Looking back at Brezhnev

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Introduction

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In the West, the Soviet Union is most often viewed through the Cold War lens of capitalist triumph over socialist decline and failure. Rather than take seriously the communist challenge to capitalist modernity, the Soviet project is presented as a historical dead-end, a doomed experiment that collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions. The Soviet Union – the story goes – was ruled by a stultified bureaucracy under which citizens enjoyed limited personal freedom and dissidents were ruthlessly persecuted. 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. The system’s survival depended on stringent controls on communication with the outside world.

Russians, of course, have a more complicated relationship to their own past. Even as the historical legacies of Lenin and Stalin, Khrushchev and Gorbachev, remain contentious, the Soviet Union of Leonid Brezhnev, who was General Secretary from 1964 to 1982, is often portrayed as something of a golden age.¹

Indeed, even as the popularity of other Russian and Soviet leaders changes over time, polls have consistently shown Brezhnev to be the most popular leader of the 20th century.\(^2\) The Brezhnev period is depicted as a time when 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 expect stable careers. These are not the only memories of the era, of course. Shortages of food and consumer goods made an indelible impression on many who lived through the period. Ideology was a deadening presence – but it was alleviated through cynicism and humor.

Opinion polls looking back at the Brezhnev era must be interpreted with caution. They may be more a reflection of distaste for the turbulence Russians experienced under Mikhail Gorbachev (1985–91) and Boris Yeltsin (1992–99) than a disinterested assessment of the costs and benefits of Soviet life before perestroika. Also, respondents under 40 are too young to have any direct personal experience of the Brezhnev era, and for older Russians, impressions of that time are naturally bound up with personal recollections about their own youth.

Nevertheless, nostalgia does not fully explain the rising interest in the Brezhnev era, both in popular culture and in academic scholarship.

Mikhail Gorbachev was very clever in sticking the label of stagnation (\textit{zastoi}) on the Brezhnev years. For one, it had the effect of making his own rule look more innovative and dynamic. But if we look outside the framework of political economy, the picture of late Soviet life becomes more nuanced and complex. This was a society undergoing rapid changes, some of them involving entropy and decline, and some of them forward looking and innovative. Society was becoming more urban and educated.\(^3\) Rising living standards were changing everyday life and patterns of consumption. Gradually, Soviet citizens became more exposed to the outside world through tourism and the inflow of western culture.\(^4\) Labels used to describe the Brezhnev era by the political elite at the time (“developed socialism” and “normalization”) and

\(^2\) For example, in 2013, the Levada Center released statistics where 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.


by western scholars ("late" or "mature" socialism) all point to a communism distinct from the Leninist and Stalinist models of class warfare and heroic mobilization – a communism where ideology had become routinized and where life had become "normal." A communism that had, in important ways, come of age.

Looking at the Brezhnev years through the lens of culture yields yet another perspective. The writer Dmitrii Bykov recently described 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. To this list we might add the writers Vladimir Sorokin, Sasha Sokolov, Venedikt Erofeev and Sergei Dovlatov, as well as artistic movements like Moscow Conceptualism and Sots-Art. What were the conditions that produced this cultural fecundity? The literary scholar Mark Lipovetsky sees the Brezhnev period as a time of aesthetic reconfiguration, likening it to other periods in Russian history – the 1840s, the 1880s, the fin-de-siècle – when political inertia coexisted with, and perhaps helped produce, artistic experimentation. In these moments, Lipovetsky writes, "time's flow somehow weakens [and] various epochs and styles 'crowd in' on top of one another, creating an unpredicted combination of discourses and styles." In this sense, late socialism is experienced as a period when time itself moves differently, a period of 'bezvremen' – a time without time.

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.

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In the 1990s social scientists were engaged in trying to understand Russia's fraught, dramatic and ultimately abortive transition to a liberal democratic market economy, and when attention turned back to the Brezhnev era, it was to search for 'legacies' that constrained later efforts to reform. However, recently, scholarly works about the Brezhnev period are appearing more and more frequently. Indeed, as Julianne Fürst notes, "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."  

Aleksei Yurchak’s influential work helped to expose how the younger generations with no direct memories of the Stalin years experienced the deep contradictions in official ideology. 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. 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. Christopher Ward examined the Baikal Amur Railway – the Brezhnev era’s most important

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ideological/developmental project, through which passed half a million volunteers.\textsuperscript{14} 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.” When economists Eugenia Belova and Valery Lazarev pored over the Communist Party’s financial records, they found 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 regard to ideological purity.\textsuperscript{15}

What new questions can we ask now that the Brezhnev era is History?

We now know more about a whole range of pivotal Soviet institutions and practices, from the \textit{kommunalka} and the dacha, to life on collective farms, television and \textit{blat}.\textsuperscript{16} Still, there are substantial gaps in our knowledge and many questions remain. No definite studies have yet been published on the military industry complex (\textit{vPK}), although Stephen Kotkin’s conference keynote address pointed to directions for future research.\textsuperscript{17} Vladimir Kontorovich has noted that despite all the attention on the Soviet military threat during the Cold War, there was not a single study published in the West of the Soviet military economy, neither by academics nor by the CIA.\textsuperscript{18} Comparative economics

\textsuperscript{14} Christopher J. Ward, \textit{Brezhnev’s Folly. The Building of BAM and Late Soviet Socialism} (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).

\textsuperscript{15} Eugenia Belova and Valery Lazarev, \textit{Funding Loyalty: The Economics of the Communist Party} (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).


textbooks would not have a chapter or even a section on the VPK. This deficit has not been remedied in the two decades since the Soviet collapse.

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.\textsuperscript{19} The conventional 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.\textsuperscript{20} However, Vitaly Naishul argues that central planning effectively ceased to exist already by the 1980s, replaced by a network of horizontal and vertical bargaining.\textsuperscript{21} This meant that the economic system was less and less responsive to changing priorities from the center, but also that it was not standing still.

Was the Soviet Union’s multi-ethnic character, embedded in an ethnically-defined federal structure, 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.”\textsuperscript{22} Throughout the Brezhnev years, the ethno-federalism required constant attention, particularly 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.”\textsuperscript{23}

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

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{yanov1984} Alexander Yanov, \textit{The Drama of the 1960s: A Lost Reform} (Berkeley, CA: University of California, Berkeley, 1984).
\end{thebibliography}
the late 1980s. Despite some ground-breaking recent work on late socialism in Eastern Europe, and Czechoslovakia in particular, there is still much comparative work left to be done.24 The Soviet 1970s still need to be placed into the global “long 1970s” in order to see the ways that the characteristic features of that era (social and anti-colonial movements, dissidence and human rights, stagnation and stagflation) played out on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

The articles that follow, by political scientists and historians, explore the complexities, contradictions and nuances of the Brezhnev era.

Nikolai Mitrokhin reconstructs the world of the Soviet Communist Party Central Committee apparatus through archival research and interviews with over 100 former officials. He finds that these apparatchiki were well-educated professionals, a far cry from the ideological dinosaurs that one might have imagined them to be. A tightly disciplined group, they had a distinct 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 Zweynert 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.

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Finally, since most political science studies of the Brezhnev era focuses on decision making in Moscow, Eric McGlinchey’s study of politics in Kyrgyzstan is 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 that eerily presaged 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.

Looking back at the Brezhnev era allows us to ask not just what tore the Soviet Union apart, but what held it together.