

Leonid Brezhnev: a Soviet nation-builder

by Rachel Douglas, U.S.S.R. Editor

In his last speech, brief remarks at a Kremlin reception on Revolution Day, Nov. 7, 1982, Leonid Brezhnev called the Soviet Union "a country of trailblazers, a country of enthusiasts and toilers."

He might have been trying to speak his own epitaph, and it turned out to be a fitting good-bye to Leonid Brezhnev, that Soviet space program officials took the Nov. 7 holiday as an occasion to announce plans to launch a permanent space station in 1985. Brezhnev's first Hero of Socialist Labor Award, in 1961, went to him with a citation for contributions, made as a Secretary of the Communist Party Central Committee with a heavy industry portfolio, to Soviet rocketry and space exploration.

Brezhnev's own enthusiasm for making the Soviet Union grow and, as he hoped, prosper was unfeigned. In his career-long allegiance to the Soviet steel industry and involvement with new frontiers in the Soviet economy—first the Virgin Lands agricultural expansion he administered in Central Asia in the 1950s and later the development of Siberian resources—there is discernible something fundamental about Brezhnev: this was a man who wanted to build his country. And Brezhnev's political staying power derived not only from the practiced skills of bureaucratic infighting in the party, but from this more essential identity as a chief of industry.

That gave Brezhnev and many of the other party figures who constituted his faction a quality distinct in the Soviet leadership, which in his years of prominence was also chock full of men who specialized in ideology of Marxism-Leninism, exhortation of communist parties in far-flung corners of the world, or the exercise of bureaucratic power without Brezhnev's driving commitment to expansion of industry. For world security, it was better that Brezhnev's tendency dominated in Moscow during the past two decades of our perilous plunge into world depression, than if any of the other Soviet leadership forces active in 1964 had prevailed.

The industrial Ukraine

Brezhnev was born in 1906 into a steelworker's family in an industrial town on the Dnepr River bend, the steel district

of the southern Ukraine. He went to school to study land reclamation and joined the Communist Party in 1931, in the Ural Mountains where he had been working on a land project for four years. In the 1930s he took a second educational course, in metallurgical engineering, and began to work in the party organization in the Dnepr steel city of Dnepropetrovsk.

Brezhnev spent World War II as a political commissar on the Southern Front and the Fourth Ukrainian Front, ending the war as a General. The experience of war on the grueling Eastern front left him, like his whole generation of Soviets, with "no higher goal," as he said it, than the preservation of peace.

From 1946 to 1950, Brezhnev headed district party organizations in two Dnepr steel towns, major centers of industry, which had been totally destroyed during the war. When Brezhnev arrived, he wrote in a memoir, "The grass had grown up through the iron and rubble, lonely dogs were howling in the distance, and all around were ruins. . . . I had seen the same kind of scene after the civil war, but then it was the dead silence of the factories that was frightening. This time the factories themselves were reduced to ashes." It was his job to oversee the reconstruction of the giant Zaporozhstal steel plant (pronounced unsalvageable by United Nations specialists), part of the huge Dneproges hydroelectric station, and other industrial plants.

The ups and downs of Brezhnev's career in the last years of Stalin's rule and under Khrushchev took him to the top of the party organization in Moldavia, to the Central Committee apparat in Moscow, to the Defense Ministry where he formed lasting ties with key military officials, to the Virgin Lands in Kazakhstan, to the Central Committee Secretariat to deal with heavy industry policy and finally, in 1960-64, to a dozen foreign countries as Soviet President—the honorary post he would reclaim for himself in 1977 when his own power was consolidated as Khrushchev's successor as party General Secretary.

In October 1964, he was part of the conspiracy to oust Khrushchev, whom the new leadership combination rejected on many counts, including performance in the Cuba missile

crisis, radical shifts in investment without ample preparation, and dismemberment first of the government and then of the party organizational structures. Brezhnev only emerged decisively as the top man at the turn of the decade, though by the end of 1965 he had removed from a Central Committee secretaryship his biggest rival in the collective leadership, Nikolai Podgorny, who would have been a sight quicker than Brezhnev to sacrifice defense and heavy industry growth for short-term gains in consumer goods production.

As it was, under Brezhnev's leadership the U.S.S.R. became unquestionably a military superpower, going from teetering on the brink of humiliation—or war—in 1962, to being a power with a navy with global reach and a strategic arsenal second to none. This commitment to military buildup was practically unwavering under Brezhnev, even when the compounding of internal bottlenecks and the international onset of economic decline led to the stagnation of overall growth rates in the 1970s.

It was Brezhnev who brought the Soviet Foreign Minister and Defense Minister onto the party's supreme body, the Politburo (in 1973, when then-KGB chief Yuri Andropov also joined the Politburo). Brezhnev himself took the rank of Marshal of the Soviet Union in 1978.

War avoidance

Brezhnev hitched his international reputation to the policy he called "relaxation of international tensions," or "détente," which was more and more eroded in the 1970s. The reasons for this were hidden in truths about 20th-century politics Brezhnev never grasped, try as he might to forge a Soviet posture of "war avoidance" combined with "war readiness."

In the Dnepr bend reconstruction memoir, Brezhnev recalled a sudden night-time telephone call from Stalin in 1947, ordering the steel plant reconstruction schedule accelerated. "Circumstances had changed," wrote Brezhnev, "not in our district, but in the country and the world. . . . This was connected with the Cold War."

What had happened, what was trickling down to the party administrator in the Ukraine, was that Britain had succeeded in breaking up the wartime alliance of Russia and the United States and the aspiration of Franklin Roosevelt to use it as a springboard to international security and prosperity, even at the expense of old British imperial interests. From that time on, despite setbacks at the time of the Suez crisis in 1956 and the potential embodied in Eisenhower's Atoms for Peace idea (to which the Soviets initially responded positively), London interests have striven, using channels of influence in Moscow and Washington alike, to manipulate the relations between the great powers, finding in this manipulation their own lever of power.

That is why, entering into the detente era with such British creatures on the other side of the table as Willy Brandt or Henry Kissinger, Brezhnev was entangled in a web of manipulated crisis. In an East-West relationship so rigged, the

string of crises that marked Brezhnev's tenure—from Czechoslovakia in 1968 to the October War in the Mideast in 1973 to the Iranian and Afghan brushfires along the U.S.S.R.'s southern perimeter at the end of the 1970s—was a sure thing.

Nevertheless, that was not all there was to detente. With Helmut Schmidt in office in West Germany instead of Brandt, in 1978 Brezhnev the production man stepped forward with his most effective international intervention, which resulted in a 25-year treaty agreement with West Germany, not just to **prevent** something (the pattern in U.S.-Soviet negotiations, for disarmament), but to *do* something: to trade for the sake of developing the Siberian frontier.

During his trip to sign that treaty with Schmidt in May 1978, Brezhnev appeared on West German television to speak simply but forcefully about the U.S.S.R. as one vast construction site. The speech had a profound effect on the ordinary citizen of West Germany, because of the fervor with which Brezhnev described the task of industrialization and Siberian development, and the depth of commitment he expressed to ending the dangers of new world war.

For world security, it was better that Brezhnev's tendency dominated in Moscow during the past two decades of our perilous plunge into world depression, than if any of the other Soviet leadership forces had prevailed. Brezhnev's political staying power derived not only from the practiced skills of bureaucratic infighting, but from a more essential identity as a chief of industry.

The potential for an East-West relationship, even more a Russian-American relationship, focused on such tasks and more—on Third World development and on the exploration of space far beyond the one-shot Soyuz-Apollo mission of the 1970s—is still alive, just barely. It is alive in no small part because Leonid Brezhnev had a trace of what scared the daylights out of British spooks H. G. Wells and Bertrand Russell when they encountered the Soviet national electrification plan of G. M. Krzhizhanovskii in the 1920s—the builder's enthusiasm that made progress-hater Russell curse the Bolsheviks for wanting to make the sensitive Russian soul "industrial and as Yankee as possible."