

To what extent can
one say that the
brezhnev era was the
'golden age' of the
sovi...



Universally observed as the least interesting leader of the Soviet Union, Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev served Soviet Russia for over eighteen years until his death in the autumn of 1982. For such a considerable time in power as the head of the USSR, his conservative style of leadership and political representation, have attracted little critical evaluation from scholars worldwide. Political stratagem of the Brezhnev administration was continuity and stability, in which many scholars and observers interpret as conservative stagnation.

The term 'golden age' infers a time of enlightenment and prosperity, whether improvements of this stature can be attributed to the Brezhnev era more outstandingly than any other period of soviet rule, an in-depth look at political and economical improvements, at this time, and unquestioningly, the socio-cultural aptitude of late sixties and early seventies. With the policy of 'detente' firmly in place, foreign businesses ventured forth to trade with the Soviet Union, providing a boosting injection of cash into the economy.

Western business ventures included a major German investment in the construction of the Siberian pipeline, which was to pump gas to the west and the building of a Fiat car plant, which provided essential jobs within Russian society helped the Brezhnev administration reservedly improve the economy. Also, according to Gorbachev, the trade in oil on the world market at the high prices that were established then, and the totally unjustified increase in the sale of strong drinks' contributed to the thinly veiled comfort of the economy. Whether this was infact the case, one can argue that this methodology was typical of soviet bhaviour.

As within agricultural enterprise, production was low, the Brezhnev administration maintained supplies in the typical communist manner of state subsidies, although during the 1970's these subsidies reached gigantic proportions of the state budget. A common trait of the Brezhnev era was the delay of the inevitable. State sector prices remained low while free market and collective farm produce soared, a similar parallel occurred in the black market. But by the seventies, food surpluses within the agricultural dimension became erratic, resulting in shortages and partial rationing.

Although throughout the 1950's and 1960's, the post war economic boom resulted in much improved standards of living, effective throughout the Brezhnev era. Outwardly the economy seemingly doing well, consumer durables were greatly in demand throughout the Brezhnev era, by the mid 1980's every home had a refrigerator, whereas by 1970 it was less than 50% of urban households². Also more and more people within the urban population were moving into separate apartments, as opposed to shared, communal living quarters.

Therefore in many respects, growth in domestic comforts, along with the relative stability which masked the Brezhnev era may account for a nostalgic reminiscence throughout the tumultuous and uncertain times ahead. Soon after succession to the position of first secretary, Leonid Brezhnev hastily reversed the unpopular policies administered by Khrushchev within agriculture, education, and economic administration and within the party structure itself. He served his administration within the work ethic of 'stability of cadres'³, in other words, maintaining high and mid-ranking party members economically comfortable lifestyle.

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In agreement with Gooding, the ' great beneficiaries of the Brezhnev era were infact the members of the political nation, for whom this was to be a golden age of well-being. ' 4 Essentially the nomenklatura were primary beneficiaries of the favouritist policy, ranking from the district level to the central-committee elite, benefits ranged from material goods, services to privileged information. Central-committee members gained further privilege, including shops, canteens, holiday resorts, sanatoriums, health clinics, hospitals, housing construction, and dacha building.

They were also entitled to priority claims to supplies, private cars and building materials. Brezhnev was also keen to remain popular, and in doing so he rarely deposed any members of the Communist party, or Nomenklatura, proving to be a long period of relative stability for members who, under the despotic paranoid of Stalin faced deportation or death, then the uncertainty under Khrushchev with his constant reshuffling and soon after Brezhnev the deconstruction of the communism began.

Therefore in the eyes of political elites, this was a time, which could be referred to as a golden era, in the sense of economic privilege and wealth, and assured security within their stature of the minority elite. For the majority populace though, the end of the Brezhnev administration saw the loss of support, and experience of a ' golden era' was relatively unknown of the time. The relationship with the middle classes had begun to erode by the late sixty's.

The regime was failing to live up to its promises, leaving the people suffering from frustrated consumerism and materialistic aspirations, blatantly on show

by the privileged minority of soviet society. Brezhnev also succeeded in the alienation of the working classes whose reality vastly contradicted the promise of a workers paradise. Worker resentment of elitist privileges conflicted with their socialist ideals, advocated by the government. The mass strikes of the 1960's were seen as the growth of soviet working class consciousness.

The government attempts to pacify through the ' little deal' of the 1970's did very little but antagonise the peasantry, who were relatively excluded from the benefits of social and economic development. Although some support was generated through his policies of a 5-day working week, and reduction of the pension age, seemingly allowing the public to enjoy their improved domestic cultures. The suppression of the dissident movement of the 1970's epitomised the iron ruling of Soviet society under Brezhnev.

The publicization and open activities of the dissidents were regarded as signs of weakness by the government as the price of detente. Public support was aroused in the west to the surprise of many. Yet the involvement of the KGB put all dissident leaders under immense scrutiny. One such person was taken to trial, followed by others, who in return implicated others. A reticent fear of a return of Stalinist actions circulated. By the late 70's the dissident movement had been dismantled by the ever-efficient KGB. Further foreign affairs regarding the cold war, coming to the fore in the 1970's with the massive arms race that dominated foreign affairs, with both the United States and Russia competing for ultimate power.

Although Russian GNP was half that of the U. S. and the Soviets weaponry was far less advanced and less economically productive, by and large a generation of national pride and identity with Mother Russia, and the belief in the socialist state diverted public attention. Running parallel to the arms race, Brezhnev also proved himself as internationally diplomatic, by fronting improved relations with western governments. Internationally Brezhnev was seen as 'shrewd but reliable'⁵ in sharp contrast to Khrushchev, erratic and unstable, the former seemed the more appealing option.

Throughout the Brezhnev regime, education and the intelligentsia played an important role, maintained through intricate political policies. In this sense we can intimate that the Brezhnev era somewhat resembled the golden age of soviet history. Higher education was continually expanding throughout the late sixties and seventies, with Brezhnev's politburo refusing to comply with demands to reduce admissions into higher education due to the over qualification of many workers.

Within industry, the average technical graduate only earned 10% more than the average manual worker. ⁶ The status of women can be examined in reference to a soviet 'enlightenment' of the Brezhnev era. Within the education system, which was continually expanding as aforementioned, women were becoming the dominant party of higher education's graduates, and comparatively as professional employers by the early eighty's.

Medicine, law, teaching and accountancy became distinctively female occupations as large numbers of female graduates secured placements within these professions. Women were also vastly present within industry by

female engineers and scientists, although the glass ceiling phenomena was held firmly in place. 7 Conclusively, Leonid Brezhnev as the leader of the Soviet Union for almost two decades has been observed as stagnant, revisionist, Neo-stalinist, and somewhat lacking on the grandised scale of Russian leadership.

Yet according to Burlatsky, '18 years without any terrors, cataclysms, and conflicts'8 is something which we should hastily decline as a relative achievement. Brezhnev brought stability to the soviet system , oversaw continued rise of living standards, the growing number of the educated, played a major role in the international community in regards to the cold war with the west, whilst being seen as helping to prevent global nuclear conflict.

Yet these apparent benefits of the Brezhnev era were thinly masquerading rgeat economic problems, and social instability that would emerge itself throughout the Gorbachev era until the demis of the soviet union. Christian states that the'apparent stabilityof the Brezhnev era masked social, economic and military changes that were, in their way, as profound as those in the Stalin era. 9 It is true that major changes occurred under Brezhnev, and his abilities to pacify the public are worthy of note. One cannot personally state whether or not the Brezhnev era was the ' golden age' of soviet society, economically the Brezhnev era delayed inevitable hardships with small concillatory policies, which began to crack in the second half of his rule, yet to many, this period is remembered in nostalgic empathy for better times that have past, especially in the case of the nomenklatura.