in the development of the Kovalsky school, and for those involved, the style of communication somewhat resembled a family relationship. One of Kovalsky’s favorite students referred to his academic adviser as a father figure.<sup>25</sup> A former female graduate student described Kovalsky as “a classic type of professor” for whom “college and graduate students were part of the family.”<sup>26</sup> Kovalsky even helped his students financially.<sup>27</sup> He also exchanged letters with a graduate student who was drafted into the army.<sup>28</sup>

The themes of the first dissertations written under Kovalsky’s mentorship had little in common with the subject matter of his own publications: they focused on the writings of the chief Soviet historian of the 1920s, Mikhail

---

<sup>23</sup> Yakunin. *Istoriia, ideologiia, politika*. P. 49.

<sup>24</sup> Memoirs by Kovalsky’s students are collected in *Dnipropetrovs’kyj istoryko-arheohrafichnyj zbirnyk [DIAZ]*. Vol. 1. *Na poshanu profesora Mykoly Pavlovycha Koval’s’koho* / Ed. Oleh Zhurba. Dnipropetrovsk, 1997; *Osiahnennia istorii. Zbirnyk naukovykh prats na poshanu prof. Mykoly Pavlovycha Koval’s’koho z nahody 70-ricchhia* / Ed. Liubomyr Vynar. Ostroh–New York, 1999; *Mykola Pavlovych Koval’s’ky. Ad gloriam... Ad honores... Ad memorandum* / Ed. Hanna Shvyd’ko. Dnipropetrovsk, 2007.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Yurii Mytsyk, April 16, 2017. According to another pupil, in communication with his closest students, Kovalsky sometimes called himself *Papa* (Dad): O. Diachok. *Shtrykhy do portreta Mykoly Pavlovycha Koval’s’koho* // *Naukovi zapysky Natsional’noho universytetu “Ostroz’ka Akademiia”*: *Istorychni nauky*. 2008. Vol. 12. P. 37

<sup>26</sup> DIAZ. Vol. 1. P. 60. See also H. K. Shvyd’ko. *Profesor M. P. Koval’s’ky jak naukovyj kerivnyk: etychna skladova* // *Istoriografichni ta dzhereloznavchi problemy istorii Ukrainy*. Dnipropetrovsk, 2014. Pp. 30–41; Iu. A. Sviatets. *Professor M. P. Koval’s’ky (1929–2006) jak pedahoh ta orhanizator nauky* // *Naddniprians’ka Ukraina: istorychni protsesy, podii, postati*. Dnipropetrovsk, 2012. Vol. 10. Pp. 313–321.

<sup>27</sup> DIAZ. Vol. 1. P. 72.

<sup>28</sup> *Mykola Pavlovych Koval’s’ky*. Pp. 92–99.

Pokrovsky (Victor Yakunin), and Russian social and political ideas of the second half of the eighteenth century (Anatoly Bolebrukh). Both dissertations were defended in 1972. But by 1975, two dissertations in the field of Ukrainian history were completed under Kovalsky's supervision (or, more precisely, in the field of Ukrainian "source studies"). Yury Mytsyk wrote about the seventeenth-century chronicle of Feodosy Sofonovych, and Mykola Kuchernyuk analyzed the primary sources related to "Ukrainian–Russian" political ties in the period of Bohdan Khmelnytsky's uprising in 1648–1654.

Occasionally, some of the dissertations directed by Kovalsky treated topics absolutely unrelated to Ukraine's early modern history,<sup>29</sup> but these were exceptions that proved the rule. Between 1975 and 1996, altogether twenty dissertations on Ukrainian history were completed under Kovalsky at DSU. Most of them discussed various aspects of studying the primary sources from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries (Ukrainian chronicles and annals, a variety of documents in the Polish, Latin, and German languages, the Lithuanian *Metrica*, sources on the socioeconomic history of Volhynia). Several focused on themes connected to historiography and source studies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (in particular, Soviet historiography of the Khmelnytsky uprising, activities of the Kyiv Archaeographic Commission, or the personalities of individual historians).<sup>30</sup>

In the mid-1990s Kovalsky returned to his native Ostroh to become vice-rector for research in the newly founded National University Ostroh Academy. But even far away from Dnipropetrovsk, now associated with a different university that he enthusiastically supported, Kovalsky still identified himself as "a scholar of sources who came into his own precisely in Dnipropetrovsk and precisely as an exponent of the Dnipropetrovsk trend or 'school.'"<sup>31</sup>

### *A Center of Source Studies at the "Closed" University*

To better understand the significance of the Kovalsky school, a look back at the development of history studies in Dnipropetrovsk is useful. By the end of the 1930s, the center of Ukrainian studies and historical research at the precursor of the Dnipropetrovsk University – Institute of People's

---

<sup>29</sup> Karl Markov's dissertation was devoted to West German politics from 1969 to 1979 (defended in 1979), Liudmila Litovchenko's work was about the nineteenth-century Russian historian Ivan Zabelin (defended in 1988).

<sup>30</sup> See the full list in DIAZ. Vol. 1. Pp. 95–96.

<sup>31</sup> N. P. Kovalsky. *O vremenii o sebe*. P. 19.

Education – was liquidated. Its leader, academician Dmytro Yavornytsky (1885–1940), director of the Dnipropetrovsk history museum and a renowned researcher of the Zaporozhian Cossacks, was fired from his post in 1933 and barely escaped arrest in 1937. Amid the ongoing purges and ideological campaigns against “Ukrainian nationalists,” all the history professors and almost all their doctoral students were forced to leave Dnipropetrovsk.<sup>32</sup> Dnipropetrovsk University was restored in 1933, but enrollments in the history department for a full-time course of study were not resumed until 1939. Just two years later, German troops occupied the city in the autumn of 1941. After the end of the war, in 1952, as the university was expanding its training program in rocket and missile design and engineering, the history department again stopped accepting full-time students.<sup>33</sup> The situation changed only in 1965, when, as already mentioned, DSU set up a history department within the Faculty of Philology.

Thus, for three decades, no professional study and teaching of history existed at Dnipropetrovsk University. Even when reestablished, the Department of History of the mid-1960s lacked any continuity with the rich tradition of Ukrainian studies that had formed in Dnipropetrovsk in the 1920s. There was not a single graduate of the prewar university among the faculty, and even classes and the library were different.

On the one hand, joining the newly created history department provided the young and ambitious Kovalsky with a good chance for career growth. On the other hand, the new job offered very few opportunities to continue his research in the field of early modern history. There were absolutely no archives related to the period in a city founded only in the late eighteenth century, and library collections in postwar Dnipropetrovsk were poor. Whereas books could be requested through interlibrary loan (which still could not match the effect of studying at a good library), for archives it was necessary to travel to Lviv, Kyiv, Moscow, and Leningrad. Moreover, history departments in postwar Soviet universities were at the vanguard of promoting the official ideology and policing any manifestations of subversive ideas. As Kovalsky’s departmental colleague noted, “The history department in its very essence has always been the university’s ideological leader, and this situation had its pluses and minuses. In the 1960s–1980s,

---

<sup>32</sup> For details, see Andrii Portnov, *Buty naukovtsem u totalitarnij derzhavi: dnipropeetrovs’ki istoriky ta radians’ka vlada (1918–1939)* // A. Portnov, *Istoriï istorykiv. Oblychchia j obrazy ukrains’koi istoriohrafii XX stolittia*. Kyiv, 2011. Pp. 15–38.

<sup>33</sup> For details, see *Istoriia Dnipropetrovs’koho natsional’noho universytetu* / Ed. M. V. Poliakov. Dnipropetrovsk, 2008.

this was manifested in the existence of what might be called two parallel lives of private individuals and the whole collective: a deeply hidden private life and a loudly displayed public life.”<sup>34</sup> In Soviet Ukraine, this normally meant severe censorship of writing on Ukrainian history and how it was written, but the enhanced security status of Dnipropetrovsk inadvertently had the opposite effect on ideological strictures.

In 1966, as its physics and technology faculty trained engineers for the secret missile industry, DSU became directly subordinated to the Ministry of Higher and Vocational Education of the USSR in Moscow, bypassing the republican authorities in Kyiv who were preoccupied with Ukrainian nationalism. According to Kovalsky himself, “Compared to Ukraine’s other centers of university education, Dnipropetrovsk in the 1970s–1980s enjoyed the most favorable environment for serious research in the area of Ukrainian history of the 15th–18th centuries.”<sup>35</sup> The reason for this was not only relative autonomy from Kyiv, where historical research was subjected to far stricter ideological examination than in Moscow, but also the fact that DSU ran its own publishing house. The university press made it possible for historians from Dnipropetrovsk to publish their works without enduring complicated bureaucratic procedures at the Kyiv publishing house “Higher School” (*Vyshcha shkola*). The content of their books had to be approved in Moscow, where the authorities were much less sensitive to the nuances of treating local themes than the Kyiv-based Party and academic establishment. At the same time, the DSU publishing house was authorized to publish only “study guides” not exceeding about 24,000 words (to use modern publishing units). Kovalsky used precisely the format of study guides to publish his four-part work devoted to the analysis of primary sources on the history of Ukraine in the sixteenth- to the first half of the seventeenth century,<sup>36</sup> and more specifically, about the Lithuanian *Metrica* (documents of the Chan-

---

<sup>34</sup> I. Kovaliova. *Zhizn', provedennaia v mogile*. P. 179.

<sup>35</sup> N. P. Kovalsky. *O vremeni i o sebe*. P. 16.

<sup>36</sup> N. P. Kovalsky. *Istchnikovedenie istorii Ukrainy (XVI–pervoi poloviny XVII veka)*. Dnepropetrovsk, 1977. Part 1: *Analiz sovetskikh arkhiegraficheskikh publikacii dokumental'nykh istochnikov*; *ibid.* *Istchnikovedenie i arkhieografiia istorii Ukrainy XVI–pervoi poloviny XVII veka*. Dnepropetrovsk, 1978. Part 2: *Analiz dorevoliutsionnykh otechestvennykh publikacii istochnikov*; *ibid.* *Istchnikovedenie istorii Ukrainy XVI–pervoi poloviny XVII veka*. Dnepropetrovsk, 1978. Part 3: *Kharakteristika publikacii istochnikov na inostrannykh iazykakh*; *ibid.* *Istchnikovedenie istorii Ukrainy XVI–pervoi poloviny XVII veka*. Dnepropetrovsk, 1979. Part. 4: *Obzor osnovnykh otechestvennykh sobranii arkhivnykh istochnikov*.

cellery of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania),<sup>37</sup> the town charters and related documents of the period,<sup>38</sup> on the Muscovy–Cossack (“Russian–Ukrainian”) contacts,<sup>39</sup> as well as several studies concerning the Khmelnytsky uprising, coauthored with Yuri Mytsyk.<sup>40</sup>

Besides teaching aids, the DSU university press published collections of articles of its faculty members. In 1978 and 1979, Kovalsky put together two collections of articles by members of his department. Subsequently, the department was allowed to invite scholars from other universities as contributors to the collective publications by the DSU press. Between 1983 and 1991, Kovalsky put together eight thematic collections of articles that featured 178 contributions. Of them, 107 were authored by historians from Dnipropetrovsk, 25 from Moscow, and 11 from Kyiv. Among the rest were scholars from various Ukrainian universities, Baku, Vilnius, Gorky, Omsk, Rostov-on-Don, and Tbilisi. These books became a milestone for the entire Soviet historical profession, not only for DSU historians. Their union-wide status was underscored not only by the diversity of contributors but also by the representative selection of editors. Thus, for the first collection of articles, *Problems of the History of the Fatherland (otechestvennaia istoriia) in the Area of Historiography and Source Studies*, Kovalsky invited several colleagues from Lviv, Kyiv, and Moscow to be members of the editorial board.

Kovalsky’s academic authority reached its peak in the early 1980s. After supervising so many dissertations, he became the recognized leader of the “Kovalsky school.” In 1984, he himself defended his Doctor of Sciences (habilitation) dissertation at prestigious Moscow State University. Besides editing popular thematic collections, Kovalsky organized two all-Union conferences in Dnipropetrovsk that attracted virtually all leading Soviet specialists in this field. One was dedicated to source studies (1983), and another to historiography (1984).

---

<sup>37</sup> N. P. Kovalsky. *Istochniki po istorii Ukrainy XVI–pervoi poloviny XVII vv. v Litovskoi metrike i fondakh prikazov TsGADA*. Dnepropetrovsk, 1979.

<sup>38</sup> N. P. Kovalsky. *Istochnikovedenie sotsial’no-ekonomicheskoi istorii Ukrainy (XVI–pervaia polovina XVII vv.): Akty o gorodakh*. Dnepropetrovsk, 1983.

<sup>39</sup> N. P. Kovalsky. *Istochnikovedenie istorii rusko-ukrainskikh sviazej (XVI–pervaia polovina XVII vv.)*. Dnepropetrovsk, 1985.

<sup>40</sup> N. P. Kovalsky, Yu. A. Mytsyk. *Analiz arkhivnykh istochnikov po istorii Ukrainy XVI–XVII vv.* Dnepropetrovsk, 1984; N. P. Kovalsky, Yu. A. Mytsyk. *Analiz otechestvennykh istochnikov po istorii osvoboditel’noj vojny ukrainskogo naroda 1648–1654 rr.* Dnepropetrovsk, 1986.

*Between Kyiv and Moscow*

The only thing that spoiled this spectacular success was that it took Kovalsky an extra ten years to become a Doctor of Sciences. The theme of his dissertation, “Sources on Ukrainian History: 1550–1650,” was approved back in 1969, and its defense scheduled for 1974.<sup>41</sup> Unfortunately for Kovalsky, the Ukrainian Party establishment ran into a political crisis in 1972 that resonated throughout the entire ideological system, which included the field of studying and teaching history. In May 1972, Petro Shelest (1908–1996) was dismissed from his post as first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine. Shelest was known for his support of Ukrainian Soviet patriotism and, in particular, for popularizing Zaporozhian Cossacks and their “progressive historical role.”<sup>42</sup> Counting on his support, in the late 1960s to early 1970s, some historians from Kyiv tried to push the limits of the officially recognized Ukrainian cultural canon. They attempted to remove the stigma of “bourgeois nationalists” from several prerevolutionary Ukrainian scholars, cautiously advanced a more humanistic and nationality-sensitive take on Marxism, problematized the dogma of “Ukraine’s reunification with Russia,” which had been mandatory since 1954, and resumed criticism of “Russia’s colonial policies in Ukraine,” which used to be a Soviet orthodoxy in the 1920s.

Officially, Shelest was fired by Leonid Brezhnev for ideological mistakes and “idealization of Ukraine’s past,” so his downfall was accompanied by an ideological campaign targeting any real or imagined manifestations of Ukrainian nationalism. Although incomparable to the purges of the 1930s, this campaign had direct effects on people’s lives and careers. A number of the most active historians were fired from academic institutions, and some whose monographs were ready to be printed were dropped by their publishers, while libraries moved books by prerevolutionary Ukrainian historians to their sections of classified literature (*spetskhran*).<sup>43</sup> Hanna Shvydko recalls how she, then a fresh DSU graduate, was applying to the graduate school. She wanted to study with Olena Kompan (1916–1986), a researcher at the Institute of History in Kyiv, but Kompan had been forced into early retirement and deprived of the opportunity to publish her research for the rest of

<sup>41</sup> O. V. Mel’nyk. *Naukova i pedahohichna diial’nist’*. P. 164.

<sup>42</sup> See Oleksii Yas’. “Na choli respublikans’koi nauky...”, *Instytut istorii Ukrainy (1936–1986): narysy z instytutsionalnoi ta intelektual’noi istorii*. Kyiv, 2016. Pp. 286–287.

<sup>43</sup> For details, see Yaremchuk. *Mynule Ukrainy*. Pp. 388–400; Yas’. “Na choli respublikans’koi nauky...”. Pp. 296–300.

her life. Kovalsky saved the day, accepting Shvydko as a doctoral student, and in 1979, she defended a thesis on the Soviet historiography of socio-economic development of Ukrainian towns in the sixteenth- to seventeenth centuries.<sup>44</sup>

The ideology-driven purge of 1972 affected Dnipropetrovsk as well, despite its semi-extraterritoriality within Ukrainian academe, although with less severe consequences. The regional publishing house produced a popular book about the Dnipro island of Khortytsia, the seat of the Zaporozhian Host (*Zaporizhian Sich*).<sup>45</sup> Amid the ongoing ideological campaign, the book received a negative review in the Moscow-based academic journal *Voprosy istorii*. The book's author was removed from his post as deputy chairman of the Zaporozhian region's Executive Committee (in the Soviet, not Party administrative hierarchy), while the region's Party Committee declared that the book "does not promote workers' education in the spirit of Soviet patriotism and proletarian internationalism," and that its copies should be removed from bookstores and libraries.<sup>46</sup>

It was in this tense political atmosphere that Kovalsky was preparing for the defense of his second dissertation. It so happened that in 1972 he published a book with the DSU press – in the Ukrainian language. The topic was completely benign (a study of primary sources related to the beginning of book printing in Ukraine),<sup>47</sup> but in the political situation of 1972, the very language of publication was perceived as a red flag – Kovalsky had never published books in Ukrainian before (and would never produce another book in Ukrainian again). Once under scrutiny, it was discovered in the book that Kovalsky quoted a work by Ivan Okhiienko (1882–1972), published in 1925 in then Polish Lviv. Still worse, after World War II, Okhiienko became Metropolitan of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, which was banned in the USSR.<sup>48</sup> This was sufficient to recognize the book as ideologically subversive and put the prospects of Kovalsky's dissertation defense on hold.

In the USSR, academic degrees in each field were bestowed by academic councils that included members of several universities. The degree

---

<sup>44</sup> Mykola Pavlovykh Koval'sky. P. 27.

<sup>45</sup> M. Kytsenko. *Khortytsia v heroitsi ta lehendakh*. Dnipropetrovsk, 1972.

<sup>46</sup> Yaremchuk. *Mynule Ukrainy*. Pp. 390–391.

<sup>47</sup> M. P. Kovalsky. *Dzherela pro pochatkovyj etap druzarstva na Ukraini (Dial'nist' pershodrukaria Ivana Fedorova v 70-kh – na pochatku 80-kh rr. XVI st.)*. Dnipropetrovsk, 1972.

<sup>48</sup> The story is described in Mykola Pavlovykh Koval'sky. Pp. 89–90.

of Doctor of Sciences in historiography and source studies was awarded by academic councils in Kyiv, Moscow, Leningrad, and Tomsk. Initially, Kovalsky planned to submit his dissertation to the council in Kyiv, at the Institute of History of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences. He had good contacts there, such as the historiographers Vitaly Sarbei (1928–1999) and Anatoly Santsevych (1924–1996), as well as Fedir Shevchenko (1914–1995), who, having fallen out of favor in 1972, was dismissed from his jobs as director of the Institute of Archaeology and editor of the *Ukrainian History Journal*. After 1978, when Kovalsky resumed attempts to obtain his Doctor of Sciences degree, the Institute of History in Kyiv was headed by the Party functionary, Yury Kondufor (1922–1997), formerly head of the Department of Science and Culture of the Central Committee of Ukraine’s Communist Party. Kondufor refused to accept Kovalsky’s dissertation for consideration by the academic council under the pretext that Kovalsky’s main works were study guides and not academic monographs.<sup>49</sup> As Kovalsky recalled the episode, an “academic bureaucrat” recommended that he publish his studies under the auspices of the institute in Kyiv and in the Ukrainian language. The subtext of this request was the obvious concern that, because of DSU’s direct subordination to Moscow, “the Kyiv apparatchiks in charge of ideology could not interfere with DSU historians.”<sup>50</sup>

After his failure in Kyiv, Kovalsky turned to his colleagues from the Mikhail Lomonosov Moscow State University (MGU), with whom he had maintained steady contact. At the MGU Faculty of History, the Department of Source Studies was established in 1953. Initially headed by Mikhail Tikhomirov (1893–1965), after 1966 the department had a new chair, Ivan Kovalchenko (1923–1995), a specialist in socioeconomic and econometric history. Both Tikhomirov and Kovalchenko were heavyweights of Soviet historiography and full members (*akademiki*) of the Soviet Academy of Sciences (Kovalchenko since 1987).

By itself, DSU’s direct subordination to the All-Union Ministry of Higher Education in Moscow did not open doors to Moscow University for Dnipropetrovsk scholars. Kovalsky had to rely on his personal and professional contacts at MGU and social networks established by other Dnipropetrovsk historians. Quite important were, for instance, the contacts of Kovalsky’s colleague and rival at the department, Victor Shevtsov (1940–1981), a his-

<sup>49</sup> DIAZ. Vol. 1. P. 66.

<sup>50</sup> N. P. Kovalsky. Razdum’ia ukrainskogo istochnikoveda o svetloj pamiaty I. D. Koval’chenko – cheloveke, uchionom, organizatore nauki // Informatsionnyj biulleten’ assotsiatsii “Istoriia i komp’iuter”. 1996. No. 18. Pp. 184, 183.

toriographer and specialist in nineteenth-century Russian history writing.<sup>51</sup> A graduate of Voronezh University, Shevtsov naturally gravitated to the Moscow academic community.<sup>52</sup> Among his close partners were Viktor Muraviev (1941–2009) from the Moscow Institute of History and Archives, Vladimir Dunaevskii (1919–1998) from the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, and Elena Chistiakova (1921–2005) from Patrice Lumumba People’s Friendship University. All these contacts played an important role in Kovalsky’s academic biography. In particular, it was thanks to Chistiakova’s help and support that his student Serhii Ploky defended a Candidate of Sciences dissertation (focused on Latin-language sources on the Khmelnytsky uprising) at the aforementioned Lumumba University in 1982.<sup>53</sup>

Two years later, in 1984, Kovalsky finally defended his Doctor of Sciences dissertation at MGU – “Sources on Ukraine’s History of the 16th–the First Half of the 17th Centuries.”<sup>54</sup> At the insistence of his Moscow colleagues, he had to significantly rewrite the initial text. In particular, he was asked to add a separate subsection discussing the representativeness and the informational potential of these sources. This suggestion can be interpreted as evidence that Kovalchenko and his associates tried to counter the growing trend toward separation between source studies and historical research per se, by emphasizing the implications of the narrow analysis of primary sources for ongoing professional discussions.<sup>55</sup>

Before Kovalsky, a precedent had been set for a Soviet Ukrainian historian to defend his habilitation thesis at MGU despite the republican authorities’ objections. There, in 1978, a medievalist and historian of culture from Lviv, Yaroslav Isaevych (1936–2010), defended his Doctor of Sciences

---

<sup>51</sup> I. I. Kolesnyk. *Issledovanie otechestvennoj istoriografii v trudakh V. I. Shevtsova // Aktual’nye problemy otechestvennoj istorii XVII–XIX vekov.* Dnepropetrovsk, 1982. Pp. 154–166; *ibid.* *Istoriografichna topohrafiia.* Pp. 366–370. Intellectual and personal competition between Shevtsov and Kovalsky based on the dichotomies “historiography vs. the study of the sources” and “Russian studies vs. Ukrainian studies” ended with Viktor Shevtsov’s early death.

<sup>52</sup> E. A. Chernov. *Retrospektiva i perspektivy istoriografii // DIAZ.* Vol. 4. 2010. Pp. 285–286.

<sup>53</sup> S. Ploky. *Povernennia do Evropy: Zustrichi z Iaroslavom Isaievychem // Historians in UA.* <http://bit.ly/2Cib8UI>.

<sup>54</sup> N. P. Kovalsky. *Istochniki po istorii Ukrainy XVI – pervoj poloviny XVII v. / Avtoreferat dissertatsii doktora istoricheskikh nauk.* Moscow, 1984.

<sup>55</sup> E. A. Chernov. *Retseptsiia lichnosti i vozzrenij I. D. Koval’chenko v Dnepropetrovskom universitete // DIAZ.* Vol. 4. P. 307.

dissertation, “The History of Book Publishing in Ukraine and Its Role in Cultural Contacts among Slavic Nations (16th–First Half of the 17th Centuries).” Like Kovalsky, Isaevych had graduated from of the University of Lviv (only five years later than Kovalsky, in 1957). He was on the editorial board of the 1983 collection of articles prepared by Kovalsky and served as “official reviewer” (*ofitsialnyi opponent*) of Kovalsky’s first graduate student in Ukrainian studies, Yuri Mytsyk.

Paradoxically, as a scholar of early modern Ukrainian history, Kovalsky found the Russian-language academic milieu in Moscow closer to his and his department’s research interests than the Soviet Ukrainian historical establishment in Kyiv. He used the “extraterritorial” status of DSU to strengthen and promote personal contacts with Moscow into full-scale professional collaboration by putting together the aforementioned thematic collections of articles and organizing all-Union conferences, by inviting Kovalchenko’s student Leonid Borodkin to lecture at DSU (which inaugurated cliometrics research at the university),<sup>56</sup> and himself offering a special course at Moscow State University on the history of Ukraine.<sup>57</sup>

### ***The Polish Connection***

Polish was one of Kovalsky’s native languages,<sup>58</sup> and Polish themes and sources were the most important component of his studies. Ironically, in the Soviet terminology of the 1970s, they were classified as “foreign,” despite the fact that Ukrainian lands were a part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth during the period studied by Kovalsky. There was a gradient of “foreignness,” which implied different degrees of security clearance for scholars wishing to engage foreign topics and literatures, and political sensitivity of their findings. The Polish People’s Republic was a close ally of the USSR, which made Polish-related scholarship much safer and more accessible than studies of a NATO member country. Still, Polish domestic politics was turbulent at times, and its cultural sphere included segments that were ideologically subversive by Soviet standards, which complicated

---

<sup>56</sup> V. V. Pidhaietsky. Notatky shchodo istorii poiavy kliometryky na terenakh istfaku DNU // *Istoriografichni ta dzhereloznavchi problemy istorii Ukrainy: istoriografia ta dzhereloznavstvo v chasovomu vymiri*. Dnipropetrovsk, 2003. Pp. 18–26.

<sup>57</sup> Chernov. *Retsepsiia lichnosti*. Pp. 307–308.

<sup>58</sup> The Polish language spoken by Kovalsky sounded “extremely beautiful” and “old-fashioned, almost forgotten” to his younger Polish colleagues. He loved to read literature in Polish, subscribed to *Przekrój*, and used some Polish words in his Russian. Interview with Yurii Mytsyk, April 16, 2017.

the situation of Soviet historians dealing with Polish themes. Unlike the USSR and most other socialist countries, after 1956 Poland enjoyed a de facto methodological pluralism with the formal domination of Marxist doctrine. This included a revision of the hard-line version of Marxism and a rejection of the teleological interpretation of historical materialism. It was also possible to completely avoid complying with Marxist methodology by declaring the explicitly empiricist nature of one's study, which explains Polish historians' widespread inclination to distrust theorizing and respect high-quality pure facts studies.<sup>59</sup> The relative methodological freedom in Polish historiography both attracted Kovalsky and made him aware of the potential political repercussions of reflecting it in his own work. For methodology, he preferred to refer to the scholarship of Moscow-based historians, rather than that of Polish colleagues.

Kovalsky first traveled to postwar Poland in 1970 for a two-month fellowship at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków.<sup>60</sup> His host was chair of the Department of Soviet Nations, Antoni Podraza (1920–2008), a researcher of Galicia's agrarian history and a native of Lwów/Lviv. Podraza started to study at Jan Kazimierz University in Lwów in 1938/39, and after the annexation of the region by the Soviet Union, moved to Poland in 1945.<sup>61</sup> Another Polish partner of Kovalsky's was a University of Wrocław professor, philologist Franciszek Sielicki (1923–2001). A native of the Vilnius region, Sielicki studied East European folklore and Russian and Belarusian literature, and translated the Primary Chronicle into Polish.<sup>62</sup> Sielicki reviewed a number of Kovalsky publications,<sup>63</sup> and hosted his graduate student, Yuri Mytsyk, when Mytsyk spent ten months in Poland during the academic year 1978–79.<sup>64</sup>

Podraza and Sielicki were six to eight years older than Kovalsky, but still belonged to the same generation that had been socialized in Polish prewar culture during their teen years. The shared cultural affinity enhanced their professional ties, but it had to be concealed even more carefully for political

---

<sup>59</sup> Rafał Stobiecki. *Historiografia PRL. Ani dobra, ani mądra, ani piękna... ale skomplikowana. Studia i szkice*. Warsaw, 2007. Pp. 66, 178–179, 192, 209.

<sup>60</sup> ADNU. F. 1. Op. 4. Od.zb. 7507. Ark. 29–29zv.

<sup>61</sup> Paweł Sękowski. *Profesor Antoni Podraza – uczony oraz działacz ruchu ludowego i laickiego* // *Forum Myśli Wolnej*. 2013. No. 55. Pp. 15–21.

<sup>62</sup> Telesfor Poźniak. *Profesor Franciszek Sielicki (1923–2001)* // *Warszawskie Zeszyty Ukrainoznawcze*. 2002. No. 13/14. Pp. 472–476.

<sup>63</sup> From 1982 to 1989, Sielicki reviewed five books by Kovalsky in two Wrocław-based periodicals, *Studia o książce* and *Slawica wratislaviensia*. See the full bibliography of Kovalsky's works in *Osiągnięcia historii*. Pp. 75–111.

<sup>64</sup> Iu. A. Mytsyk. *Z lystiv M. P. Koval'skoho* // *Mykola Pavlovykh Koval's'ky*. P. 35.

reasons. Despite spatial, professional, and personal closeness, Kovalsky's Polish colleagues could not visit his university in the "closed" city of Dnipropetrovsk, and his status was not high enough to include their research (or that of any other foreign scholars) in the collections that he edited. Whether the result of his own precaution or direct prohibition, during the entire Soviet period Kovalsky never once published his works abroad (he first had an article published in Poland in 1994, and even this piece was in the Ukrainian language<sup>65</sup>). By publicly keeping a distance from Polish scholarship, Kovalsky secured the very possibility of sustaining his contacts with Polish colleagues. He was even able to visit Poland again for one month in 1980 (before the imposition of martial law in 1981 made visiting Poland more problematic).<sup>66</sup> By contrast, many of Kovalsky's colleagues – including Yaroslav Isaevych – were not authorized to leave the USSR.

### ***The Ideology of Professionalism and Its Traps***

The methodological empiricism that culminated in the creation and proliferation of specialized departments of source studies at Soviet universities was an efficient way to insulate scholarship from the interference of the communist ideology cum methodology. The side effect of this strategy was a tendency to neglect any other modern theoretical approaches to the study of history, and the view of the "study of sources" as a self-sufficient academic exercise.

As late as 1995, Kovalsky emphasized that it was the discipline of source studies that became "a flagship of true scholarship in the sea of opportunistic and even consciously falsified 'works' and 'dissertations'" and "saved the esprit de corps of the history profession and became an antidote to 'vulgar sociology' and pseudo-scholarship."<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, he insisted that the comprehensive analysis of the primary sources (identification of their structure and assessment of credibility) remained the preconditions of any solid research. Even after the demise of the official ideology and the mandatory status of Marxist methodology after 1991, Kovalsky did not find any conceptual changes necessary. He did not subscribe to harshly critical comments on the traditional approach to primary sources made by the renowned Moscow

---

<sup>65</sup> M. P. Kovalsky. Vnesok pol's'kykh istorykyv XVIII – pochatku XX st. v rozshyrennia dzherel'noi bazy istorii Ukrainy XV – XVII st. // *Warszaws'ki ukrainoznavchi zapysky*. 1994. Vol. 2. Pp. 55–63.

<sup>66</sup> ADNU. F. 1. Op. 4. Od.zb. 7507. Ark. 103.

<sup>67</sup> N. P. Kovalsky. O vremeni i o sebe. P. 25.

medievalist Aron Gurevich (1924–2006), who pointed out the limitations of “external critics” of the sources, as well as historians’ reluctance to ask questions and to stop being “slaves to the source.”<sup>68</sup> Kovalsky, on the contrary, spoke about conscious “worship” of the sources and argued that one of the most dangerous tendencies of historical studies was its ignoring of sources or using them purely for illustration.<sup>69</sup> However, he also stressed that source studies were not an aim in themselves but, rather, an “indispensable element of the new stage of Ukrainian historiography’s development.”<sup>70</sup>

According to the memoirs of Kovalsky’s colleagues at DSU, his academic thinking was greatly influenced by a collection of articles, *Sources Studies: Issues in Theory and Method*,<sup>71</sup> edited by Sigurd Shmidt (1922–2013) and published in 1969. In the foreword, Shmidt made a very important attempt to expand the theoretical prospects of historical research. In this introductory article, Shmidt argued that rather than viewing source studies as just an auxiliary discipline, one should give some thought to their philosophical dimension. The article raised the questions of the role of intuition and modeling in historical research, of the creative use of achievements in other areas of knowledge (from philosophy to mathematics), and of the historian’s creative role and the closeness of his work to belles lettres, of the importance of critically revisiting and respecting prerevolutionary traditions (first of all, Alexander Lappo-Danilevskii’s legacy) and international publications (in his piece, Shmidt referenced Fernand Braudel, E. H. Carr, and other “Western authors”).<sup>72</sup> In his articles, Kovalsky never, not even in the 1990s, went as far as Shmidt did.<sup>73</sup> Perhaps one of the reasons for this was the very context

---

<sup>68</sup> A. Ya. Gurevich. O krizise sovremennoi istoricheskoi nauki // Voprosy istorii. 1991. No. 2–3. Pp. 21–36.

<sup>69</sup> N. P. Kovalsky. O vremeni i o sebe. Pp. 17–18.

<sup>70</sup> M. P. Kovalsky. Aktual’ni problemy dzhereloznavstva istorii Ukrainy XVI–XVII st. // Ukrains’kyj archeohrafichnyj shchorichnyk. 1992. No. 1. P. 261. Cf. relevant critical remarks in O. I. Zhurba. Obrazy istoriohrafii v naukovykh uiavlenniakh M. P. Koval’s’koho // Istoriohrafichni ta dzhereloznavchi problemy istorii Ukrainy. Teoriia. Metodyka. Praktyka. Dnipropetrovsk, 2009. Pp. 8–13.

<sup>71</sup> E. A. Chernov. Retseptsia lichnosti. P. 302. Compare Kovalsky’s own estimation of this collection in his lecture delivered at the Zaporizhzhian University in 1991: N. P. Kovalsky. Nekotorye problemy teorii i metodiki istoricheskogo istochnikovedeniia. Zaporozh’e, 1999.

<sup>72</sup> S. O. Shmidt. Sovremennye problemy istochnikovedeniia // Istochnikovedenie: teoreticheskie i metodicheskie problemy. Moscow, 1969. Pp. 7–58.

<sup>73</sup> Compare observations on the epistemological influences of Kovalsky’s writings in Soviet historiography in Sergei I. Zhuk. *Soviet Americana: The Cultural History of Russian and Ukrainian Americanists*. London, 2017. Pp. 290–302.

of his work: source studies, on the one hand, were regarded as a part of historical scholarship that was auxiliary and “not the most important part,” and on the other hand, within a narrow circle of specialists, they served as a cautious theory for the chosen ones and the most important component of “the ideology of professionalism.”

“The ideology of professionalism” was the reaction of a faction of the scholarly community to the vulgar theorizing of Soviet historiography. Practitioners of this approach usually addressed themes relatively disconnected from the political realities of the day (focusing on medieval or early modern periods), experimented with mathematical methods of research as the epitome of objective knowledge, and sought their academic ideal in the introduction of new sources into scholarly debate or in a new reading these source. Today, the ideology of empiricist professionalism is characterized as “a reaction to ideologization [that did not] encroach on Marxism-Leninism.”<sup>74</sup> A historian, who himself belonged to the elite Moscow community of medievalists, calls this approach “defensive professional pragmatism.”<sup>75</sup>

While methodological empiricism contributed to Soviet and post-Soviet historians’ lagging behind the rapidly evolving and diversifying global historiography, it is hardly fair to put the entire blame on the victim and declare the resistance to ideology in the ivory tower of professionalism “a form of self-deception of the disaffected that protected not just some historians from the system, but also the system from historians.”<sup>76</sup> Challenging “the system” by explicitly deconstructing its conceptual foundations implied not just political and legal persecutions but, most immediately, a ban on the profession of history for anyone who dared, which nullified the effect of such attempts. Moreover, in the Ukrainian context, “the ideology of professionalism” also allowed early modern Ukrainian history to be sustained as a legitimate (even if not prestigious) subject of history writing.

### *The “Ukrainianness” of the Kovalsky School*

Mykola Kovalsky was identified as an ethnic Russian in his Soviet passport,<sup>77</sup> he lectured in Russian at DSU and published most of his works in Russian. He preferred the Russian-language Moscow-based professional

<sup>74</sup> N. E. Koposov. *Khvatit ubivat' koshek! Kritika sotsial'nykh nauk*. Moscow, 2005. P. 187.

<sup>75</sup> P. Iu. Uvarov. *Mezhdru “ezhami” i “lisami”*. *Zametki ob istorikakh*. Moscow, 2015. Pp. 85, 140.

<sup>76</sup> Koposov. *Khvatit ubivat' koshek*. Pp. 191–192.

<sup>77</sup> ADNU. F. 1. Op. 4. Od.zb. 7507. Ark. 10, 25, 92, 110, 121.

milieu to the Soviet Ukrainian academic establishment in Kyiv. Yet his specialization was Ukrainian history, and he suggested topics in Ukrainian history to his graduate students. Often, these topics were directly or indirectly related to Cossacks – a subject that Soviet academic authorities endorsed as a story of popular uprising, but in the Ukrainian context was invariably seen as a key element of national (and even nationalistic) history.<sup>78</sup> Thus, there was a complex dialectics of promoting Ukrainian studies at a Ukrainian university but not in the Ukrainian language (which, one may argue, was making these studies accessible to historians outside Ukraine and helped historians from Dnipropetrovsk win recognition across the USSR).

In the late 1990s, Kovalsky's favorite student Yuri Mytsyk, on the occasion of his teacher's anniversary, published an article in which he wrote about the spirit of Ukrainian patriotism inherent in his professor's work. Mytsyk declared that Kovalsky had revived in Dnipropetrovsk the tradition of Ukrainian studies of the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>79</sup> He explained that the choice of Russian language in the publications by Kovalsky's school was based on the pressure of Soviet policy and claimed that the critical remarks made by MSU scholars about the first version of Kovalsky's dissertation had anti-Ukrainian connotations.<sup>80</sup> This seems to be a simplification of the motivation behind Kovalsky's personal choices and his approach to history writing. Kovalsky, who twice had to live through a change in the regime and the sociopolitical system, knew how to choose between languages and identities. Besides the real or fictitious pressure of Russification in Moscow and Dnipropetrovsk, he also experienced clear Ukrainizing pressure from Kyiv. Apparently, to him, a linguistic choice was inseparable from more general choices of methodological orientation and academic politics.

Kovalsky wrote in 1995: "95 percent of my scholarship has been devoted to Ukrainian history... I'm deeply convinced that nobody is going to do this for us and our history should not be left 'in the care' of others," and he

---

<sup>78</sup> The tension between permitted and suspected (or even forbidden) regarding the Cossack topic in Brezhnev-era Ukraine could be seen in a 1968 scandal around the socialist realist novel by a renowned Soviet Ukrainian writer Oles' Honchar, *A Cathedral* (Sobor). The book itself and a campaign against it was centered in Dnipropetrovsk, and some young historians, including Kovalsky's student Yuri Mytsyk, were engaged in it. See more in Zhuk. *Rock and Roll in the Rocket City*. Pp. 53–57.

<sup>79</sup> Yu. A. Mytsyk. Mykola Koval's'ky (Do 70-richchia z dnia narodzhennia) // *Ukrains'kyj archeohrafichnyj shchorichnyk*. 1999. No. 3–4. Pp. 6–14. It is worth mentioning that this article written by Kovalsky's favorite student opened the issue of Ukraine's most important archaeological journal while Kovalsky was still alive.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* Pp. 10–12.

explained the choice of Russian for his publications as based on “certain tendencies typical for DSU.” At the same time, he agreed with his identification as a Soviet historian and named several Soviet Russian historians as his ideal for researchers.<sup>81</sup>

### ***What Happened after the End of “Closedness”***

When the moon is full, it starts to wane. By the mid-1980s, the Kovalsky school had reached the peak of its evolution and influence. In approximately the same period, the seeds of Gorbachev’s policy of glasnost’ and “the new thinking” began to sprout in the public life of the Soviet Union, covering the whole gamut from the publication of texts previously banned by the censors to the opening up of unprecedented opportunities of direct contact with the outside world. Oriented toward détente and nuclear disarmament, the Gorbachev government opened the closed city of Dnipropetrovsk in 1987. In 1986, in the context of the new Soviet foreign policy (but still thanks to DSU’s special status!), Kovalsky’s student Serhii Plokyh, then an assistant professor at DSU’s world history department, traveled to the United States for a nine-month fellowship at Columbia University.<sup>82</sup>

In 1989, as the processes of disintegration of the USSR were proceeding full blast and republican aspirations were growing, the Ukrainian language and Ukrainian history received new legitimation. In the spring of 1989, DSU established a Department of Ukrainian History, with Kovalsky’s student Hanna Shvydko at its head. In a new (and what turned out to be the last) collection of articles by scholars from different universities edited by Kovalsky and released in 1991, all the articles were published in the Ukrainian language.<sup>83</sup> This book still contained six articles by researchers from Moscow and St. Petersburg, but now they were translated into Ukrainian.

The period of the late 1980s to early 1990s offered opportunities to establish direct contacts with the Ukrainian diaspora, establish new academic institutions, and reconsider the existing academic hierarchies. Kovalsky actively participated in all this. He initiated the opening in Dnipropetrovsk of a branch of the U.S.-based Ukrainian Historical Society – a creation of the Ukrainian diaspora – as well as a branch of the Archaeographic Com-

---

<sup>81</sup> Kovalsky, *O vremeni i o sebe*. Pp. 20, 23, 27.

<sup>82</sup> S. Plokyh, *Ukraina zminiujetsia: ia vidchuvaiu sebe tut siohodni bil’sh-mensh normal’nym istorykom Ukrainy, iakyj ne musyt’ platyty za svoi teksty* // <http://uamoderna.com/jittepis-istory/plokyh>.

<sup>83</sup> *Problemy istoriohrafii ta dzhereloznavstva istorii Ukrainy*. Dnipropetrovsk, 1991.

mission (which soon grew into a new institute of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences – the Institute of Archaeography and Source Studies). In 1991, Professor Kovalsky received the honorary titles Distinguished Science and Technology Professional and Honor Roll Educator.<sup>84</sup> However, he was blackballed in elections to the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences as a corresponding member (in 1992) and the Ukrainian Academy of Higher Education as a full member (1993).<sup>85</sup> Perhaps in this case the Kyiv academic elites decided to show Kovalsky that they had not at all forgotten his independent stance in the 1970s and the 1980s.

In 1994, Mykola Kovalsky moved from Dnipropetrovsk to his native town of Ostroh, taking along several students. This was both a return to his birthplace and a decision to take part in the project of setting up from scratch a new university – the Ostroh Academy. However, it is doubtful that the leader of the Dnipropetrovsk school made this decision solely out of nostalgia for Ostroh. Some authors argue that one of the reasons was the “anti-Ukrainian stance” of the then rector of DSU.<sup>86</sup> Kovalsky postfactum explained his decision (which he called “right and univocal”) to leave DSU: he had become “completely disillusioned with the students who entered the university on the basis of the newly adopted test system.”<sup>87</sup> Perhaps this circumspect formulation contained a painful recognition of the difficulties of accepting the post-Soviet realities of higher education in Dnipropetrovsk – a sharp decline in the prestige of the historian’s profession, as well as the elimination of the special opportunities the university had enjoyed under Brezhnev.

In post-Soviet Ukraine, the Ostroh Academy gave Kovalsky more opportunities than the university where he had worked for over twenty-five years. Professor Kovalsky lived and taught in Ostroh until his death on October 5, 2006.<sup>88</sup>

After Kovalsky’s departure from Dnipropetrovsk, some of the students who were closest to him followed suit. Yuri Mytsyk moved to Kyiv to teach at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. Victor Brekhunenko left Dnipropetrovsk to take a job at the Institute of Archaeography and Source Studies. Hanna Shvydko, after a conflict with the rector, left DSU to teach at another Dnipropetrovsk school – the National Mining Academy. Since the early 1990s,

---

<sup>84</sup> Trofymovych, Mel’nyk. *Zhyttia zarady nauky*. P. 74.

<sup>85</sup> Mel’nyk. *Naukova i pedahohichna diial’nist’*. P. 169.

<sup>86</sup> Mytsyk. *Mykola Koval’s’ky*. P. 13.

<sup>87</sup> Kovalsky. *O vremenii o sebe*. P. 18.

<sup>88</sup> More on the Ostroh period can be found in Mykola Pavlovych Koval’s’ky. Pp. 112–118.

Serhii Plokyh has been working at the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies in Edmonton.

The “geographic expansion” of the “Dnipropetrovsk school” did not bring about a new center of Ukrainian studies with a Kovalsky student at the head. Southern Ukraine’s school of history and source studies, created by a DSU graduate and Kovalsky’s student (albeit not his graduate student) Anatoly Boiko (1960–2010), turned out to be the closest to the Kovalsky school. After defending his Candidate of Sciences dissertation on agrarian history, under Dmytro Poida’s academic supervision, Boiko worked at the Zaporizhian University, which opened in 1985. What the “Zaporizhian school” has in common with the approach of Kovalsky, whose inspirational influence Boiko cited more than once,<sup>89</sup> is an interest in archival heuristics and the publication of sources, as well as the model of communication between academic advisers and their graduate students and their collaborative work on publishing projects. From the institutional-structural viewpoint, the Boiko school is interesting because it came into existence and developed during a time when the realities of the post-Soviet university had already been established.

### *The Oasis in the Desert and Its Disappearance*

As Yuri Mytsyk put it metaphorically, “it was in Dnipropetrovsk, a city akin to an Arabian desert in the postwar period, that a life-giving oasis emerged in the field of Ukrainian studies.”<sup>90</sup> Speaking about the Kovalsky school, Serhii Plokyh, too, uses the image of a desert, noting that the school sprang up in a “source studies desert,”<sup>91</sup> at a university that did not have traditions, a library, or an archive that could satisfy a student of sources on the early modern period.

As a scholar, Mykola Kovalsky managed not only to survive several regime changes and ideological shifts (such as the one in 1972), but also to become a leader of probably the only Soviet Ukrainian school of historical studies. The status of the Kovalsky school was broadly acknowledged by its members as well as by colleagues all around the Soviet Union. Formally

---

<sup>89</sup> On Anatoly Boiko and his school, see *Naukova shkola profesora A. V. Boika: personalii ta dorobok* / Ed. Ihor Lyman, Viktoriia Konstantinova. Zaporizhzhia, 2011. The introductory articles to this collection were written by Kovalsky’s students Serhii Plokyh and Viktor Brekhunencko, who both stressed Kovalsky’s influence on Boiko (Pp. 9, 13).

<sup>90</sup> Mytsyk. *Mykola Koval’s’ky*. P. 12.

<sup>91</sup> Plokyh. *Zhyttieva misiia*. P. 6.

speaking, there was nothing special about the academic activities coordinated by Kovalsky: he headed a department of source studies and historiography, supervised the research of graduate students, and edited collections of articles, as many other Soviet history professors did. It must be something about Mykola Kovalsky's personal and professional qualities that amplified his impact on the profession – his academic motivation and his style of teaching, his interest in working with young colleagues, and his wide range of academic knowledge and contacts. Of no less importance was his keen sensitivity to sociopolitical contexts and his skill in both adapting to it and masterfully using its potential to achieve his own goals.

Kovalsky's success was the continuation of what might be seen as his failure to fully unleash his research potential because of conscious self-censorship. A person of very diverse interests, in his academic publications Kovalsky limited himself to a fairly narrow period and range of themes. Although fluent in several languages, he never quoted research by foreign scholars in his Soviet publications, nor did he publish abroad. He formed as a professional during the years of late Stalinism, and the traumatic experience at the University of Lviv (which Kovalsky nonetheless finished with honors) must have influenced his subsequent career, particularly regarding the understanding of unwritten rules.

While the closed status of Dnipropetrovsk and the direct subordination of its university to Moscow cannot alone explain the success of the Kovalsky school, arguably, it was so well-adjusted to this specific academic subordination that could not function without it. The opening up of the city and the collapse of the Soviet Union with its established configuration of distribution of academic authority and resources became the major challenge to the school. The departure of Kovalsky and many of his pupils from Dnipropetrovsk can hardly be seen as a form of academic expansion. Still, the loss of relative privileges related to DSU's special status, compensated for by new career opportunities and the social capital accumulated by the Kovalsky school in the field of Ukrainian studies were conducive to the professional success of its individual members in the realities of post-Soviet academe. The main destinations in the academic migration of Kovalsky's students were Kyiv (which quite quickly replaced Moscow as the main intellectual magnet) and Ostroh (the birthplace of the new modern university).

The new situation of post-Soviet methodological pluralism, combined with the internationalization of academic life, created a context in which it became virtually impossible to preserve the former coherence of Kovalsky's school. One of the main tests was the attitude of scholars to the national-

ization of history, the Ukrainian national narrative, and assessment of the Russian factor in Ukrainian history.<sup>92</sup> The majority of Kovalsky's students univocally supported the Ukrainian national narrative in its post-Soviet version. Kovalsky himself remained loyal to *istochnikovedenie* and the ideology of professionalism, never changing the style of his academic writing or switching to fashionable theorizing rhetoric. Once again, his demonstrative methodological conservatism indicated a more profound – and more sophisticated – political and cultural stance. Kovalsky's affinity with three distinctive Slavic cultures (Ukrainian, Russian, and Polish), his enthusiasm for teaching and research, and his developed capacity for creative intellectual assimilation made him choose a position of impartial empiricism because no more sophisticated methodological approach was capable of embracing such multifaceted complexity – neither in the 1970s nor in the 1990s.

## SUMMARY

The article discusses the late Soviet phenomenon of Mykola Kovalsky's school of Ukrainian history at the Dnipropetrovsk University. The authors reconstruct the multiple contexts that informed Kovalsky's career choices and scholarship that problematize the notion of “national historiography.”

## РЕЗЮМЕ

Статья посвящена позднесоветской школе украинской историографии и источниковедения, сформированной учениками Николая (Миколы) Ковальского в Днепропетровском университете. Авторы реконструируют множественные контексты, которые повлияли на исследования и карьеру Ковальского, проблематизируя стандартные представления о “национальной историографии”.

---

<sup>92</sup> Interviews with Yuri Mytsyk and Oleh Zhurba.