31ST ANNUAL STANFORD BERKELEY CONFERENCE ON SOVIET, EAST EUROPEAN & EURASIAN AFFAIRS:
UKRAINE: HISTORY AND SOCIETY

On Friday, March 2, CREEES at Stanford and the Institute for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, devoted a day-long conference to “Ukraine: History and Society.” The conference was the 31st Annual Berkeley-Stanford Conference; its goal is to bring together scholars from the two universities, as well as a few invited experts, to discuss a theme of current significance. The two centers selected the theme of Ukraine this year to recognize the common interest on both campuses in Ukraine and to explore some of the more dynamic and fascinating developments in contemporary Ukraine.

Nine scholars presented papers in the day-long session, which was attended by an appreciative audience of about 75 members of the University communities and the interested public, several of whom had journeyed from the Stanford area to attend.

In the first panel of the day, devoted to history and culture, Berkeley professor David Frick presented the results of his fascinating research project on seventeenth-century Wilno; he is constructing a micro-history of communities and neighborhoods, in particular looking at the interaction of the many different religious communities in Wilno – Catholic, Lutheran, Greek Catholic and Orthodox. He explored evidence for “Ruthenian” identity among Greek Catholic and Orthodox residents of Wilno, drawn primarily from court cases. UCLA Professor Roman Koropeckyj explored the earliest debates about the identity of Ukrainian literature by scholars such as Mykola Kostomarov and Taras Shevchenko in the mid-nineteenth century. Finally, Berkeley Professor Marika Kuzma explored tradition and innovation in the music of contemporary Ukrainian composer Lesia Dychko, demonstrating folk themes in her work through selections of Dychko’s choral works.

The second panel of the day focused on Ukrainian political history from the seventeenth century to the twentieth. Stanford Professor Robert Crews addressed the issue of “Cossacks in Global Perspective,” noting that Cossack communities, including the Zaporozhian Cossacks, emerged all across the Eurasian steppe/forest and steppe/mountain boundaries at a certain historical moment, namely from sixteenth century onward. Initially outposts of para-military bands composed of men who had fled the taxation and serfdom of emerging empires, these communities gradually were drawn into frontier service to those empires. Yet they maintained their traditional identities and practices, such as democratic election of leadership, fierce group honor and warrior ethic. In a controversial and stimulating move, he argued that a modern day parallel is the Pashtun tribes of Afghanistan, who share many of the same attributes, customs and attitudes of Cossack bands of earlier centuries. Berkeley Professor John Connelly examined recent history writing on Ukraine’s economic development since World War II, while Stanford Professor Amir Weiner, under the topic “Laboratory of Soviet Dreams?”, also addressed World War II, exploring how Soviet policy in Western Ukraine was shaped by Soviet ideology more than by pragmatic politics.

The final panel of the day focused on the contemporary Ukrainian economy. Here the panel featured invited specialists from around the world. Professor Lucan Way from the University of Toronto explored “Rapacious Individualism and the Evolution of Democracy,” considering the phenomena of official corruption, oligarchy and voting patterns in Ukraine. Professor Roy Gardner, economist from Indiana University and Director of the MA Program in Economics at the National University “Kyiv Mohyla Academy,” addressed the problem of where the “transitional economy” of Ukraine was headed, giving a generally optimistic picture of growth and diversification. Finally, Nazar Kholod, Professor at the Ivan Franko National University of Lviv and currently a Fulbright Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center, Washington, DC, spoke on Ukraine’s economic development since the Orange Revolution, echoing Gardner’s generally optimistic assessment of large macro-economic indicators.

The day’s program was introduced by the Berkeley Institute’s Director Yuri Slezkine and wrapped up with concluding comments by the Stanford CREEES Director Nancy Kollmann. The panels were chaired by Berkeley Professors Luba Golburt, Victoria Frede and Jason Wittenberg. Throughout the day the audience engaged the speakers in lively and productive interchange, informally at coffee breaks and in formal Q and A after the talks.