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## Book Review

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# Who really rules Russia today?

by Clifford Gaddy

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### The Defense Council of the USSR

by *Nikolai Nor-Mesek and Wolfgang Rieper*

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Who really runs Russia? That question could not be more timely. The leadership status, not to mention the very existence of Konstantin Chernenko, has now passed into the same twilight zone as that of Yuri Andropov barely a year ago, and there is a growing probability that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union will soon be selecting its fourth general secretary in less than two years. But is the U.S.S.R. leaderless? Definitely not, if we are to judge by the actual results of policy. Far from showing signs of paralysis due to lack of leadership, the Soviet Union has in precisely these past two years exhibited more resoluteness and more consistency in its foreign policy than ever before.

In the search for an explanation for this paradox of a virtually constant "leadership crisis" on the surface and absolute continuity and purposefulness of policy on a deeper level, some Western observers have drawn attention to the existence of a shadowy institution known as the Defense Council of the U.S.S.R. They have suggested that this body, which officially would assume absolute executive power in wartime, is in fact already exercising full power today. In short, the Defense Council, rather than the Politburo, runs the country.

It was the Soviets themselves who first gave attention to the Defense Council. In the final period of Leonid Brezhnev's reign, Defense Minister Dmitrii Ustinov unexpectedly announced that, among his other posts, Brezhnev was also chairman of the Defense Council. No such mention of the Defense Council had been made for years in the Soviet Union, and Ustinov's remarks sent Kremlinologists to their reference works to find out more about the Defense Council—with little results. Since that time, Ustinov, with apparently arbitrary timing, has similarly confirmed that first Andropov and then Chernenko also held the post of Defense Council chairman.

But beyond these bare references, and assurances that the

"Defense Council is abreast of all matters [bearing upon] the defense of the U.S.S.R. from any surprise attack" (former Soviet Chief of Staff Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov in a December 1983 press conference in Moscow), the question has remained: what is the Defense Council and above all, *who* is it?

Until now, no one in the West has been able to answer those questions either—not until the publication in August of a thin booklet entitled *The Defense Council of the U.S.S.R.* by the Frankfurt, Germany-based Institut für Sowjet-Studien (Institute for Soviet Studies), which specializes in monitoring changes in the Soviet hierarchy, military and political. This publication is an exact list of the members and deputy members of the Defense Council. This work is based solely on a meticulous gridding of exclusively Soviet press sources.

The conclusion which is hard to escape is that if there is one individual who is to be singled out as the center of power and continuity, it is Defense Minister **Dmitrii Ustinov**.

Ustinov has outlived Brezhnev, Andropov, and Chernenko in his position as deputy chairman of the Council. He first became a deputy (non-voting) member of the Council back in 1957, when it was still called the Supreme Military Council, and has been a full member since 1965, when he was appointed a Central Committee secretary. Together with Foreign Minister **Andrei Gromyko** and the head of the Soviet Navy, **Adm. Sergei Gorshkov** (both members of the Defense Council since 1958), Ustinov is the senior member of the Council.

Otherwise, seniority of membership on the Council is strictly in the hands of the leading members of the Soviet High Command. Of the 13 Defense Council members, six—7, if Ustinov is included—have marshal's (or admiral's) rank: **Ogarkov**, **Gorshkov**, **Viktor Kulikov** (the Warsaw Pact commander-in-chief and a member of the Council since 1971), **Sergei Sokolov** (chief of the reserve of the U.S.S.R. Armed Forces, a member since 1967), **Vasilii Petrov** (commander of the Ground Forces, a member since 1980), and **Vladimir Tolubko** (commander-in-chief of the Strategic Rocket Forces and a member since 1972).

With the exception of Gromyko, the other five civilian members of the Defense Council are relative newcomers: Prime Minister **Nikolai Tikhonov** has been a member only since late 1980, KGB head **Viktor Chebrikov** since December 1982, and Politbureau member **Grigorii Romanov** since June 1983. Both Mikhail Gorbachev, the man most often pegged as Chernenko's successor, and Chernenko himself have been members of the Defense Council for only seven months.

Thus, regardless of who is eventually chosen to replace the ailing Chernenko, the unique information made available now for the first time in *The Defense Council of the U.S.S.R.* makes clear that the people to watch—and to know more about—will be the surviving 12 members of the Council, and particularly those 6 uniformed, senior members headed by Marshals Ustinov and Ogarkov.