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The Dynamic Side of the Leonid Brezhnev Era

By Peter Rutland

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With Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's impending return to the presidency, he is set to rule Russia for even longer than General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev, in power from 1964 to 1982. There is increasing talk of a Communist-type restoration. But what do we really know about the Soviet Union of the Brezhnev years? This topic has received scant scholarly attention in the West. The period is too distant to be worthy of study by political scientists, and yet recent enough that it is only now attracting the attention of historians.

Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev cleverly branded the Brezhnev period as the era of "stagnation" in contrast to what he saw as his own dynamic and visionary leadership. This label struck a chord in the West, used to seeing a parade of geriatric leaders atop Lenin's tomb. But it is a mistake to take Brezhnev's infirmity as symbolic of the entire Soviet Union any more than we should see Queen Elizabeth II — on the throne since 1953 — as signaling lack of change in Britain. Just as the social and economic development of the late tsarist era sowed the seeds of the Bolshevik Revolution, so the forces that tore apart the Soviet Union in

the late 1980s had their roots in the Brezhnev era.

Several weeks ago, 20 scholars gathered at Wesleyan University to present their ongoing research on the late Soviet Union. Their work reveals a Soviet Union that was dynamic and even innovative, with deep and widening regional and social differentiation. Clearly, the way the system worked in practice diverged from the official account of how society functioned. The scholars at the workshop drew on a wealth of new sources — from interviews with surviving participants to recently released archival materials.

Brezhnev's regime rested on an extensive information-gathering network. Tulane University political science professor Martin Dimitrov reported that since organized group resistance was nonexistent, the police state could be run with a light hand. The KGB engaged in "prophylaxis" — warning students that their activities were crossing the line — before actually arresting people. The regime sponsored extensive opinion polls but then realized that the results were unreliable. They regarded citizen complaints as a more trustworthy source of information about the mood of the public, and Dimitrov found that they took letters from the public very seriously.

Ultimate power lay in the hands of the Communist Party Central Committee. Nikolai Mitrokhin, a researcher at the University of Bremen, interviewed 90 former officials of the committee and found that these officials were well educated and quite innovative — not the bland ciphers that most people assume. The Politburo was a place for the brokering of different group interests, while the apparatus was where policies were devised and implemented. Their tasks included identifying suitable candidates for important positions and training regional elites, who cycled through the Central Committee apparatus for three to six years. Listening to Mitrokhin's account, you cannot help but be reminded of the absence of these key functions in the current Russian political system.

Vitaly Naishul, who worked in Gosplan in the 1970s, explained how hierarchy in the planning system steadily eroded over time, even before Gorbachev's reforms. It was not just undermined by bargaining between enterprise directors. There was also vertical bargaining, where subordinates negotiated over plan fulfillment with their superiors, something that is not possible in the Western understanding of bureaucracy. This made the system increasingly unmanageable over time.

Brown University political science professor Linda Cook tackled the puzzle of why the Soviet Union built up such an impressive welfare state, absorbing 17 percent of gross domestic product. This is often referred to as a "social contract," although Cook conceded that this term is misleading for the simple reason that Soviet citizens did not have any choice in the matter.

Brezhnev's Soviet Union was not a North Korea, hermitically sealed off from the outside world.

Sergei Zhuk, associate professor of history at Ball State University and author of a recent book on rock music in the Soviet Union, spoke of the historical and cultural significance of the first disco in Tashkent, the first rock concert in Tbilisi and the publication of "The Godfather" in Ukraine.

Eric McGlinchey, associate professor of government and politics at George Mason University, looked for the roots of ethnic conflict that wracked Kyrgyzstan in 2010. He tracked it back to the Brezhnev era, when the Kyrgyz, who were viewed as less Islamic and less clannish, were considered more "friendly" to Moscow than the Uzbeks. As Kyrgyz youth migrated to the cities looking for jobs and housing, the politically empowered Kyrgyz clashed with the Uzbeks who controlled the economy in the city of Osh, a process that culminated in rioting in 1990.

Nobody is suggesting that the Brezhnev years were a halcyon period of growth and stability, where Soviet citizens happily marched into a radiant future. But nor was it a giant gulag staffed by browbeaten clones.

Contrary to the rhetoric of stagnation, the Soviet Union was not a country frozen in time. It was a society in flux, driven by processes of both decay and renewal.

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