Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Faculty of History

Universität Basel, Departement Geschichte

Living the Soviet Utopia: Cultural History of Technologies in Ukraine, 1922-1991

Thursday, 24.09 – Friday, 25.09.2026

Swiss National Science Foundation

Universität Basel

Living the Soviet Utopia: Cultural History of Technologies in Ukraine, 1922–1991

Living the Soviet Utopia: Cultural History of Technologies in Ukraine, 1922–1991 is conceived as an interdisciplinary inquiry into the ways technological modernity was not only implemented but culturally imagined, negotiated, and experienced in Soviet Ukraine. Rather than treating technology as a purely infrastructural or economic domain, the conference approaches it as a cultural force that shaped forms of knowledge, social hierarchies, and everyday life, while simultaneously being redefined through these very practices. Central to this framework are questions about how scientific knowledge and expert authority were produced within specific institutional environments, including closed academic cities, secrecy regimes, and highly structured research infrastructures, and how these conditions contributed to the formation of a distinct scientific intelligentsia. Equally important is the exploration of technology in everyday life: how industrial goods, housing technologies, agricultural modernization, and consumer technologies mediated daily routines, aspirations, and material cultures of Soviet citizens. The conference further interrogates how infrastructures of modernization were experienced unevenly across space and social groups, producing both visions of progress and persistent frictions of scarcity, adaptation, and informal practice. At the same time, attention is given to the cultural imagination of technology in Soviet Ukraine, including cybernetics and early notions of artificial intelligence, as well as to the ways in which technological optimism and its limits were represented, contested, and reworked in cinema, visual culture, and artistic responses to industrialization and catastrophe. In this regard, the Chernobyl disaster serves as a critical point of reflection on the fragility of technological utopianism and its environmental and social consequences.

Organization:
Prof. Dr. Gennadii Kazakevych, Prof. Dr. F. Benjamin Schenk, Dr. Olha Martynyuk.

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Format: Online (via Zoom). No registration is required.
Join Zoom Meeting: https://knu-ua.zoom.us/j/2141834026?pwd=d1F4TVJUK2ZmdldWYlNCMVo4SHkxQT09
Meeting ID: 214 183 4026
Passcode: gg31YV
(Note: All times are listed in Eastern European Summer Time / EEST, Kyiv).

Cover image: Oleksandr Dubovyk. Fragment of the mosaic panel Svit Tekhniky (The World of Technology) on the facade of the Stantsiia Yunykh Tekhnikiv (Young Technicians' Station) in Kyiv, 1980. Mosaic.

Conference Program

Day 1: September 24 (Thursday)

14:00 – 14:10 | **Opening Remarks & Welcome**

Prof. Dr. Gennadii Kazakevych (Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv)
Prof. Dr. F. Benjamin Schenk (University of Basel)

Panel 1. Cybernetics, Mass Housing & Atomic Utopias

14:10 – 14:40 | Dr. Serhii Zhabin (Erfurt University)
The idea of digital immortality through artificial intelligence in the "Cybertonia" subculture of Kyiv cyberneticists

14:40 – 15:10 | Illia Koval (Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv)
The Dictatorship of Science in the Urban Space of the "Atomic City": Technological Utopia in the Monuments of Prypiat (1974–1982)

15:10 – 15:40 | Dr. Anastasiia Bozhenko (Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe)
Who Built Utopia? Representing Expertise in Soviet Mass-Housing Production

15:40 – 16:10 | Dr. Olexandr Popovych (G.M. Dobrov Institute for Scientific and Technological Potential and Science History Studies)
Scientific and technological development in Soviet Ukraine – a struggle that did not lead to victory

16:10 – 16:30 | Technical Break (20 min)

Panel 2. Secret Cities, Elites & Closed Knowledge

16:30 – 17:00 | Prof. Dr. Serhii Zhuk (Ball State University, USA)
Komsomol Business in the Rocket City: Testing Communist Utopia in the Closed City of Soviet Ukraine, 1956–1991 (09:20 EDT / US Eastern Time)

17:00 – 17:30 | Dr. Viacheslav Grekov (National Science Center "Kharkiv Institute of Physics and Technology")
Between Science and Isolation: The Formation of a Specific Identity within the KIPT Scientific Community

17:30 – 18:00 | Dr. Iryna Spodenets (National Scientific Center "Kharkiv Institute of Physics and Technology")
From an International Physics Center to a "Nest of Spies": The Social Destruction of UPTI in the 1930s as the Collapse of a Scientific Utopia

18:00 – 18:30 | **Day 1 Concluding Discussion**

Day 2: September 25 (Friday)

10:00 – 10:05 | Welcome & Day 2 Opening

Panel 3. Technologies of Everyday Life: Sound, Mobility & Health

10:05 – 10:35 | Dr. Iryna Adamska (Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv)
Scripts of Health: Sanitary-Educational Theatre and Film within the System of Soviet Medical Propaganda in Ukraine, 1928–1932

10:35 – 11:05 | Dr. Olha Martynyuk (University of Basel)
Road Rallies of the 1920s–1930s as a Mobility Culture in Early Soviet Ukraine

11:05 – 11:35 | Prof. Dr. Rostyslav Konta (Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv)
Building a Soviet Sound Industry: The Origins of Consumer Tape Recorder Production in Ukraine (late 1940s–early 1970s)

11:35 – 12:00 | Coffee / Technical Break (15 min)

Panel 4. Visualizing Progress: Media, Cinema & Photography

12:00 – 12:30 | Prof. Dr. Antonina Kizlova (National Technical University of Ukraine «Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute»)
«Uninherited» Technologies in the Soviet Film «In the Former Nest of Obscurantism» (1938)

12:30 – 13:00 | Polina Bukharina (Mystetskyi Arsenal National Art and Culture Museum Complex)
Between the Industrial Miracle and the Unmade Photographs: The Representation of Dneprostroi through the Lens of the Soviet Press and Western Journalists in 1929–1934

13:00 – 13:30 | Anna Onufriienko (University of Karlsruhe)
The Colonial Gaze on Labour and Technology in the Film Ukraine 1943

13:30 – 14:00 | Prof. Dr. Gennadii Kazakevych (Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv)
Framing the Self in Soviet Utopia: Practices and Narratives of Vernacular Photography in Ukraine, 1950s–1980s

14:00 – 14:30 | Oleksii Kuchanskyi (Universität Basel)
Filming Radioecology: Soviet Ukrainian Scientific Cinema and the Nuclear Contamination of the Ocean

14:30 – 15:00 | **Closing Remarks & Final Discussion**
Prof. Dr. F. Benjamin Schenk