

Introduction: Looking back at Brezhnev ¹

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In the West, the Soviet Union is now viewed as a historical dead-end, a doomed experiment that eventually collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions. Extrapolating back from the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, it is often assumed that the Soviet Union was ‘bound’ to fail. The Soviet Union was ruled by a stultified bureaucracy under which citizens enjoyed very limited personal freedom, dissidents were ruthlessly persecuted, and only stringent controls on communication with the outside world enabled the system to survive. The attempt to build a centrally-planned economy on principles antithetical to the market led to colossal inefficiency and stagnant growth. Moscow’s competition with the United States for global hegemony brought the world to the brink of nuclear war and fueled bitter conflicts from Afghanistan to Angola.

In contrast, many Russians now view the Soviet Union of Leonid Brezhnev, who was General Secretary from 1964 to 1982, as something of a golden age: a society in which citizens could lead a secure and predictable life, where living standards were rising every year, and where their children could receive a good education and stable careers. Levada Center polls show Brezhnev to be the most popular leader of the 20th century.³ Even some Russian intellectuals look back at the Brezhnev years as an era of fervent creativity. Writer Dmitrii Bykov goes so far as to describe the 1970s as “our silver age, when culture and science evolved at a rapid pace,” producing such towering figures of artistic and moral authority as Vladimir Vysotsky, Andrei Tarkovsky and Andrei Sakharov.⁴

Opinion polls looking back at the Brezhnev era, of course, must be interpreted with caution. They may be more a reflection of distaste for the turbulence Russians experienced in the years of Mikhail Gorbachev (1985-91) and Boris Yeltsin (1992-99) than an abstract assessment of the costs and benefits of life in the pre-perestroika Soviet Union. Respondents under 40 have no direct personal experience of the Brezhnev era, and for Russians from 40-60 years old, the Brezhnev era was the time of their own childhood and adolescence, and thus a natural object of nostalgia.

Mikhail Gorbachev was very clever in sticking the label of stagnation (*zastoi*) on the Brezhnev years, with the goal of making his own rule look more innovative and dynamic. But the Brezhnev years were not ‘stagnant’ at all. On the contrary they were very dynamic: this was a society undergoing rapid changes, some of them involving entropy and decline, but some of them forward looking and innovative. Society was becoming more urban, enjoying improved education, rising living standards and – gradually – more exposure to the outside world. The stability of the Brezhnev era was due to the Communist Party’s ability to balance these contrary forces – until, that is, they were no longer able to do so.

¹ Published as “Looking back at Brezhnev,” *Russian History*, 41: 3, Sept 2014, 299-306 (with Victoria Smolkin-Rothrock).

² The papers gathered here were originally presented at a conference “What Was the Soviet Union? Looking back at the Brezhnev years,” held at Wesleyan University on 20-21 October 2011.

³ Brezhnev had a 56% positive rating, ahead of Lenin with 55%, Stalin 50%, Nicholas II 48%, Khrushchev 45%, and Gorbachev and Yeltsin at 22% each. Levada Center press release, May 22, 2013. <http://www.levada.ru/22-05-2013/otnoshenie-rossiyan-k-glavam-rossiiskogo-gosudarstva-raznogo-vremeni>

⁴ Dmitrii Bykov, “Russkii tormoz,” *Novaya gazeta*, 21 January 2014.

In the 1990s social scientists naturally enough were engaged in trying to understand Russia's fraught, dramatic and ultimately abortive transition to democracy. More recently, with the return to authoritarianism under Vladimir Putin, attention has turned back to the Brezhnev era in the search for 'legacies' which constrained the later efforts to reform Russia into liberal democratic market economy.⁵ After a two-decade hiatus, scholarly works about the Brezhnev period are now starting to appear.⁶

Julianne Furst notes that "Over the last two years, the early messengers of what promises to be an avalanche of Soviet 1970s studies and memoirs have appeared in print, giving a tantalizing glimpse of a period full of contradictions and sketching a picture of late socialist Soviet life that oscillates between mind-numbing boredom, frantic activity, and unintended hilarity."⁷ The bulldozing of an unofficial art exhibit in 1974 symbolized the regime's unwillingness to tolerate dissent – but also the existence of a parallel society.⁸

Aleksei Yurchak's influential ethnographic work helped to expose the deep contradictions in Soviet official ideology, especially for the younger generations with no direct memories of the Stalin years.⁹ Sergei Zhuk documented the explosion of rock sub-culture in the 1960s and 1970s in his native Dnepropetrovsk which defeated the best efforts of the Communist Party and KGB to stem its tide.¹⁰ The disco culture was eventually taken over by the Komsomol, becoming an important source of revenue for them and laying the groundwork for the break-out of young entrepreneurs in the perestroika period. Economists Eugenia Belova and Valery Lazarev pored over the Communist Party's financial records. They find that regional party organs were expected to self-finance, and relied on their publishing businesses and membership dues – which gave them an incentive to increase the party's ranks with scant

⁵ See for example: Grigory Pop-Eleches, "Historical legacies and post-communist regime change," *Journal of Politics*, 69: 4 (2007); Silvana Malle, "Soviet legacies in post-Soviet Russia," *Post-Communist Economies* 21, no. 3 (September 2009) 249-82; Alena Ledeneva, *How Russia Really Works: The Informal Practices That Shaped Post-Soviet Politics and Business* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006); Jordan Gans-Morse, "Searching for transitologists: Contemporary theories of post-communist transitions and the myth of a dominant paradigm," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 20, no. 4 (October 2004), 320-349.

⁶ Donald Raleigh, *Soviet Baby Boomers: An Oral History of Russia's Cold War Generation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Edwin Bacon and Mark Sandle, eds.: *Brezhnev Reconsidered* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Neringa Klumbyte and Gulnaz Sharafutdinova (eds.), *Soviet Society in the Era of Late Socialism, 1964-85* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012); Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Durham, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); William Tompson, *The Soviet Union under Brezhnev* (Harlow: Pearson, 2003). For a Russian example, see B. V. Sokolov, *Leonid Brezhnev: Zolotaya epokha* (Moscow: ATS Press, 2004).

⁷ Julianne Furst, "Where Did All the Normal People Go?: Another Look at the Soviet 1970s," *Kritika*, 14, no. 2 (summer 2013), 621-40.

⁸ Furst, 627.

⁹ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More. The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Sergei Zhuk, *Rock and Roll in the Rocket City: The West, Identity and Ideology in Soviet Dnepropetrovsk, 1960-85* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins, 2010).

regard to ideological purity.¹¹ Christopher Ward examined the Baikal Amur Railway – the Brezhnev era’s most important ideological/developmental project, through which passed half a million volunteers.¹² He found for example that few of the non-Slavic republics sent Komsomol teams to take part in BAM, undermining the project’s claims to be a new frontier in forging a post-ethnic “Soviet people.”

It was the Soviet Union’s multi-ethnic character, embedded in an ethnically-defined federal structure, that proved to be its Achilles Heel. In the memorable words of a former KGB officer quoted by Stephen Kotkin: “The Soviet Union resembled a chocolate bar: it was furrowed with the lines of future division.”¹³ Throughout the Brezhnev years, the ethno-federalism required constant attention, particular in dealing with the difficult cases of peoples such as the Germans and Crimean Tatars who had been repressed under Stalin and only partially rehabilitated after his death. Hanya Shiro argues that the authorities were “prepared to reform in order to meet new situations, but they were incapable of accomplishing reform while controlling mass movements.”¹⁴

Still, there are substantial gaps in our knowledge. No definite studies have yet been published of a whole range of pivotal Soviet institutions, from the *kommunalka* (communal apartment) to the military industry complex (VPK) – though the dacha has been covered.¹⁵ Vladimir Kontorovich has noted that despite all the attention on the Soviet military threat, there was not a single study published in the West of the Soviet military economy during the decades of Soviet existence, neither by academics nor by the CIA.¹⁶ Comparative economics textbooks would not have a chapter or even a section on the VPK. This deficit has not been remedied in the 25 years since the Soviet collapse.

As yet, the debate over possible alternatives during the Brezhnev years has barely begun. It remains an open question whether a change of course during the 1960s or 1970s could have prevented the unraveling of the Soviet system in the late 1980s. The Khrushchev period was one of instability and experimentation, when it appeared that systemic change was a real possibility. The Brezhnev period, in contrast, was characterized by aversion to experimentation – exemplified by the decision to invade Czechoslovakia in 1968 to crush the “Prague Spring.” On the home front, economic reform proposals were shut down, such as the introduction of independent “links” in agriculture in the late 1960s – a would-be precursor of the “household responsibility system” subsequently introduced in China, to great effect.¹⁷ The conventional

¹¹ Eugenia Belova and Valery Lazarev, *Funding Loyalty: The Economics of the Communist Party* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

¹² Christopher J. Ward, *Brezhnev’s Folly. The Building of BAM and Late Soviet Socialism* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).

¹³ Nikolai Leonov quoted in Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted. The Soviet Collapse 1970-2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 86.

¹⁴ Hanya Shiro. “Nationalities policy in the Brezhnev era,” in Uyama Tomohiko, ed., *Empire, Islam, and Politics in Central Eurasia* (Sapporo: Slavic Eurasian Studies, no.14, 2007), ch. 8, 221-46, 245.

¹⁵ Stephen Lovell, *Summerfolk. A History of the Dacha 1710-2000* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).

¹⁶ Vladimir Kontorovich, “A Cold War creature that sat out the Cold War,” forthcoming in *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2014.

¹⁷ Alexander Yanov, *The Drama of the 1960s: A Lost Reform* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, Berkeley, 1984)

wisdom is that it was increased revenue from oil and gas exports after the rise in world oil prices in the 1970s that bought the Brezhnev model another decade or two of operation.¹⁸ However, the economic system was not standing still during those decades. Vitaly Naishul argued that central planning effectively ceased to exist already by the 1980s, replaced by a network of horizontal and vertical bargaining.¹⁹ This meant the system was less and less responsive to changing priorities from the center.

The articles that follow report on recent work exploring the complexities, contradictions and nuances of the Brezhnev era by political scientists and historians.

Nikolai Mitrokhin reports on his fascinating quest to reconstruct the lost world of the apparatus of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, through archival research and interviews with 90 former officials. He finds that these apparatchiki were well-educated, professional officials, a far cry from the ideological dinosaurs which one might have imagined them to be. A tightly disciplined group, they held to their own world view and even their own language (shorn of profanity and colloquialisms), but were not more conservative than members of other Soviet bureaucratic institutions.

Martin Dimitrov argues that the Soviet state was by no means out of touch with developments in Soviet society. On the contrary they devoted considerable effort to tracking social and political trends, with some success. Dimitrov usefully distinguishes between the different types of information that the authorities were collecting – evidence of political dissent, versus the general mood of the population, versus specific grievances (that could be addressed by forwarding the information to the relevant authorities). Party leaders paid a lot of attention to citizens' letters, more so than to opinion polls, which they saw as unreliable.

Joachim Zvejnert dissects the way in which the Brezhnev leadership responded to the challenge of economic reforms emanating from the socialist bloc in Eastern Europe by allowing some experimentation and debate – within defined limits. He sees the concept of “developed socialism” as the epitome of *zastoi*: a legitimization of the existing order “that came very close to abandoning the idea of development itself.” Soviet economists were prevented from bringing ‘objective’ economic laws into the debate, and this made them ill-prepared to deal with the challenge of systemic reform when it became a necessity in the 1980s.

Most political science studies of the Brezhnev era focus on decision making in Moscow, which makes Eric McGlinchey's study of politics in Kyrgyzstan particularly welcome. McGlinchey argues that Brezhnev had a good understanding of Central Asian society, and that his shift to a policy of “trust in cadres” helped to stabilize the political situation in the region – but only in the short run. A growing economy brought migration into the cities and strong competition over land and housing in the Osh province between the economically dominant Uzbek community and Kyrgyz leaders – politically empowered as the ‘titular’ nationality. These tensions culminated in ethnic rioting in 1990 which eerily presage the even more bloody confrontations that occurred in the summer of 2010, killing hundreds. Gorbachev's response was to blame the Kyrgyz leadership – helping, ironically, to spark a new Kyrgyz nationalist movement, one that was beyond the party's control. The new Kyrgyz nationalists used Brezhnevite rhetoric of modernization to justify their moves against the Uzbeks. McGlinchey's article illustrates the importance of studying historical origins when trying to analyze contemporary events.

¹⁸ Egor Gaidar, *Collapse of an Empire: Lessons for Modern Russia* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2007).

¹⁹ Vitaly Naishul, “Liberalizm i ekonomicheskie reformy,” *Mirovaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya* 30, (August 1992), 35-54.

