

“Shitting Medals”:  
L.I. Brezhnev, the Great Patriotic War, and the Failure of the Personality Cult,  
1965-1982

Adrienne Nolan

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of History.

Chapel Hill  
2008

Approved by:

Donald J. Raleigh

Louise McReynolds

Donald M. Reid

## **Abstract**

Adrienne Nolan

“Shitting Medals”: L.I. Brezhnev, the Great Patriotic War, and the Failure of the  
Personality Cult, 1965-1982

(Under the direction of Donald J. Raleigh)

This thesis explores the relationship between L.I. Brezhnev’s cult of personality and the memory of the Second World War in the Soviet Union. By glorifying and falsifying Brezhnev’s record of wartime service, his personality cult placed him within the myth of the “Great Patriotic War,” which had become the historical anchor of Soviet regime legitimacy. The General Secretary also used the memory of the war to bolster his other public personae, or “hero roles.” Brezhnev’s war hero image, however, ultimately contributed to the failure of his personality cult. Becoming increasingly overblown, this persona invited ridicule that undermined Brezhnev’s cult. The consequences of this failure, moreover, potentially reach beyond the 1970s and 1980s. The implosion of Brezhnev’s cult undermined not only his legitimacy but, by encouraging the desacralization of the leadership, may also have gravely damaged the legitimacy of the Soviet regime as a whole.

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
One Man, Many Roles.....	6
A Heroic Failure.....	25
Conclusion: Failure, Collapse, and Nostalgia.....	38
Bibliography.....	44

## Introduction

*“In general, men judge more by sight than by touch. . . . Everyone sees what you seem to be; few have direct experience of who you really are. Those few will not dare speak out in the face of public opinion when that opinion is reinforced by the authority of the state.”*

– Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*<sup>1</sup>

*“What would happen to a crocodile if he ate Brezhnev?”*

*“He’d be shitting medals for weeks.”*

– Popular Soviet joke, c. 1981<sup>2</sup>

In 1981, in honor of his seventy-fifth birthday, Leonid Brezhnev was awarded his sixth Order of Lenin, which was meant to commemorate, among other achievements, his “great personal contribution to the attainment of victory over the German-Fascist aggressors in the Great Patriotic War.”<sup>3</sup> By this time, Brezhnev had accumulated so many awards, a great number of them for his alleged military service, that many Soviet citizens had begun to quip that his latest surgery was to have his chest expanded—it was

---

Translations from Russian are my own, unless otherwise specified. On a few tricky passages (humor is notoriously hard to translate), I was fortunate to have the assistance of Emily Baran and Ainsley Morse. When Russian words and phrases appear in the text or notes, I have used the Library of Congress transliteration system. I have not altered the transliteration of Russian names in quotations from English-language publications.

<sup>1</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, edited and translated by David Wootton (Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett, 1995), 55.

<sup>2</sup> Dora Shturman and Sergei Tiktin, eds., *Sovetskii Soiuz v zerkale politicheskogo anekdota* (Jerusalem: Express, 1987), 272. Here is a variation on this: “A airplane carrying Brezhnev crashed in the taiga. The KGB searched for him for three days and didn’t find him. Finally gathering all of the animals and birds of the forest, the KGB asks if any of them had seen Brezhnev. Hare responds: “I didn’t see Brezhnev himself, but I did see Wolf crapping medals for three days!”” As related in Aleksandr Maisurian, *Drugoi Brezhnev* (Moscow: Vagruis, 2004), 452. A variation involving a bear can be found in Iu. Borev, ed., *XX vek v predaniakh i anekdotakh*, vol. 4 (Khar’kov: Folio & Rostov-on-Don: Fenikhs, 1996), 333.

<sup>3</sup> Spravka o nagradax Leonida Il’icha Brezhneva, in *Vestnik Arkhiva Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii* (Moscow: Archive of the President of the Russian Federation, 2006), 205.

the only way he would have room to accommodate more medals.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, by 1981 it seemed implausible that the General Secretary could make a significant personal contribution to anything, as he had been experiencing precipitous physical decline since his first stroke in 1974. Rumored to have been afflicted with everything “from abscessed teeth, bursitis, gout, influenza, pneumonia to heart attack and . . . leukemia,” Brezhnev had become not only an object of pity and a target for black humor, but also a symbol of political decay.<sup>5</sup> Regardless, “Dear Leonid Il’ich” would die a few months later the most highly decorated leader in Soviet history. In less than a decade, the USSR would follow him to the grave.

As the above discussion illustrates, by the early 1980s, obvious and painful incongruities existed between Brezhnev’s public persona and his actual person. The public Brezhnev, the core of his cult of personality, was a deliberate construction born of a pragmatic and fluid bid for legitimacy and a longstanding tradition of leader cults.<sup>6</sup> In the USSR, personality cults held a vital place in political culture for both historical and contemporary reasons. First, these cults were a legacy of prerevolutionary political

---

<sup>4</sup> One version of this joke can be found in Algis Ruksenas, ed., *Is That You Laughing, Comrade? The World’s Best Russian (Underground) Jokes* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1986), 31.

<sup>5</sup> “The Brezhnev Syndrome,” *Time*, 20 January 1975. Dmitrii Volkogonov has also made this point. He writes, “The General Secretary, with his [poor] physical and mental condition, became a symbol of the decay, ruin, and erosion of the system.” Dmitrii Volkogonov, *Sem’ vozhdai: Galareia liderov SSSR*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Novosti, 1995), 108.

<sup>6</sup> For discussions of the personality cult as a traditional Soviet political tool, see Ian D. Thatcher, “Brezhnev as Leader,” in *Brezhnev Reconsidered*, edited by Edwin Bacon and Mark Sandle (Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 29; Graeme Gill, “The Soviet Leader Cult: Reflections on the Structure of Leadership in the Soviet Union,” *British Journal of Political Science* 10 (April 1980): 167-86; Jan Plamper, “Introduction: Modern Personality Cults,” in *Personality Cults in Stalinism/ Personenkulte im Stalinismus*, edited by Jan Plamper and Klaus Heller (Göttingen: VR Unipress, 2004), 13-42; and Boris Korsch, “The Brezhnev Personality Cult—Continuity (The Librarian’s Point of View),” research paper no. 65 (Marjorie Mayrock Center for Soviet and East European Research, Hebrew University of Jerusalem: Jerusalem, 1987).

tradition, stemming from the glorification of the tsar, the cults of saints and various popular figures, and the veneration of early revolutionary heroes.<sup>7</sup> Also, characteristics of the Soviet leadership structure generated a need for these cults. As Graeme J. Gill asserts, uncertainties surrounding the process of succession, as well as the lack of rules governing limits of authority and tenure, created a situation in which the Soviet leader was left to consolidate power and support by any and all means possible. “Unprotected by formal institutional supports,” Gill argues, the General Secretary sought “to make his symbolic position unassailable by projecting himself as the embodiment of the system’s fundamental legitimizing principles.”<sup>8</sup> The personality cult thus served to attribute to the leader unique accomplishments and abilities that made it appear not only as though he should be *allowed* to rule, but also as though the country *needed* him to rule.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, a given leader’s personality cult offers a window into the concerns of his own era, as well

---

<sup>7</sup> Several scholars identify continuities between tsarist-era traditions and Soviet leader cults. Nina Tumarkin argues that the tropes, rituals, and forms of Lenin’s cult of personality were rooted in prerevolutionary Russian culture. Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 1983), 207-51; and “Religion, Bolshevism, and the Origins of the Lenin Cult,” *Russian Review* 40 (Jan., 1981): 35-46. Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov and Olga Sosnina also see continuity between tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union in the practice of giving gifts to the leader. Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov and Olga Sosnina, “The Faculty of Useless Things: Gifts to Soviet Leaders,” in Plamper and Heller, eds., *Personality Cults in Stalinism/Personenkulte im Stalinismus* (see note 6), 277-300. For detailed analysis of the tsarist-era traditions, see Richard S. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995 & 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Gill, “The Soviet Leader Cult,” 179.

<sup>9</sup> A leader cult is, in the broadest sense, the organized glorification of the state leader, which serves to legitimize his position and power. Jan Plamper notes that the label “cult of personality,” meaning “god-like glorification of a modern political leader with mass medial techniques and excessive popular worship for this leader,” has been “applied to a large number of historical examples, including the post-Stalin leader cults of Mao, Kim Il Sung, Fidel Castro, Hafiz Al-Assad, and Saddam Hussein.” Plamper, “Modern Personality Cults,” 33. Rees uses the leader cult concept to link Nazism, Fascism, and Soviet Communism, writing that in each of these cases, “The leader cults were part of an attempt both to create a new official political culture that overcame the deep divisions within the state, and to construct a new sense of nationhood, a new identity.” Rees, “Leader Cults,” 17. We must bear in mind, however, that the process of legitimation necessarily draws upon traditions, tropes, ideas, and, most importantly, political needs relevant to the leader’s specific time and place. This means that there are vast differences between the cults of, for example, North Korea’s Kim Il Sung and Cuba’s Fidel Castro.

as a means of accessing imagery and myths persistently embraced by Soviet political culture.<sup>10</sup>

By investigating the structure and content of Brezhnev's public persona, my essay offers some insights into the way this cult functioned and its impact on Soviet state and society. Borrowing a concept from Robert C. Tucker, I identify the "hero roles" that

---

<sup>10</sup> For studies of specific Soviet personality cults, see Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives*; Robert C. Tucker, "The Rise of Stalin's Personality Cult," *American Historical Review* 84 (April 1979): 347-66; Balázs Apor, Jan C. Behrends, Polly Jones, and E.A. Rees, eds., *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships: Stalin and the Eastern Bloc* (Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); David Brandenburger, "Stalin as Symbol: A Case Study of the Personality Cult and its Construction," in *Stalin: A New History*, eds. Sarah Davies and James Harris (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 249-70. For work on the cults of Eastern European communist leaders, see Apor, et al., eds., *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships* and Joseph Held, ed., *The Cult of Power: Dictators in the Twentieth Century* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1983). Many scholars of the Brezhnev years do address his cult of personality, although almost always with brevity. George W. Breslauer's discussion of the cult is typical. He periodically mentions the image Brezhnev projected in the media but only once specifically references the "personality cult." George W. Breslauer, *Khrushchev and Brezhnev as Leaders: Building Authority in Soviet Politics* (London, Boston & Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1982), 189. Breslauer also touches on the cult of Brezhnev in an earlier essay, George W. Breslauer, "The Twenty-fifth Congress: Domestic Issues," in *The Twenty-Fifth Congress of the CPSU: Assessment and Context*, edited by Alexander Dallin (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1977), 16. A slightly more substantial discussion of Brezhnev's cult can be found in journalist John Dornberg's biography of Brezhnev. John Dornberg, *Brezhnev: The Masks of Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 237. Later scholarship takes the topic more seriously, but still falls short of a satisfying characterization. See Stephen E. Hanson, "The Brezhnev Era," in *The Cambridge History of Russia*, vol. 3, edited by Ronald Grigor Suny (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 309-14 and Ian D. Thatcher, "Brezhnev as Leader," 29. Two published (but somewhat idiosyncratic) works have been devoted at least in part to the Brezhnev cult. Boris Korsch, a librarian, aims to prove the existence of the Brezhnev cult through an examination of the numbers of publications by and about Brezhnev, the size of their print runs, and the instructions given to librarians regarding these materials. Boris Korsch, "The Brezhnev Personality Cult," 4. Like Korsch, political scientist Graeme Gill asserts that the primary function of the leader cult was to create an aura of legitimacy around the ruler, which became necessary because of the gap between ideology and practice in the Soviet system. Approximately a quarter of Gill's essay is dedicated to the cult of Brezhnev. Gill, "The Soviet Leader Cult," 167-86. While Russian-language authors do not always treat the cult in the same cursory fashion as Western scholars, they seem more intent on highlighting the ways in which it was built, rather than analyzing its content. Dmitrii Volkogonov, for example, devotes several pages of his *Sem' vozhdiei (Seven Leaders)* to Brezhnev's awards and autobiographies, as well as the flattery that other officials tended to heap upon him, but does not interrogate the imagery, tropes, and practices that constituted the cult. Volkogonov, *Sem' vozhdiei*, 66-79. More recent Russian-language publications seem to be aimed primarily at challenging negative interpretations of Brezhnev and therefore frequently gloss over his cult or treat it as something out of the General Secretary's control. For example, in *Drugoi Brezhnev (The Other Brezhnev)*, Aleksandr Maisurian argues that Brezhnev asked other officials not to build a cult and was reluctant to wear many of his medals on a regular basis. It seems unlikely, however, that the cult was created entirely without the General Secretary's consent. Maisurian, *Drugoi Brezhnev*, 422-57. For a case study that highlights the importance of apparent modesty to certain personality cults, see Árpád von Klimó, "'A Very Modest Man': Béla Illés, or How to Make a Career through the Leader Cult," in Apor, et al., *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships* (see note 10), 47-59. Also see Tucker, "The Rise of Stalin's Personality Cult," 348 and 357.

comprised Brezhnev's cultic persona, analyzing how these components worked together.<sup>11</sup> Brezhnev primarily appeared in four roles: the great Leninist, the fighter for peace, the war hero, and the true son of the Soviet people. These images not only supported each other conceptually, but each likewise offered unique ways for Brezhnev to connect himself to both the mythic past and political concerns of the 1970s. I also offer a preliminary discussion of the public response to the cult and its consequences. By focusing on the question of how the cult fared in the eyes of the Soviet populace, especially as Brezhnev's health and abilities declined. Owing to a lack of archival access, my essay is confined primarily to an analysis of the means by which the state broadcast the cultic Brezhnev to the public. Thus, it is not meant to discuss either the internal workings of the various state and Party organs that played a role in the cult's construction, or personal and professional interactions within the leadership. Restricted to published sources, I draw on Brezhnev's autobiographies, officially approved writings about Brezhnev, the Soviet press, post-Soviet Russian-language publications, and collections of Soviet-era jokes. Much of my source base spans the whole period of Brezhnev's reign, from 1965 to 1982, although my discussion of reception relies on sources from after 1974, during the period of Brezhnev's physical decline.

---

<sup>11</sup> In *Stalin as Revolutionary*, Robert C. Tucker writes that Stalin's "supreme aspiration was to be like Lenin, a hero in history." Accordingly, Stalin created a matrix of "hero-roles," which corresponded to the emerging national mythology and his own psychological proclivities: "the Best Leninist," "the Great Revolutionary," "the Civil War Fighter," "the Eminent Marxist-Leninist Theoretician," and "the Builder of Socialism." Although this paper is not concerned with Brezhnev's inner world, the idea of "hero-roles" remains relevant and useful because all subsequent leader cults adhere to this pattern. The categories changed with the times, but the basic structure remained, as the leader played several interconnected parts, each of which illustrated specific reasons for his power and authority. Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary, 1879-1929: A Study in History and Personality* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1973), xv and 462-87.

## One Man, Many Roles

Countless public celebrations—theatrical affairs covered extensively in the press—marked the Brezhnev era. Overseeing massive fêtes in honor of, for example, the twentieth and thirtieth anniversaries of the Soviet victory over the Nazis (1965 and 1975), the fiftieth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 (1967), the one-hundredth anniversary of Lenin’s birth (1970), and the sixtieth anniversary of the Soviet Armed Forces (1978), Brezhnev had unique opportunities to connect his image to key events in the Soviet past. The state also exploited annual and semi-annual occasions.<sup>12</sup> Victory Day grew immensely in importance throughout the Brezhnev era, while the media paid increasingly immodest attention to the General Secretary’s major birthdays. Press coverage of these events offers one point of entry into the cult of personality. Journalists and state officials took these opportunities to heap praise upon “Dear Leonid Il’ich,” while Brezhnev’s speeches often dominated holiday issues of various newspapers. I examine editions of *Pravda*, the main press organ of the Communist Party of the Soviet

---

<sup>12</sup> Celebrations are discussed in virtually every work dealing with personality cults. See, for example, Benno Ennker, “The Stalin Cult, Bolshevik Rule and Kremlin Interaction in the 1930s,” in Apor, et al., *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships* (see note 10), 83-96. Ennker traces the evolution of the Stalin cult, treating the leader’s birthdays as markers of change. Also, for a study of public celebrations in general, which includes discussions of the cult of personality and political legitimacy, see Karen Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades: Celebrations in the Time of Stalin* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000). Awards ceremonies generally receive less attention than other forms of cult-building. It would be particularly interesting to examine this in terms of all of the postwar leaders, as it appears that the accumulation of medals and titles became increasingly important in this period. For instance, it seems that N.S. Khrushchev’s cult was also built up with awards ceremonies. For one exception, see William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and his Era* (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2003), 425 and 614. For the press and the personality cult, see Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You Comrade Stalin! Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

Union, for Victory Day of each year from 1965 to 1982, New Year's, Revolution Day (November 7), and May Day editions from odd-numbered years, coverage of Brezhnev's most significant birthday celebrations (19 December 1966, 1976, and 1981), as well as issues devoted to relevant, one-time events, such as awards ceremonies in honor of the leader and Brezhnev's death. More specifically, I analyze articles centered on the General Secretary and his accomplishments, in addition to speeches delivered by him or in his honor. Through the language their authors use and the events on which they focus, such documents display the various hero roles ascribed to Brezhnev, as well as the ceremonies and acts used to "elevate" the General Secretary above his peers and competitors.<sup>13</sup>

Official biographies of the General Secretary, as well as his own ghostwritten "autobiographies," serve a similar purpose.<sup>14</sup> I examine two biographies—*L.I. Brezhnev: kratkii biograficheskii ocherk* (*L.I. Brezhnev: A Short Biographical Sketch*, 1976) and *L.I. Brezhnev: Pages from his Life*, 1982—and Brezhnev's ghostwritten autobiographies (*Little Land*, 1978; *The Virgin Lands*, 1978; *Reconstruction*, 1978; and *Memoirs*, 1981), in addition to various pamphlets and books devoted to Brezhnev's speeches and accomplishments.<sup>15</sup> These sources provide a site for image construction, first of all, by

---

<sup>13</sup> I borrow the concept of "elevation" from Richard Wortman. A process of "elevation," he argues, "lifted the sovereign [of Imperial Russia] into another realm where he or she displayed the superior qualities of being entitled to rule." "Elevation" was the result of an "intentional and often painstaking effort to present the ruler as supreme and to vest him or her with sacral qualities." This is analogous to the formation of personality cults in the Soviet Union, as the state intentionally created an aura of myth around the leader as a means of legitimizing his rule. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power* vol. 1, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Today it is accepted that Brezhnev's memoirs were ghostwritten. I will discuss the works as though Brezhnev produced them, as the authorial voice is intended to be his. We must also bear in mind, however, that having a functionary actually write the works can be seen as part of the cult's construction in and of itself. For an interesting (but somewhat cagey) discussion of the process of the memoirs' production, see Iakovlev, "Kak sozdavalis' memuary Brezhneva," in *L.I. Brezhnev: Materialy k biografii*, edited by Iurii Aksiutin (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1991), 288.

<sup>15</sup> Institute of Marxism-Leninism, *Leonid Il'ich Brezhnev: Kratkii biograficheskii ocherk*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1981); Academy of Sciences of the USSR, *Leonid I.*

marking the leader's prestige. In the Soviet Union, as Robert McNeal argues, "the anthology of a leader's works remains an important symbol of status, even if the content of the writing is pedestrian."<sup>16</sup> Large print runs and numerous editions proved integral to this phenomenon, making the leader's books ubiquitous in libraries, schools, and party offices. Brezhnev's memoirs, for example, enjoyed print runs in the millions, as well as appearances in the press. Moreover, in such biographical and autobiographical texts, we find a condensed presentation of General Secretary's cultic persona, as well as a coherent—if somewhat fictionalized—narrative of his life and accomplishments. As Balázs Apor writes,

the biographies of the communist leaders could . . . be considered as cross-sections of their own cults. The biography was a summary or outline that contained the whole range of myths about the particular leader in a simplified, condensed form. At the same time, it could also function as a guide to, or map of, the cult, from which one could gain a mastery of the symbols and language of the cult.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, these texts present each aspect of the General Secretary's personality, abilities, and accomplishments, without any other concerns getting in the way. We can therefore use these sources to help us understand not only the components of Brezhnev's

---

*Brezhnev: Pages from His Life*, foreword by L.I. Brezhnev (Oxford & New York: Pergamon, 1982). Each volume of Brezhnev's memoirs was originally published individually and also run in the press. Throughout the rest of Brezhnev's reign and in the first few years after his death, they were re-released in several editions. I use L.I. Brezhnev, *Vospominaniia*, expanded 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1983).

<sup>16</sup> McNeal's article focuses on Brezhnev's collected speeches and articles, which were published in nine volumes throughout the 1970s. This statement, however, holds for the leader's autobiographies, as well (see note 17). Robert H. McNeal, "Review: Brezhnev's Collected Works," *Slavic Review* 36 (September 1977): 488-93. Also concerning the importance of the leader's writings, see Korsch, "The Brezhnev Personality Cult."

<sup>17</sup> Balázs Apor, "Leader in the Making: The Role of Biographies in Constructing the Cult of Mátyás Rákosi," in Apor, et al., *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships* (see note 10), 63-77.

public image, but also the logic of the cult: why these hero roles emerged and how Brezhnev's various personae supported one another conceptually and rhetorically.

Defining the current leader as Lenin's heir emerged as a central feature of all post-Lenin Soviet personality cults.<sup>18</sup> Lenin's own cult existed in part to legitimize Soviet rule and he became an icon for the state's primary foundation story, the myth of the October Revolution.<sup>19</sup> Stalin managed to cast himself as the legitimate successor to Lenin by exploiting and fictionalizing his personal relationship with the deceased leader, emphasizing the roles he allegedly played in the Revolution and Civil War, and by posing as a great Leninist theoretician and the continuer of Leninist policies.<sup>20</sup> Having not known Lenin personally, Brezhnev focused especially on casting himself as Lenin's ideological heir.

In particular, Brezhnev forged a connection to Lenin through the rhetoric of peace. In his many speeches on world peace, Brezhnev persistently described his policies as "Leninist," insisting that Lenin had established a tradition of pursuing peace and that he, Brezhnev, was carrying this out. "Following the behests of the great Lenin," he enlightened a crowd in Cuba, "the Soviet Union, its Communist Party and other socialist

---

<sup>18</sup> Referring to the public portrayals of Stalin and Brezhnev as "composite images," Graeme Gill argues that one of the most critical elements of the personality cult was the leader's connection to Lenin. Gill, "The Soviet Leader Cult," 167. Similarly, Boris Korsch argues that Stalin and every subsequent Soviet leader created a cult meant to legitimize his rule by portraying him as the "only [updater] of Leninism." thereby legitimizing their rule. Korsch, "The Brezhnev Personality Cult," 4.

<sup>19</sup> Nina Tumarkin argues that, during his lifetime, Lenin became central to national lore, being cast as a genius, a kind liberator, and a fearless fighter for the needs of the peasant masses. Lenin and his supposedly unique qualifications to rule the Soviet state became such integral parts of the regime's legitimacy that a special organization was established after his death to immortalize his memory and thereby extend his legitimizing potential past the bounds of his natural life. See Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives*, 64, 185, and 207-51. For an excellent study of the development of the myth of the October Revolution, see Fred Corney, *Telling October: Memory and the Making of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> Robert C. Tucker addresses this. Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary*, xv and 462-87.

countries and fraternal parties, together with all peace forces, are waging today a persistent struggle to banish for good wars of aggression from the life of mankind, a struggle for lasting peace.”<sup>21</sup> State officials also made this connection. When Brezhnev received the Lenin Peace Prize in 1973, one observed that the medal itself “bears a picture of Lenin, a profoundly symbolic fact, for Vladimir Ilyich Lenin laid the cornerstone of the peaceful foreign policy of the Soviet state which, right from the first days of existence, has been following the principles of peace and friendship between nations.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the anonymous author of *Pages from His Life* connects Brezhnev’s work for peace to his Leninist credentials, asserting, “Brezhnev’s boundless loyalty to the communist ideals, the leading one being work and peace, along with his own tremendous, often difficult, combat experience, have made him an active champion and exponent of Lenin’s policy of peaceful coexistence.”<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Leonid Brezhnev, Speech at a Mass Rally in Havana, January 29, 1974, *For the Triumph of Peace and Socialism: Documents of the Official and Friendly Visit of the CC CPSU General Secretary, L.I. Brezhnev, to the Republic of Cuba* (Moscow: Novosti, 1974), 35. For illustrative examples of this rhetoric, see: L.I. Brezhnev, *Pravda*, 9 May 1965, no. 129 (17081), 1-4; *Pravda*, 4 November 1967, no. 308 (17990), 1-6; *Pravda*, 9 May 1975, no. 129 (20733), 1; *Pravda*, 19 December 1981, no. 353 (23149), 1-2.

<sup>22</sup> Speech by Z.A. Malakhova, in *Honouring an Outstanding Champion of Peace: On the Meeting at which the International Lenin Prize “For Strengthening Peace Among Peoples” was presented to L.I. Brezhnev, General Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee, July 11, 1973* (Moscow: Novosti, 1973), 26. For comparable praise, also see “Delo oktiabria zhivet v svershcheniakh partii i naroda,” *Pravda*, 7 November 1973, no. 311 (20185), 1-2; *Pravda*, 8 November 1973, no. 312 (20186), 1; *Pravda*, 19 December 1976, no. 354 (21323), 2; “Pobeda vo imia mira,” *Pravda*, 9 May 1978, no. 129 (21829), 2; “Radi mira!” *Pravda*, 17 December 1981, no. 351 (23147), 2; “Gorod plamennyx zor’,” *Pravda*, 18 December 1981, no. 352 (23148), 3; *Pravda*, 19 December 1981, no. 353 (23149), 1-3; “Chuvstvo istorii,” *Pravda*, 20 December 1981, no. 354 (23150), 3.

<sup>23</sup> Academy of Sciences, *Pages from His Life*, 116. In this vein, during Revolution Day celebrations, officials often lauded Brezhnev’s international visits. See, for example, “Pod znamenem Lenina k novym pobedam kommunisticheskogo stroitel’sstva,” *Pravda*, 7 November 1969, no. 311 (18724), 2; *Pravda*, 6 November 1971, no. 310 (19453); *Pravda*, 7 November 1971, no. 311 (19454), 2 and 5; *Pravda*, 7 November 1973, no. 311 (20185), 2; “Po puti Oktiabria—k novym pobedam dela kommunizma i mira,” *Pravda*, 7 November 1974, no. 311 (20550), 2. For more systematic praise of Brezhnev’s meetings with foreign leaders (communist and non-communist), see Institute for Marxism-Leninism, *Kratkii biograficheskii ocherk*, 150-224 and Academy of Sciences, *Pages from His Life*, 112-221.

In this way, Brezhnev's alleged war record also provided a means by which the General Secretary could attempt to appear as Lenin's heir. Service in World War II gave him a role within the longstanding and very Leninist mission of "fighting for peace and communism," while he forged an even stronger link by invoking Lenin's name upon the receipt of his military decorations.<sup>24</sup> Brezhnev's war experience, he wanted the public to believe, gave him a special ability to promote "Leninist" policies. In a speech commemorating the one-hundredth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, Brezhnev used the Second World War as an example of the "revolutionary internationalism" the state had inherited from Lenin.<sup>25</sup> Praise from state officials sometimes echoed this reasoning. As one of his countless birthday greetings stated, "Since the Great Lenin, history has not known such party and state leader [as Brezhnev]," going on to call up Brezhnev's "enormous contribution to the defeat [*razgrom*] of fascism . . . in the name of

---

<sup>24</sup> Brezhnev asserted, for example, upon his receipt of the Order of Victory, that his "guiding star" had always been "the great ideas of Lenin, the ideas of Communism." "Vruchenie tovarishchu L.I. Brezhnevu ordena "Pobedy"," *Pravda*, 21 February 1978, no. 52 (21752), 1. Also see, *Pravda*, 20 December 1966, no. 354 (17671), 1; *Pravda*, 8 November 1971, no. 312 (19455), 1; *Pravda*, 20 December 1978, no. 354 (22054), 1; L.I. Brezhnev, Speech in the Kremlin upon Receiving the Distinction of Marshal of the Soviet Union, in L.I. Brezhnev, *Leninskim kursom*, vol. 6, *Rech'i i stat'i* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1978), 20-21.

<sup>25</sup> *Pravda*, 4 November 1967, no. 308 (17990), 5. Also see, L.I. Brezhnev, "Velikaia pobeda sovetского naroda," *Pravda*, 9 May 1965, no. 129 (17081), 1-4; Iu. Zhukov, "Uroki istorii," *Pravda*, 9 May 1970, no. 129 (18907), 4. Similarly, Brezhnev sometimes connected Lenin and the revolutionary tradition to the Second World War by giving out awards. On Lenin's one-hundredth birthday, for example, Brezhnev presented Kharkhov Oblast with an award commemorating the residents' bravery in the Great Patriotic War. *Pravda*, 15 April 1970, no. 105 (18883), 1-2. Brezhnev and other members of the leadership also frequently described the state's foreign policy as "Leninist." This tied into Brezhnev's "personal accomplishments" in the international arena, while often invoking the memory of the war or linking Lenin's Decree on Peace with Brezhnev's Peace Program. See, for example, "Cerdechnye pozdravleniia L. I. Brezhnevu," *Pravda*, 9 May 1973, no. 129 (20003), 1-2; "Po puti Oktiabria-k novym pobedam dela kommunizma i mira," *Pravda*, 7 November 1974, no. 311 (20550), 2; L.I. Brezhnev, "Piat' desiat let velikikh pobed sotsializma," *Pravda*, 4 November 1967, no. 308 (17990), 5; *Pravda*, 1 January 1971, no. 1 (19144), 1; *Pravda*, 1 January 1977, no. 1 (21366), 4. Brezhnev was also often cast as the continuer of the principles of Leninism upheld in the war. See, for example, *Pravda*, 9 May 1971, no. 129 (19272), 1-2; *Pravda*, 8 November 1975, no. 312 (20916), 1; *Pravda*, 20 December 1981, no. 354 (23150), 1-2; L.I. Brezhnev, Speech in the Kremlin upon Receiving the Order of the October Revolution, *Leninskim kursom*, vol. 8, *Rech'i, privetstviia, stat'i* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1981), 566.

freedom and the independence of peoples.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, as Brezhnev and others conjured up a mythologized event in which the General Secretary supposedly played a role—the Great Patriotic War—they used this experience to create an image of Brezhnev as a part of the state’s first foundation myth—the October Revolution—and a legitimate successor to the state’s founder.

Returning to Brezhnev’s rhetoric of peace, we can discern another of the General Secretary’s hero roles: the fighter for peace.<sup>27</sup> This persona not only established a connection to Lenin, but also responded to contemporary political concerns and worked to make Brezhnev appear able and accomplished. Throughout the late 1960s and the 1970s, world events created a situation in which it was advantageous for Brezhnev to appear as a peacemaker. For example, during the Vietnam War, Brezhnev took almost any opportunity to contrast “imperialist” America with his own country, the superpower that worked for “all honest men and women who cherish peace, justice, freedom and independence of the peoples.”<sup>28</sup> Additionally, while Brezhnev’s embrace of West

---

<sup>26</sup> Birthday greeting from the Professional Unions of the USSR, *Pravda*, 19 December 1976, no. 354 (21323), 2. Also see coverage of Brezhnev’s 75<sup>th</sup> birthday in *Pravda*, 19 December 1981, no. 353 (23149), 3.

<sup>27</sup> “Outstanding fighter for peace” became one of Brezhnev’s most common monikers. This phrase appeared frequently in the press and found its way into the titles of pamphlets dedicated to the General Secretary. See “Prazdnik trudi i mira,” *Pravda*, 1 May 1973, no. 121 (19995); “Bortsu za mir, za idealy kommunizma,” *Pravda*, 9 May 1976, no. 130 (21099), 1; “Svet velikogo Oktiabria ozaraet put’ k kommunizmu,” *Pravda*, 6 November 1976, no. 311 (21280), 2. Also see *Pravda*’s coverage of Brezhnev’s seventieth and seventy-fifth birthdays. *Pravda*, 18 December 1976, no. 353 (21322), 1-3; *Pravda*, 19 December 1976, no. 354 (21323), 1-6 and 8; *Pravda*, 18 December 1981, No. 352 (23148); *Pravda*, 19 December 1981, No. 353 (23149); *Pravda*, 20 December 1981, No. 354 (23150), 1-2 and 4-5. Reportage on Brezhnev’s death reflects this praise. *Pravda*, 12 November 1982, no. 316 (23477). A bibliography of Brezhnev’s writings used “outstanding fighter for peace and communism” in its title. N.P. Maloletova and N.B. Iakimova, eds., *Vydaishchiisia borets za mir i kommunizm: K 75-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia L.I. Brezhneva* (Moscow: Kniga, 1981).

<sup>28</sup> This quotation comes from a discussion of the US presence in Vietnam. Statement of the Twenty-third Congress of the CPSU Concerning US Aggression in Vietnam, in *23<sup>rd</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (Moscow: *Novosti*, 1966), 428. Peace and the struggle against “imperialism” are frequently linked in Brezhnev’s rhetoric. One example of this is found in one of his

German Chancellor Willy Brandt's moves to recognize postwar European borders and open relations with the East was almost certainly fueled by pragmatic concerns, such as national security and the possibility of creating new trade opportunities, he used this turn of events to present himself as an ideologically-driven "fighter for peace," rather than an ambitious politician seeking economic and geopolitical benefits for his state.<sup>29</sup> In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the "fighter for peace" trope also allowed Brezhnev to justify, to some extent, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The Soviet Union was not, according to Brezhnev, engaging in expansion or imperialism, rather it aimed to help the "people [*narod*] of Afghanistan" along the path to "conditions of peace and security," that would

---

addresses to the Twenty-fourth Congress of the CPSU. He asserts, "Comrades, in the period under review, the Central Committee and the Soviet Government did their utmost to ensure peaceful conditions for communist construction in the USSR, to expose and frustrate action by the aggressive imperialist forces, and to defend socialism, and the freedom of peoples and peace." L.I. Brezhnev, Report of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to the 24<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPSU, March 30, 1971, in *24<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union: Documents* (Moscow: Novosti, 1971), 29. Foreign leaders engaged in similar rhetoric. For example, in honor of Lenin's 99<sup>th</sup> birthday, the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, asserted that he was "personally glad" that in the "efforts" of the previous year against "anti-socialist forces," he had received the support of the CPSU and "personally [Brezhnev]." This greeting appeared less than a year after Warsaw Pact forces invaded Czechoslovakia and crushed the Prague Spring. *Pravda*, 22 April 1969, no. 122 (18525), 1.

<sup>29</sup> As suggested above, the majority of the scholarship on Brezhnev era foreign policy was written by political scientists either during Brezhnev's life or shortly after his death. Consequently, it is often aimed at offering suggestions for future United States policy, rather than at drawing conclusions about the motivations and larger significance of the Brezhnev government's policies. See, for example, Seweryn Bialer, ed., *The Domestic Context of Soviet Foreign Policy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press; London: Croom Helm, 1981). Fresh perspectives are now being offered by scholars such as Mike Bowker who argues that Brezhnev sought a number of goals in his pursuit of détente, including economic benefit from trade, the recognition of the Soviet Union as a superpower, to preempt a Sino-American alliance, and to discourage instability in the Eastern bloc. Mike Bowker, "Brezhnev and Superpower Relations," in Bacon & Sandler, eds., *Brezhnev Reconsidered* (see note 6), 90-109. A recent work by Matthew J. Ouimet also discusses Brezhnev's foreign policy, focusing specifically on the long-term effects of the "Brezhnev Doctrine" upon Soviet domestic and foreign policies. He traces the reforms of the mid-1980s back to the economic pressures and increasing military expenditure of the Brezhnev era, arguing that these factors made it unfeasible for the USSR to continue to put down rebellions in Eastern Europe after the Prague Spring and the emergence of the Polish Solidarity movement. Matthew J. Ouimet, *The Rise and Fall of the Brezhnev Doctrine in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

“answer the interests of every state and every people of that region of the world,” thereby also furthering “international détente as a whole.”<sup>30</sup>

Another strength of this hero role was the fact that it was not entirely manufactured. Many Western leaders did have genuine esteem for Leonid Brezhnev and his foreign policy, regardless of whether or not they were wary of his obvious ambition.<sup>31</sup> He had unprecedented contact with leading politicians across the world, developing professional, if not cordial, relationships with Indira Gandhi, Willy Brandt, and several United States presidents. He signed numerous treaties and accords, furthering international détente, finalizing postwar European borders, and making groundbreaking (although, in some cases, superficial) agreements on restricting arms buildup. In Ian Thatcher’s words, “Foreign statesmen found in Brezhnev a leader with whom they could do business.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, if we look at earlier personality cults, we see quite easily that there was necessarily some truth woven into the web of exaggeration and fabrication. Lenin really *did* play a crucial role in the October Revolution; Stalin really *was* in charge when the Third Reich crumbled; Brezhnev really *did* score some successes in international relations. The peace-fighter image represents one way in which this cult was rooted, to some degree, in reality.

---

<sup>30</sup> L.I. Brezhnev, Speech at the Meeting of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, April 20, 1979, *Leninskim kursom*, vol. 8 (see note 25), 23.

<sup>31</sup> Richard M. Nixon, for example, said of Brezhnev, “He was not a madman. He was a realist. If an opponent showed weakness, Brezhnev would take every possible advantage, without scruple. But when met with firmness, he would compromise. He wanted the world. But he did not want war.” Richard M. Nixon, as quoted in David Shribman, “3 Ex-U.S. Presidents Assert Death Marks End of an Era,” *New York Times* 12 November 1982.

<sup>32</sup> Thatcher, “Brezhnev as Leader,” 26.

Brezhnev's war hero role also found its basis, albeit somewhat more loosely, in fact. He had served as a political officer throughout the war, although not necessarily in such a distinguished manner as his slew of awards may lead one to believe. Before his rise to power in the mid-1960s, Brezhnev possessed only four military decorations; yes, he served, but not remarkably. By his seventy-fifth birthday in 1981, however, Brezhnev possessed a mountain of additional medals, and had also become a Marshal of the Soviet Union, a rank enjoyed by only a small elite of military leaders. As the cult matured during the late 1970s and the first years of the 1980s, officials, writers, and journalists frequently praised Brezhnev's alleged war service, making it a ubiquitous theme at state celebrations, especially on Victory Day.<sup>33</sup> In response to the laudations and awards heaped upon the ailing General Secretary, Soviet citizens often joked that the only reason Brezhnev did not become *Generalissimo*—the highest military rank and the one taken by Stalin at the end of the war—was because he could not pronounce the word.<sup>34</sup>

Brezhnev's major state-sponsored biography, *A Short Biographical Sketch*, offers the official master narrative of his wartime service, also fleshing out the qualities he

---

<sup>33</sup> The Battle of Malaia Zemlia at Novorossiisk, a relatively minor event in the war, became the focal point of much of this praise and the topic of one of Brezhnev's memoirs, *Malaia zemlia*. L.I. Brezhnev, "Malaia zemlia," in L.I. Brezhnev, *Vospominaniia* (see note 15), 41-85. Boris Korsch offers a good overview of the rapturous praise that *Malaia zemlia* received in the press following its 1978 publication. Korsch, "The Brezhnev Personality Cult," 30-33. The state-approved narrative of Brezhnev's supposedly heroic service can also be found in Academy of Sciences, *Pages from His Life*, 17-55 and Institute for Marxism-Leninism, *Kratkii biograficheskii ocherk*, 11-30. For illustrative examples of this in the press, see "Muzhestvo desantnikov," *Pravda*, 8 May 1965, no. 128 (17080), 3; *Pravda*, 19 December 1966, no. 353 (17670), 1; *Pravda*, 20 December 1966, no. 354 (17671), 1; *Pravda*, 1 May 1973, no. 121 (19995), 3; *Pravda*, 9 May 1975, no. 129 (20733), 2-3; *Pravda*, 19 December 1976, no. 354 (21323), 1; "Zemlia malaia i bol'shaia," *Pravda*, 16 February 1978, 2; "Frontovye vstrechi," *Pravda*, 10 February 1978, no. 51 (21751), 2; *Pravda*, 21 February 1978, no. 52 (21752), 1; "Vysokii rubezh istorii," *Pravda*, 9 May 1979, no. 129 (22194), 2; "Narod-geroi, narod-bogatyr'," *Pravda*, 9 May 1980, no. 130 (22560), 2; "Uroki velikoi pobedy," *Pravda*, 9 May 1981, no. 129 (22925), 2; "Gorod plamennyx zor'," *Pravda*, 18 December 1981, no. 352 (23148), 3; *Pravda*, 12 November 1982, no. 316 (23477), 1-3.

<sup>34</sup> Versions of this joke can be found in Anatolii Shepievker, *Smekh vopreki vsemu: 100 russkikh anekdotov* (Self-published, 1982), 27 and Borev, *XX vek*, 331.

allegedly displayed in battle. As emphasized throughout this text, his persistent desire to act and serve ensured that “many glorious pages of the history of the war are connected with the name, Leonid Il’ich Brezhnev.”<sup>35</sup> Indeed, according to his biographer, the young political officer was not satisfied unless he was in the midst of battle with his men, dodging bullets and leading charges. Adored by his subordinates, Brezhnev raised their morale, showered them with wise words, and stood shoulder-to-shoulder with them in the heat of battle. More than a brave, dynamic leader, the future General Secretary also promoted correct ideology and brought new Party members into the fold. As *A Short Biographical Sketch* informs us, wherever Brezhnev served, “the more tense the battle conditions became, the more actively people joined the party.”<sup>36</sup> Brezhnev was, so we are told, indispensable as a warrior and a political leader.

Several factors may have driven Brezhnev to choose this particular hero role for himself. First of all, both tsarist-era and Bolshevik revolutionary traditions offered rhetoric that fed the creation of Brezhnev’s war hero persona. Prior even to the February Revolution, the Russian underground possessed, according to Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii, “a huge illegal literature of hagiographies, histories and legends, broadsides and prints, celebrating the exploits of” countless revolutionary heroes and martyrs.<sup>37</sup> Later, the “freedom fighter” (*borets za svobodu*) became the soldier-hero of the revolution and Civil War. Stalin’s cult of personality, for example, made extensive use of this trope. As Robert Tucker writes in his pioneering work, *Stalin as Revolutionary*,

---

<sup>35</sup> Institute of Marxism-Leninism, *Kratkii biograficheskii ocherk*, 13.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>37</sup> Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 74.

“the events in which Stalin had participated became the decisive ones of the war. He emerged in the center of the historical picture, by Lenin’s side, as the great front-line organizer of victory, the outstanding Civil War hero on the Red side.”<sup>38</sup> Like Brezhnev, Stalin had been a political officer and, also like Brezhnev, it is highly debatable whether he was as indispensable as later portrayed.

Celebrating his war record also—and this is an essential point—allowed Brezhnev to root his public image in an indispensable national myth. During the late 1940s and beyond, the “Great Patriotic War” became the USSR’s central foundation story, displacing the increasingly remote myth of the October Revolution.<sup>39</sup> Through educational programs, mass media, and enormous celebrations, the state promoted a glossy master narrative of the war.<sup>40</sup> This development allowed the present generation of leaders, who were by and large too young to have participated in the Revolution and Civil War, to develop a system of legitimization based on legendary service to the state and people, while potentially overriding undesirable class origins. For most Soviet adults, moreover, the Second World War existed as important shared experience—even those who did not serve on the front had been involved in the war effort in some capacity, and all

---

<sup>38</sup> Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary*, 478.

<sup>39</sup> I base my discussion of the cult of World War II on the works of Amir Weiner and Nina Tumarkin. Both argue that this story superseded the Revolution as the state’s primary foundational myth. Nina Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia* (New York: Basic Books, 1994) and Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001). In his study of the myth of the October Revolution, Fred Corney argues that the Soviet Union had an especial need for legitimacy tales, as it engaged in a “protracted battle with the West over its perceived legitimacy.” One might add that the Soviet Union later faced increasingly bold domestic political dissent, another factor that likely reinforced the necessity of foundation myths. Corney, *Telling October*, 4.

<sup>40</sup> Nina Tumarkin discusses educational programs aimed at instilling patriotism in the Soviet youth in Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead*, 150-57. Regarding films that propagated the war myth, see Denise J. Youngblood, *Russian War Films: On the Cinema Front, 1914-2005* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2007), 158-93.

remembered not only the sorrows of battle, but the joys of victory. The war thus provided a historical anchor for Brezhnev's cult, a familiar point of reference and a meaningful narrative for those meant to embrace the leader's image and policies. Finally, the cult of the Great Patriotic War also gave the state a means by which it could try to instill patriotism and revolutionary fervor in disaffected Soviet youth, competing ever more intensely with Western popular culture for their hearts and minds.<sup>41</sup>

Brezhnev's cult needed to make thorough use of this new story because cults of heroic national deeds not only legitimized the system as a whole, but also provided a conceptual foundation and a system of imagery for the cult of the leader. Reinstated as a national holiday in 1965, the twentieth anniversary celebrations of the end of World War II (Victory Day, May 9) marked the beginnings of both Brezhnev's inflation of the myth of the Great Patriotic War and his slow consolidation of personal power. As Nina Tumarkin demonstrates in *The Living and the Dead*, Brezhnev reveled in the cult of the Great Patriotic War, manipulating it and inflating it to suit his goals. The General Secretary's intent was not, however, simply to foster patriotism or turn Soviet youth away from Western popular culture, as Tumarkin argues; he also sought to legitimize his position and power. War service had become a vital marker of loyalty to the state and of revolutionary fervor, so, presumably, the more impressive his war service was, the more fit he was to lead.

---

<sup>41</sup> Nina Tumarkin addresses the aims of the war cult in *The Living and the Dead*, especially 133. John Bushnell argues that Soviet youth were increasingly influenced by Western popular culture throughout the 1970s and 1980s, demonstrating this by examining graffiti appearing throughout Moscow during this period. John Bushnell, *Moscow Graffiti: Language and Subculture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990). Although not concerned exclusively with youth, Richard Stites also maintains that the Brezhnev era was marked by a cultural "malaise," which eventually gave rise to "culture wars about the airing of such themes as sex and politics and the inflow of Western styles and fashion." Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society since 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 149.

Brezhnev may also have adopted the war hero image in part because of his tastes and sentiment. Discussions of personal motives are necessarily tentative, but there is evidence that Brezhnev adored the military in general and the Great Patriotic War in particular. Those close to Brezhnev wrote about his “passion for awards” and the joy he took in meeting with other veterans.<sup>42</sup> According to his son-in-law, Yurii Churbanov, Leonid Il’ich loved war films and “patriotic military songs,” and always kept in touch with his “comrades from the war.”<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Brezhnev’s niece, Liubov’ Brezhneva, asserts that at the end of his life the closest person to the General Secretary was his chief bodyguard, “a man who had been with him at the front lines in World War II.”<sup>44</sup>

The narrative of war further bolstered Brezhnev’s legitimacy by offering a site for the creation of another persona: the true son of the Soviet people. Brezhnev’s memoirs proved vital to this project. Brezhnev emphasizes not only his proletarian background, but also his enduring connection to the working class, particularly those workers who selflessly fought for the motherland. In *Little Land*, he recounts his numerous warm interactions with his subordinates, thereby reminding the reader of how vital it is for an officer “to be there with the soldiers in the most difficult moment, to suffer the same danger.”<sup>45</sup> Similarly, in the words of one biographer, Brezhnev “lived the life of his

---

<sup>42</sup> Yurii Churbanov, Brezhnev’s son-in-law, coined the phrase “passion for awards (*strast’ k nagradam*).” Yurii Churbanov, *Moi test’ Leonid Brezhnev* (Moscow: Algoritm, 2007), 132.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 98-99.

<sup>44</sup> Luba Brezhneva, *The World I Left Behind: Pieces of the Past*, translated by Geoffrey Polk (New York: Random House, 1995), 361. Although originally published in English translation, Brezhneva’s autobiography was later released in Russia as *Plemiannitsa Genseka* (Moscow: Tsentrpoligraf, 1999).

<sup>45</sup> Brezhnev, “Malaia zemlia,” 61.

people, and when the people had to go to war, he became a soldier, too.”<sup>46</sup> Brezhnev proved a “true son of the Soviet people,” not only through his humble beginnings and selfless service to the nation, but also through his faithfulness to his class origins and the cause of communism. He been born into the working class and he never ceased to be a worker at heart, even when he became the nation’s leader. As a photo exhibit dedicated to his seventieth birthday proclaimed, Brezhnev was “Always with the Party . . . Always with the People.”<sup>47</sup>

Stepping back from these individual personae, we may begin to see how they fit together, thereby identifying the logic of Brezhnev’s personality cult. First, Brezhnev needed the cult to create links between himself and the state’s foundational myths. It was not sufficient to simply make himself central to the memory of the October Revolution and November 7 celebrations, invoking Lenin’s name at every possible opportunity, since he had been too young to have taken part in events or to have had personal interactions with Lenin. Instead, he cast himself as Lenin’s ideological heir. Brezhnev used his alleged wartime experience to legitimize his rhetoric of peace, which, in turn, validated his claim to Lenin’s mantle. Brezhnev inflated the emerging myth of the Great Patriotic War, moreover, in an attempt to make it central to national legitimacy, as this was the foundation narrative in which he could play a role.

Connecting to these myths, moreover, allowed Brezhnev’s cult to harness already existing rhetoric and imagery. The cult evolved as Brezhnev shaped his public image

---

<sup>46</sup> This quotation comes from the English-language publication, Academy of Sciences, *Pages from His Life*, 54. In this vein, Brezhnev casts his autobiographies as tales about the “heroism of the Soviet people,” rather than mere memoirs. L.I. Brezhnev, Predislovie k Brazil'skomu izdaniiu trilogii “Malaia zemlia,” “Vozrozhdenie,” “Tselina,” in L.I. Brezhnev, *Leniniskim Kursom*, vol. 8 (see note 25), 385.

<sup>47</sup> A photo of this exhibition can be found in *Pravda*, 19 December 1976, no. 354 (21323), 8.

with the tools at hand, but these changes were more in form than in content. During the early years of his rule, Brezhnev enjoyed undeserved recognition for his war service and a prominent place in state celebrations, but his public image was not ubiquitous. The laudations heaped upon him in these years seem amorphous when compared to what came later, but they already embodied the major themes of the personality cult: Brezhnev was a true communist, a war hero, and a peacemaker.<sup>48</sup> Over time, as he consolidated his power, amassed real accomplishments—such as numerous meetings and summits with foreign leaders from the East and the West—and dominated countless state anniversaries, Brezhnev received ever more extravagant praise. By the mid-1970s, other officials quoted Brezhnev almost as often as they quoted Lenin, and floods of books supposedly authored by the General Secretary swept into schools, bookshops, and libraries. Also, the vague accolades of the late 1960s had hardened into recognizable (though unofficial) titles: “a great continuer of Lenin’s cause,” “an outstanding fighter for peace,” a “true son of the Soviet people.”<sup>49</sup> The cult’s thematically consistent nature, however, may have simultaneously worked for and against the cult’s success. On one hand, Brezhnev had many years to hone his image, fine tuning the connections between his persona and the real past, as well as the ways in which the various elements of the cult worked together. On the other hand, as I demonstrate below, refusing to curtail a component of the cult that

---

<sup>48</sup> *Pravda*’s coverage of Brezhnev’s sixtieth birthday illustrates this type of praise. See *Pravda*, 19 December 1966, no. 353 (17670).

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, *Pravda*’s coverage of Brezhnev’s seventieth and seventy-fifth birthdays. *Pravda*, 18 December 1976, no. 353 (21322), 1-3; *Pravda*, 19 December 1976, no. 354 (21323), 1-6 and 8; *Pravda*, 17 December 1981, No. 351 (23147); *Pravda*, 18 December 1981, No. 352 (23148); *Pravda*, 19 December 1981, No. 353 (23149); *Pravda*, 20 December 1981, No. 354 (23150), 1-2 and 4-5; *Pravda*, 21 December 1981, No. 355 (23151), 4-5; *Pravda*, 22 December 1981, No. 356 (23152), 4; *Pravda*, 23 December 1981, No. 357 (23153), 4.

the public received poorly could have damaged the aura of legitimacy Brezhnev sought to create.

Returning to the utility of the cult's tropes, we see that the General Secretary's personae built a bridge between reality and fiction. Both the fighter for peace and war hero personas found their roots, to a certain extent, in fact; again, however, Brezhnev's war record is the key to the cult's logic. Brezhnev had served in the war and, for better or worse, he proved to be the Soviet leader most actively engaged with foreign powers both East and West. Having been cast in the crucible of the personality cult, these two facts became inextricably linked. While "Dear Leonid Il'ich" sold his foreign policy at home and abroad wrapped in peace rhetoric, he invariably couched his claims to expertise on matters such as "international friendship" in terms of his wartime experience. The Great Patriotic War, Brezhnev told the world, taught him the true costs of war and, thereby, the true value of peace.<sup>50</sup> He even justified the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia in terms of peace and the memory of the war. Speaking to a delegation of Czechoslovak communist party officials in October 1968, Brezhnev stressed the importance of the Great Patriotic

---

<sup>50</sup> For this line of reasoning, see, for example, "Velikii podvig Sovetskogo naroda," *Pravda* 9 May 1970, 3; *Pravda* 1 May 1977, no. 121 (21456), 1; "Zemlia malaia I bol'shaia," *Pravda* 16 February 1978, no. 47 (21747), 2; "Frontovye vstrechi," *Pravda* 10 February 1978, no. 51 (21751), 2; Academy of Sciences, *Pages from His Life*, 55 and 116. On seemingly unlikely occasions, Brezhnev sometimes managed to invoke the memory of the war as a reminder of the importance of peace. See, for example, the coverage of his visit to a factory in honor of May Day 1976 in *Pravda*, 1 May 1976, no. 122 (21091), 2. Also see Brezhnev's speech in honor of Soviet scientists in *Pravda*, 8 October 1975, no. 281 (20885), 2. On or near Victory Day, Brezhnev and other members of the leadership invoked the "struggle for peace," highlighting the General Secretary's role in it. They thereby cast the Great Patriotic War in terms of peace, while also using the war to legitimize current foreign policy. For a particularly illustrative example, see *Pravda's* coverage of Brezhnev's involvement in the international meeting, "Za ukreplenie mira mezhdunarodami" in *Pravda*, 1 May 1973, no. 121 (19995), 1-4.; *Pravda*, 2 May 1973, no. 122 (19996), 4; *Pravda*, 9 May 1973, no. 129 (20003), 1-4. This conference had taken place in April, but *Pravda* only provided an extensive treatment of this event several weeks later, in honor of May Day and Victory Day. On 10 May 1975, *Pravda* published an article celebrating international reactions to Brezhnev's Victory Day speech, which offers extensive praise for his efforts in the "struggle for peace." *Pravda*, 10 May 1975, no. 130 (20734), 4. Also see, *Pravda*, 7 May 1965, no. 127 (17097), 2; *Pravda*, 8 May 1965, no. 128 (17080); *Pravda*, 9 May 1973, no. 129 (20003), 1-4; *Pravda*, 9 May 1981, no. 129 (22925), 1.

War in forging unbreakable bonds between the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia, countries that together would carry on the “struggles” against imperialism and for peace.<sup>51</sup>

These personae worked together, reinforcing and legitimizing one another, for each role depended in large part upon Brezhnev’s status as a war hero. Officials praised the General Secretary as a “true son of the working class” for marching “with the Soviet people down the difficult path of struggle and victory.”<sup>52</sup> Moreover, Brezhnev’s claims to being a Great Leninist required that Brezhnev appear to have been instrumental to Soviet successes in World War II, as this cast him in the ongoing drama, “fighting for peace and communism.” Brezhnev also could not appear as an heir to Lenin without his rhetoric of peace, which, in turn, depended on the invocation of Brezhnev’s war record for validation.

In this vein, he declared on the twentieth anniversary of the Soviet victory in the Second World War, “We have done and are doing everything to prevent a new world war. We truly remember those who died for the freedom of the socialist Fatherland. . . . Our foreign policy is clear. Its goal: to guarantee . . . the conditions for building communism in [socialist] countries and to defend the cause of peace and progress.”<sup>53</sup>

Similarly, Brezhnev’s larger image as a fighter for peace relied heavily on Brezhnev’s

---

<sup>51</sup> L.I. Brezhnev, Speech at the Meeting of Soviet-Czechoslovak Friendship, 27 October 1968, in L.I. Brezhnev, *Leninskim kursom*, vol. 2, *Rech'i i stat'i* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1970), 471-85. In honor of Victory Day 1975, A.P. Kirilenko praised Brezhnev’s role in the liberation of Czechoslovakia during World War II, connecting this to the General Secretary’s role in strengthening post-war Czech-Soviet friendship. *Pravda*, 8 May 1975, no. 128 (20732), 4.

<sup>52</sup> *Pravda*, 19 December 1976, no. 354 (21323), 2.

<sup>53</sup> L.I. Brezhnev, “Velikaia pobeda Sovetskogo naroda,” *Pravda* 9 May 1965, no. 129 (17081), 1-4.

image as a battle-weary veteran. In 1981, on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday, one of the General Secretary's many well-wishers gushed, "You became a Communist during the heroic time when the Soviet people selflessly struggled . . . for the gains of the Great October [Revolution]. . . . The Soviet people and the workers of all countries remember that you lived through the . . . ordeal of the Great Patriotic War and know the value of peace."<sup>54</sup>

Brezhnev's alleged military experience provided his primary claim to legitimacy as the leader of the Soviet Union. According to the logic of the personality cult, Brezhnev earned his position (and the adulation it entailed) through fearless service to the socialist motherland and the exceptional abilities he displayed therein. The lessons he learned in battle theoretically taught him to be a great leader, one who valued peace, international friendship, and the Leninist party line. But what was the consequence of allowing his legitimacy to become so intimately connected to a single persona, to one set of supposed accomplishments? We can assume that this proved detrimental in the long run, as the extravagance and pomposity of Brezhnev's war hero persona increased to the point of being simply implausible in the latter years of his reign. And what, more importantly, would the consequences be for the regime as a whole if popular scorn and disbelief slowly demolished the leader's image?

---

<sup>54</sup> *Pravda*, 19 December 1981, no. 353 (23149), 3.

## A Heroic Failure

I now turn away from the creation and dissemination of the cult, focusing instead on the how the Soviet populace reacted to it. Unfortunately, public reception is notoriously difficult to gauge, especially in the Soviet Union, a society without freedom of speech and the press.<sup>55</sup> I use Russian-language scholarship and the press from the *perestroika* and post-Soviet periods, as well as Soviet-era jokes, to gauge popular sentiment surrounding Brezhnev's cult of personality. Offering an impressionistic view of public opinion, these sources reflect cynicism and disbelief, in some cases even bitterness, strongly suggesting that the Soviet people did not regard Brezhnev as a great and legitimate leader. While opinions of Brezhnev may have broadly been neutral or even positive at the beginning of his era, people began to recognize the massive incongruities between reality and rhetoric, which grew as Brezhnev's health declined. Rather than revering him, many Soviet citizens pitied and ridiculed the aging General

---

<sup>55</sup> Some scholars have tried to investigate popular opinion through surveillance records (*svodki* or public mood reports) compiled by state officials. Sarah Davies, one of the first scholars to access *svodki* after Russian archives began to open, uses these sources to gauge popular opinion under Stalin. Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda, and Dissent, 1934-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Soviet-trained historian Elena Zubkova uses *svodki* to access popular sentiments in the postwar period. Elena Zubkova, *Russia After the War: Hopes, Illusions, Disappointments, 1945-57*, translated by Hugh Ragsdale (Armonk: M.E. Sharp, 1998). While these studies have yielded interesting results, such documents are filtered through the lens of the observer. Lynne Viola condenses and elaborates upon Sarah Davies's discussion of the weaknesses of *svodki* as a source for investigating popular resistance to the regime. In the broadest terms, the "Stalinist source lens" renders these documents problematic, as they are "standardized forms," which are "structured from the center." In other words, dissenting and official discourses operate not only in tandem, but together, which means that we may not be able to draw authentic transcripts of resistance from official sources. Lynne Viola, "Popular Resistance in the Stalinist 1930s: Soliloquy of the Devil's Advocate," *Kritika* 1, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 56-57. Regardless of their problematic nature, I do not have access to *svodki* for the Brezhnev years.

Secretary. The war hero persona, a critical unifying element of Brezhnev's public image, proved a favorite target for vicious tongues. This doomed the cult of personality.

Before proceeding, it is possible to make some inferences as to why the cult would have failed with the public, particularly in regard to Brezhnev's war hero persona. "Dear Leonid Il'ich," first of all, did not physically fit the war hero aesthetic. As Brezhnev's cult grew, his health declined, leaving the public to witness the increasing glorification of things a sick old man allegedly did when he was young and able.<sup>56</sup> His widely scoffed-at public gaffs, including reading the wrong speech to an official reception in Baku, also made many perceive him as dim-witted, another un-heroic trait.<sup>57</sup> Although not the only Soviet leader to experience physical and mental decline in office, the spread of technology put Brezhnev at a distinct disadvantage. Unlike Lenin or Stalin, whose illnesses were hidden from public view, television broadcast Brezhnev's slow decay directly into Soviet homes. Despite the Central Committees efforts to "hide the obvious," Dmitrii Volkogonov asserts, "the whole country, indeed the whole world, knew of Brezhnev's illnesses."<sup>58</sup> This state of affairs led the public not only to ridicule the leader, but also to pity him. "He is so old and sick," one elderly citizen sighed, "and they

---

<sup>56</sup> Stephen Hanson makes a related claim: "the Brezhnev elite at the turn of the decade faced a whole series of new challenges on the international arena . . . [which] simultaneously undermined the USSR's international prestige in the Third World, in Europe and in the United States, at a time when the CPSU leadership as a whole was far too old and sick to respond with any vigour or creativity." Hanson, "The Brezhnev Era," 311.

<sup>57</sup> Here is an example of a joke featuring a stupid Brezhnev: "After the successful Apollo-Soyuz space flight, Leonid Brezhnev called to congratulate the cosmonauts, but he also reproached them with: 'The Americans are winning the space race! We must accomplish something to outdo them. They've already landed on the moon, so we in the Politburo have decided to send you for a landing on the sun.' The cosmonauts groaned: 'But comrade Brezhnev, we'll be burned alive!' 'What do you think,' interrupted Brezhnev, 'that we don't understand anything? Don't worry, we've already planned all the details. First of all, you are going to complete the landing at night!'" Emil Draitser, ed., *Forbidden Laughter: Soviet Underground Jokes*, translated by Jon Pariser (Los Angeles: Almanac, 1978), 56.

<sup>58</sup> Volkogonov, *Sem' vozhdai*, 76.

still force him to work.”<sup>59</sup> Unfortunately, the personality cult aimed to legitimize the leader, not foster sympathy for him.

The matter of Brezhnev’s medals is another area in which there existed a tenuous relationship between reality and image, as the General Secretary received the vast majority of his awards and titles years after the end of the war. By the time of his death, Brezhnev had amassed more medals even than the most prominent veteran officers.<sup>60</sup> Increasingly suspicious of Brezhnev’s awards and the concomitant inflation of the Battle of Novorossiisk (also known as Malaia zemlia or Little Land)—the previously obscure skirmish in which Brezhnev had allegedly experienced combat—Soviet citizens needed little impetus to poke fun at the General Secretary. According to Nina Tumarkin, reading aloud from the leader’s war memoir, *Little Land*, was enough to send some young people into fits of laughter.<sup>61</sup> Brezhnev’s “passion for awards” also had a more sinister side. The repression of the Brezhnev era extended not only to dissidents, but likewise to those who challenged Brezhnev’s war hero status. Marshal Grigorii Konstantinovich Zhukov, the most celebrated Soviet hero of the Second World War, suffered a long period of official disgrace, which some veterans believe to have been the result of the General Secretary’s jealousy.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> Roy Medvedev quotes this woman, identified only as an “elderly female worker,” in “Fars s primes’iu tragedii,” in Aksiutin, ed., *Materialy k biografii* (see note 14), 124.

<sup>60</sup> Stephen Kotkin makes this observation in *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 50.

<sup>61</sup> Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead*, 156.

<sup>62</sup> Marshal I. Kh. Bagramian put forth this idea in a 1999 interview. See Aleksandr Kuchkov, “Marshal pobedy. Opala, ili 20 let spustia,” *Krasnaia zvezda*, 23 October 1999.

The ever more glossy and overblown cult of the war itself proved to be a liability for Brezhnev's image. Reaching its apogee under Brezhnev, Tumarkin maintains, "the cult of the Great Patriotic War . . . backfired, inspiring a callous derision on the part of many youths," not to mention veterans.<sup>63</sup> While youth may have resented the sanitized, ubiquitous war narrative, veterans may have been offended by the abuses of the awards system that allowed men like Brezhnev to receive medals essentially as birthday presents. Building on Tumarkin's argument, film scholar Denise J. Youngblood illustrates the decline of the war cult by discussing responses to Brezhnev-era movies. Film industry officials tried to push the "master narrative" of World War II on audiences but, as Youngblood asserts, the public did not cooperate. Rather than flocking to battle epics like *Liberation* (commissioned for Victory Day 1970), Soviet moviegoers chose less bombastic war films or, even more frequently, comedies and "sentimental" pictures.<sup>64</sup> As Amir Weiner asserts, it may be too early to "sign a death warrant for the cult of the war," which appears to be alive in Russia today, but it is clear that, in the second half of the 1970s, mounting cynicism about the state's use of the war myth damaged Brezhnev's image. He made himself the focal point of the war cult and suffered the consequences.<sup>65</sup>

*Perestroika*-era and early post-Soviet Russian scholarship may also offer insights on the reasons for the cult's failure. In these texts, we find the basis for the "classic"

---

<sup>63</sup> Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead*, 157.

<sup>64</sup> Youngblood, *Russian War Films*, 158-93.

<sup>65</sup> Weiner writes, "Even today historians should not rush to sign a death warrant for the cult of the war. Not only has the date and sites of commemoration sponsored by newly independent states remained the same as in the Soviet era, but so have some of the basic components of the cult. In today's incarnations, the myth of the war has been flexible enough to warn against the rising specter of domestic fascism, promote nostalgia for lost glory and the last successful war in the Russian Federation, and remind of the wartime sacrifice for the unification of the land and people in Ukraine. . . . The cult of the war was and is alive and well." Amir Weiner, "Saving Private Ivan: From What, Why, and How?" *Kritika* 1, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 335.

Brezhnev most familiar to Westerners today, a conservative incompetent who ushered in the “age of stagnation.” The most prominent of the scholarly works are Roy Medvedev’s *Lichnost’ i epokha: politicheskii portret L.I. Brezhneva* (*The Personality and the Era: A Political Portrait of L.I. Brezhnev*) and Dmitrii Volkogonov’s *Sem’ vozhdiei* (*Seven Leaders*).<sup>66</sup> Both historians set about overturning the cult of personality, deflating the myths surrounding Brezhnev, and blaming his rule for the sorry state of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. Describing Brezhnev’s wartime service, Volkogonov and Medvedev make clear that he was not the fearless war hero he claimed to be.<sup>67</sup> In fact, Brezhnev may have *never* seen battle. Medvedev quotes one veteran: “I only found out that [Brezhnev] was our political officer in 1957.”<sup>68</sup> Similarly, tracing the evolution of the myth of Brezhnev’s wartime service, historian Nikolai Kirsanov states, “For some unclear reason, the war biography of L.I. Brezhnev became the object of unrestrained exaltation, even direct falsification in the history of the Great Patriotic War.”<sup>69</sup>

For many Soviet citizens, the personality cult failed. Brezhnev did not earn their respect as a leader; they saw through the façade of legitimacy, medals and all. In general, however, it is difficult to draw from the attitudes of scholars a sample “representative” of the populace as a whole. During *perestroika* specifically, it was imperative for reformers

---

<sup>66</sup> For Volkogonov, see note 5; Roy Medvedev, *Lichnost’ i epokha: Politicheskii portret L.I. Brezhneva*, volume 1 (Moscow: Novosti, 1991).

<sup>67</sup> Volkogonov, *Sem’ vozhdiei*, 17-19 and Medvedev, *Lichnost’ i epokha*, 31-50. Recent Russian-language publications often neglect to be critical of the narrative offered by *Malaia zemlia*. In reference to Brezhnev’s narrative (specifically one uncorroborated tale), writer and TV personality Leonid Mlechin asserts that “no one doubted the General Secretary’s words.” Leonid Mlechin, *Brezhnev* (Moscow: Prospekt, 2006), 63.

<sup>68</sup> A. Nikulin as quoted in Medvedev, *Lichnost’ i epokha*, 42.

<sup>69</sup> Nikolai Kirsanov, “Ne osobenno tseremonias’ s faktami,” in Aksiutin, ed., *Materialy k biografii*, (see note 14) 30-32. Also see Dmitrii Tabachnik, “Zapiataia v biografii Genseka,” in Aksiutin, ed., *Materialy k biografii*, (see note 14) 38-45.

and their supporters to place blame for economic and social problems on their more conservative predecessors. These individuals had a big stake in making it appear as though “stagnation” in the economy and the ranks of the leadership, rather than their own reforms, were the root causes of contemporary problems. Mikhail Gorbachev himself was one of the first to use the term “stagnation” (*zastoi*) to describe the Brezhnev era, while certain reforms, such as the 1988 overhaul of the state awards system, were aimed specifically at breaking down the traditions of Brezhnev-era elites, in this case the abuse of titles and medals, which were given out as favors, gifts, or meaningless symbols of prestige, rather than in return for service to the state.<sup>70</sup> In this vein, Novosti Press published a collection of abridged newspaper articles, meant to offer insights into the failings of the Brezhnev years. Including articles by respected dissident historian Roy Medvedev and Brezhnev’s grandson, Andrei Brezhnev, this work proved to be one of many efforts to destroy any positive impressions the public may have harbored about the deceased leader. Tellingly, the volume is entitled *Leonid Brezhnev: The Period of Stagnation, An Unbiased Analysis of the Negative Experience of Leonid Brezhnev’s 18-year Leadership (1964-1982) Today Helps us Find Correct Solutions to Questions Put [sic] by Perestroika*.<sup>71</sup> While it is outside the scope of my paper to discuss whether or not their views on the economic and social decline of the Soviet Union are accurate, we

---

<sup>70</sup> Stephen Hanson makes this point, noting Gorbachev’s “ritual invocation of the phrase ‘era of stagnation’ (*era zastoi*) to describe the pre-*perestroika* period.” Hanson, “The Brezhnev Era,” 293. For the reform of the award system, see “Soviet Award System Altered To End Brezhnev-Era Abuses,” *The New York Times*, 23 August 1988.

<sup>71</sup> Alexei Serov, ed., *Leonid Brezhnev: The Period of Stagnation* (Moscow: Novosti, 1989). It appears that a Russian language edition of this pamphlet was also published, although I have been unable to obtain it. Such criticism reached such a fever pitch under Gorbachev that the American press eventually began to question it. See, for example, Bill Keller, “Soviet Libraries Purge Books Giving Pre-Gorbachev Views,” *The New York Times*, 17 August 1988.

can assume that the attitudes of the educated classes may not have been exactly the same as those held by common people, such as factory workers, farmers, or the urban poor.<sup>72</sup>

It is possible, however, to access some measure of the popular reception of Brezhnev's cult of personality through other means. Jokes are one form of popular discourse that thrived during the Soviet era (and exist today in printed form), in spite of state restrictions on speech and the press. Often considered a form of folklore, the *anekdot* is an oral tradition found throughout Russian history. The telling of *anekdoty* is more akin to a process of culture-formation and, in some cases, as an act of political and social rebellion, than Western conceptions of humor would lead one to expect. Anekdoty, moreover, took on special significance in the Soviet period. As Seth Graham argues, "At its peak, the *anekdot* enjoyed the status of a carnivalesque genre-laureate in the organic hierarchy of popular discursive forms that had developed with the state-prescribed *Ars poetica*." This "genre-laureate," moreover, was preeminent thanks to "its capacity to outflank, mimic, debunk, deconstruct, and otherwise critically engage with other genres and texts of all stripes and at all presumed points on the spectrum from resistance to complicity (or from official to unofficial)."<sup>73</sup> In other words, the *anekdot* thrived because it gave people a relatively safe outlet for their frustrations with the Soviet state and society.

---

<sup>72</sup> Some new scholarship points to the inaccuracies that underpinned Gorbachev's anti-Brezhnev rhetoric. For a roundup of some of these ideas, see Edwin Bacon and Mark Sandle, "Brezhnev Reconsidered," in Bacon and Sandle, eds., *Brezhnev Reconsidered* (see note 6), 211-17. One new work suggests that the Soviet public may have seen this as a time of stability, as well as a time of stagnation, and that these views were not static throughout the Brezhnev years. See Donald J. Raleigh, *Russia's Sputnik Generation: Soviet Baby Boomers Talk about Their Lives* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2006), 46-47, 113, 233 and 247.

<sup>73</sup> Seth Benedict Graham, "A Cultural Analysis of the Russo-Soviet Anekdot" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2003), 114.

The Brezhnev years witnessed the heyday of the *anekdot*, thanks in part to the bombastic and ridiculous nature of the leader's public persona. As A.V. Trubnikov, one of the interviewees in Donald J. Raleigh's *Russia's Sputnik Generation* asserts, "Attitudes toward Brezhnev were expressed in jokes that circulated about him. The number of anecdotes is enormous. . . . That is, he wasn't taken seriously. People didn't relate to him as a leader, Lord forbid, there was nothing but jokes at his expense."<sup>74</sup> Anekdoty about Brezhnev are wide-ranging in their subject matter, from Brezhnev's love of luxury to his luxurious eyebrows, but I focus here on recurring themes that are of particular relevance to my study. I examine eleven collections of jokes: three in English and six in Russian, as well as two bilingual volumes.<sup>75</sup> Comprised of about forty-five jokes, my sample offers an impressionistic view of this oral tradition as it existed in the late 1970s. Nearly half of these *anekdoty* poked fun at Brezhnev's alleged war service or his love of medals, while his mental competence appears as the second most popular topic. Other targets include Brezhnev's poor health and his vanity. The majority of the jokes cited here appeared in two or more of these collections, as I take the frequency of their appearance to indicate, to some extent, their popularity.

First, the *anekdoty* mocking Brezhnev's intellect (or, rather, lack thereof) point to the fact that many Soviet citizens detected the leader's un-heroic characteristics. One

---

<sup>74</sup> A.V. Trubnikov, as quoted in Raleigh, *Russia's Sputnik Generation*, 247.

<sup>75</sup> L.I. Abramenko, ed., *Sovetskii anekdot: Antologiya I* (Moscow: DataStrom, 1991); Bruce Adams, *Tiny Revolutions in Russia: Twentieth-Century Soviet and Russian History in Anecdotes* (New York and London: Routledge Curzon, 2005); Borev, *XX vek*; Z. Dolgopolova, ed., *Russia Dies Laughing: Jokes from Soviet Russia* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1982); Draitser, *Forbidden Laughter*; Mark Dubovskii, ed., *Istoriia SSSR v anekdotakh, 1917-1992* (Smolensk: Smiadyn', 1991); A. Lif, ed., *Forbidden Laughter (Soviet Underground Jokes)*, vol. 2 (Los Angeles: Almanac, 1979); Nikolai Olin, ed., *Govorit "Radio Erevan"* (Brazzaville and Munich: Logos, 1970); Ruksenas, *Is That You Laughing, Comrade*; Shepievker, *Smekh vopreki vsemu*; Shturman and Tiktin, *Sovetskii Soiuz*.

popular anecdote features Brezhnev's seeming inability to make any public statement without a script:

There is a knock at Brezhnev's door. He takes out a stack of papers, finds the one he needs, walks to the door and reads: "Who's there?"<sup>76</sup>

Brezhnev's reputation for doltishness appears to have even rubbed off on established popular war heroes. As Bruce Adams notes, anecdote about the Civil War hero Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev emerged and flourished during the 1970s. Previously a beloved figure in Soviet culture, during the Brezhnev years Chapaev became the butt of countless jokes, most of which mocked his intellect and depicted him as "a heavy-drinking, uncultured boob with a foul mouth, a larcenous heart, and uncertain loyalties."<sup>77</sup> In one Chapaev anecdote we even find an oblique reference to the General Secretary:

"Vasily Ivanovich, can you drink a liter?"  
"I can."  
"Two?"  
"I can."  
"A whole bucket?"  
"No. . . . Only Ilich can do that."<sup>78</sup>

This one anecdote offers several layers of meaning. On the surface, it features routine desacralization of a beloved hero, Chapaev, a process that Adams argues was spurred on by "the excesses of Brezhnevite propaganda."<sup>79</sup> Beyond this, we have an ambiguous reference to the leader. Is the jokester indicating Vladimir *Il'ich* Lenin or Leonid *Il'ich* Brezhnev? Since Lenin famously abstained from alcohol, the listener can safely assume that the barb is aimed at Brezhnev. Such deliberate ambiguity, however, still turns the

---

<sup>76</sup> Shturman and Tiktin, *Sovetskii Soiuz*, 265.

<sup>77</sup> Adams, *Tiny Revolutions*, 117.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

expression into a meta-anekdote by forging a connection with another canonical joke, which lampoons Brezhnev's lust for power:<sup>80</sup>

“Comrade Brezhnev, you've become the General Secretary. What do you want to be called now?”  
“Just call me Il'ich.”<sup>81</sup>

Connected to Brezhnev's alleged stupidity is a family of anekdoty that cast doubt on the authorship of Brezhnev's “autobiographies.” These jokes often highlight widespread knowledge—or, at least, suspicion—that these books, including *Little Land*, were ghostwritten. For example:

Brezhnev asks Suslov: “Have you read *Little Land*?”  
Suslov: “Yes, I read it twice. I liked it a lot.”  
Brezhnev replies happily: “Oh, I still need to read it.”<sup>82</sup>

The 1970s in particular also saw an avalanche of jokes directly mocking Brezhnev's war hero image. After Brezhnev became a Marshal of the Soviet Union, for example, people began to quip that it was because he “managed to take the Kremlin.”<sup>83</sup> One nasty little rhyme (part of a genre called *chastushki*) also poked fun at his Marshal status. I present it here in Russian transliteration as well as in English, since translation destroys the rhyme scheme:

<i>Maskaradnyi marshal Brezhnev</i>	Fake marshal Brezhnev
<i>Sobiraet ordena.</i>	Collects medals.
<i>Sobiraet ordena,</i>	Collects medals,
<i>A sam ne stoit ni khrena.</i>	And he still isn't worth shit. <sup>84</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup> Seth Graham offers a thorough discussion of meta-anekdote in Seth Graham, “Varieties of Reflexivity in the Russo-Soviet *Anekdot*,” in *Reflective Laughter: Aspects of Humour in Russian Culture*, edited by Lesley Milne (London: Anthem, 2004), 167-79.

<sup>81</sup> Borev, *XX vek*, 331.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 338 and Dubovskii, *Istoriia SSSR*, 199.

<sup>83</sup> Shturman and Tiktin, *Sovetskii Soiuz*, 267.

<sup>84</sup> Borev, *XX vek*, 336.

We find yet another example of the widespread mockery of Brezhnev's "passion for awards" in one classic question and response style joke:

"What did Brezhnev die from?"

"We don't know exactly, but just before death he was crapping medals."<sup>85</sup>

Such satire reflects more than the Soviet people's love of scathing political humor, also pointing to a more serious matter: the desacralization of the leadership. Indeed, these *anekdoty* may have constituted a major component of the process of desacralization, being not only symptomatic of the public's political disaffection, but likewise feeding it. Writing about underground literature on the eve of the French Revolution, Robert Darnton asserts that the authors of these works "had directed a new cultural power against the orthodoxies of the old."<sup>86</sup> In the Soviet Union of the Brezhnev era, jokes played this role, as common people sitting in their kitchens participated in the creation of a discourse that challenged official ideas and narratives. This is strikingly similar to the waves of desacralization that swept away the *ancien regime* in France and Russia's Romanov dynasty.<sup>87</sup> In the Soviet case, however, jokes played, at least in part, the role that pornography, libelous pamphlets, and rumor had in France and Imperial Russia.<sup>88</sup> *Anekdoty* tore down the leader's façade and built a new image in its place, replacing Brezhnev the War Hero with Brezhnev the Sickly Dolt.

---

<sup>85</sup> Shturman and Tiktin, *Sovetskii Soiuz*, 275. Also see epigraph.

<sup>86</sup> Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Bestsellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York and London: WW Norton & Co., 1995), 197.

<sup>87</sup> For the French Revolution, see *Ibid*, 169-246. For the Russian Revolution, see Figes & Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution*, 9-29.

<sup>88</sup> Not only residents of the RSFSR, but also citizens of the Eastern Bloc states participated in this process of desacralization. For a few examples of Brezhnev jokes circulating in Romania, see C. Banc and

Earlier eras had certainly produced their share of political anecdote, but during the Brezhnev period the character of this underground humor began to change. Previously sacrosanct events, such as the October Revolution, and the Civil War, increasingly became fodder for jokes.<sup>89</sup> Beyond these topics, many Brezhnev-era jokes also expressed bitterness about Soviet rule in general. One joke asks: “What hopes do we have for 1982?” The answer: “Soviet power turns sixty-five. Maybe it will retire.”<sup>90</sup> Finally, the anecdote’s status at this time as a “ubiquitous form of discourse” points to the process of desacralization. Previously, political humor had meant the possibility of denunciation and imprisonment; however, as A.V. Trubnikov asserts, “No one was afraid of [Brezhnev]. People told these jokes about him and no one was imprisoned for doing do. At work you could quietly tell jokes about Leonid Ilich and no one would inform on you, no one would come after you, even though there was a system of informants in the Soviet Union.”<sup>91</sup> Many Soviet citizens even joked about the possibility of being imprisoned for swapping anecdote:

At a meeting Brezhnev and President Nixon start a conversation about their pastimes:

Nixon asks, “Do you have any hobbies, Mr. Brezhnev?”

“Oh, yes!” Brezhnev exclaims, “I collect jokes about myself.”

Nixon, surprised by this strange hobby, inquires further: “And have you collected many?”

Brezhnev responds, “I have three camps full!”<sup>92</sup>

---

A. Dundes, *First Prize, Fifteen Years: An Annotated Collection of Romanian Political Jokes* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1986, 31.

<sup>89</sup> Bruce Adams notes that throughout the first several decades of Soviet rule, there were no jokes about the October Revolution or the Civil War, but “much later, jokes would poke fun at the way official history had come to glorify and otherwise distort the events of these years.” Adams, *Tiny Revolutions*, 8.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>91</sup> A.V. Trubnikov, as quoted in Raleigh, *The Sputnik Generation*, 247.

<sup>92</sup> Shepievker, *Smekh vopreki vsemu*, 16.

As such anecdote suggest, the “period of stagnation” may have seen the beginning of a process of desacralization that impacted more than the image of the General Secretary.

While aiming to legitimize Brezhnev’s power and to broadcast an ideal image of the leader, the cult of personality backfired. Over the course of the 1970s, the Soviet people came to pity the physical wreck that the General Secretary had become and sneer at the overblown glorification of his abilities and accomplishments. The myth of Brezhnev’s military successes had offered support to his other hero roles, drawing on tropes from the Russian and Soviet past, also giving him a place in the mythologized narrative of the Great Patriotic War. The incongruities between reality and official fiction, however, proved too great to be overcome by parades, pamphlets, and blatant distortions of the historical record. After Gorbachev began his process of reform, another set of voices emerged as scholars began to form a master narrative of the sixties, seventies, and eighties that pinned blame for the USSR’s economic and social problems on Brezhnev-era stagnation. Obvious disconnections between reality and rhetoric, a profusion of scathing anecdote, and the perestroika-era stagnation thesis all indicate not only that the cult of personality failed, but also that this failure resulted largely from the absurdity of Brezhnev’s war hero persona

## Failure, Collapse, and Nostalgia

Some people began joking about Brezhnev's death years before it actually happened. "Brezhnev died," many quipped, "but his body lives on."<sup>93</sup> Coupled with obvious physical deterioration, the General Secretary's longwinded speeches and numerous public gaffs fed into an image of illness and incompetence, transforming him into a living caricature. The fact that nearly a decade stretched between Brezhnev's 1974 stroke and his death in 1982 may have exacerbated this impression; he proved increasingly feeble, yet inexplicably eternal. Over time, "Dear Leonid Il'ich" became something of a symbol for the Soviet Union of the late 1970s. The leader's seemingly endless decline reflected the condition of his state: sick and stagnant. In both cases, it appears that many people were somehow prepared for the end, even if they felt it may never come.<sup>94</sup>

The collapse of Brezhnev's cult of personality demonstrates how one of the most deeply embedded characteristics of Soviet political culture could become a major weak spot for the state. Shrouding the leader in fiction and mythologizing his deeds proved effective in establishing regime legitimacy throughout much of Soviet history. Under

---

<sup>93</sup> This is a play on the popular slogan, "Lenin died, but his cause lives on." Adams, *Tiny Revolutions*, 145.

<sup>94</sup> In *Everything was Forever Until It was No More*, anthropologist Alexei Yurchak attempts to explain a "paradox" that he believes to be central to understanding the latter years and collapse the USSR; "although the system's collapse had been unimaginable before it began," he asserts, "it appeared unsurprising when it happened." Yurchak contends that a "feeling of immutability" permeated "late socialist" society and Gorbachev inadvertently destroyed the state by interrupting this phenomenon with a shift in "authoritative discourse." Alexei Yurchak, *Everything was Forever Until It was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 291-95.

Brezhnev, however, we see what can happen if the personality cult fails. Discussing the 1917 fall of Alexander Kerensky, Figes and Kolonitskii remind us that “the cult of the leader had its disadvantages,” namely, he “would take the blame for the mistakes of the government.”<sup>95</sup> Similarly, one might argue that, by intertwining the his legitimacy with that of the state, the personality cult encourages the populace to blame the entire government for the mistakes of its leader. Keeping this in mind while looking at the growing cynicism of the “era of stagnation,” we can infer that the failure of Brezhnev’s cult of personality negatively impacted the legitimacy of the Soviet system as a whole.

Could the collapse of the cult of Brezhnev have, in fact, played a role in the collapse of the state? Focusing mainly on the Gorbachev era, several scholars suggest that the disillusionment of the masses contributed to the USSR’s demise. But what if we take this back further?<sup>96</sup> As the failure of Brezhnev’s cult illustrates, the Soviet public had already ceased to take the leadership’s rhetoric seriously, at least in part, by the latter

---

<sup>95</sup> Figes and Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution*, 89.

<sup>96</sup> Journalist David Remnick asserts that the reforms of the Gorbachev era undermined the state, simultaneously liberating and disillusioning the masses. David Remnick, *Lenin's Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire* (New York: Random House, 1993). John B. Dunlop argues that the attempted reforms of the last Soviet regime both unleashed the infectious disillusionment of the intelligentsia and also conflicted with militant minority and Great Russian nationalisms, thereby creating a crisis situation. John Dunlop, *The Rise of Russia and the Fall of the Soviet Union* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). Focusing on the 1980s, Paul Hollander argues that the ways in which the Soviet leadership and intelligentsia perceived the condition of the economy had a great deal to do with their eventual disillusionment with Communism. This, he posits, is a key cause of the fall of the USSR. Paul Hollander, *Political Will and Personal Disbelief: The Decline and Fall of Soviet Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999). Nancy Ries and Alexei Yurchak both emphasize the role of discourse in the demise of the USSR. Ries traces “litanies and laments” in perestroika-era conversation as a means of shedding light on the decline of the state. Nancy Ries, *Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation during Perestroika* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1997). For Yurchak, see note 94. Some authors do take their analyses back to the Brezhnev era. Journalist David Satter, for example, makes the case that disillusionment, coupled with corruption and social decline, rooted in the conditions of 1970s brought down the USSR. David Satter, *Age of Delirium: The Decline and Fall of the Soviet Union* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1996). Historian Stephen Kotkin also traces the roots of collapse back to the Brezhnev years in *Armageddon Averted* (see note 60).

half of 1970s. To use Machiavelli's words, it appears that public opinion had ceased to be "reinforced by the authority of the state," having instead rejected this authority and its representatives. Furthermore, Brezhnev, through his very public descent into infirmity, became a sad figurehead for the regime, the embodiment of stagnation; this dealt a heavy blow to state legitimacy. The heroes of the revolution were long dead, and the leader who cast himself as a hero of the Great Patriotic War became a laughingstock.

Looking back to the 1950s, we see the beginning of the story of de-legitimization to which Brezhnev added a new chapter. Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 opened up the regime to internal and external judgment. In the following months, "at numerous meetings where the speech was read and discussed, criticism of the party exploded way beyond Khrushchev's."<sup>97</sup> This was further encouraged by the dismantling of the terror apparatus and the easing of censorship in the press, as the new political climate allowed "a nascent civil society to form where Stalinism had created a desert."<sup>98</sup> During these years, however, the leadership disappointed many hopes that they may have raised. Khrushchev's social and political reforms proved halting and incomplete, while his prophecies about the progress of the

---

<sup>97</sup> William Taubman, "The Khrushchev Period, 1953-1964," in Suny, ed., *The Cambridge History of Russia*, vol. 3 (see note 10), 269. Elena Zubkova asserts that Khrushchev left behind a social climate in which people "ceased to be afraid of each other" and thus could gather in private and discuss issues—such as their dissatisfaction with the government—that previously would have been taboo. Zubkova, *Russia After the War*, 201. Ludmilla Alexeyeva discusses reactions to Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin in her memoir, which chronicles the emergence of the dissident movement. Ludmilla Alexeyeva and Paul Goldberg, *The Thaw Generation: Coming of Age in the Post-Stalin Era* (Boston, Toronto and London: Little, Brown and Co., 1990), 4 and 76.

<sup>98</sup> Taubman, "The Khrushchev Period," 291.

Soviet state, particularly its march toward communism, went unfulfilled.<sup>99</sup> The emerging “civil society” often proved to be critical of the state.

Over the ensuing decades, the government tried to curtail this phenomenon, but to no avail. By the mid-1970s, a small but active dissident movement had firmly been established and many of those who did not dissent slipped into political apathy.<sup>100</sup> For numerous Soviet citizens, the regime had become something to either oppose or ignore; an object of satire, but not of fear. The Soviet public had been stripped of its hopes for real reform and had ceased to harbor any intense fear of the regime. Under Brezhnev, the Soviet myth economy ran out of ideas to bolster its leaders and reverse popular disappointment; the personality cult failed, but political tradition was hard pressed to produce another method for legitimating authority. Through a process of desacralization analogous to that of the late tsarist era, a combination of popular discontent and faltering ideology hamstrung the USSR. People were already fed up with want, despair, and empty promises by the time Gorbachev came to power. It may have already been too late to revive the Soviet project.

But this does not mean that “Dear Leonid Il’ich” was doomed to obscurity. In September 2004, officials in Novorossiisk—the site of the Battle of Malaia Zemlia—unveiled a two-meter tall, bronze statue of the deceased General Secretary. The

---

<sup>99</sup> William Taubman describes Khrushchev’s reforms as “awkward and erratic.” Ibid. Brezhnev derailed Khrushchev’s claims that communism would be achieved by 1980 with his introduction of “developed socialism.” Stephen Hanson argues that this rhetoric was key to Brezhnev’s attempt to maintain an aura of revolutionary action about his regime. Hanson, “The Brezhnev Era,” 305-6. Alfred Evans charts the maturation of concept of developed socialism in Alfred B. Evans, Jr., “Developed Socialism in Soviet Ideology,” *Soviet Studies* 29, no. 3 (July 1977): 409-28.

<sup>100</sup> Stephen Hanson argues that, during the Brezhnev era, “the gap between the CPSU leadership’s formal proclamations of Soviet revolutionary modernity and the social reality of widespread political apathy and cultural alienation became increasingly glaring.” Hanson, “The Brezhnev Era,” 305. Nina Tumarkin also notes “the growing nationwide apathy and loss of popular resilience of spirit” that existed in the post-war Soviet Union. Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead*, 133.

monument features a “healthy, strong” man on the verge of gracious middle age, a dramatically different figure than the Brezhnev lampooned in the anecdote of the 1970s.<sup>101</sup> Recent years have also seen the publication of several biographies that offer a much rosier view of the man and his era than was presented in *glasnost*-era scholarship. These new authors portray Brezhnev as deeply human, a simple but capable man, devoted to his country and its cause.<sup>102</sup> A few Western historians even suggest that Brezhnev has, more than two decades after his death, become the most popular leader in modern Russian history.<sup>103</sup>

In order to understand nostalgia for the Brezhnev era, we must remember that the “period of stagnation” also offered unparalleled international prestige, the Olympics in Moscow, job stability, vacation time, and shoddy-but-obtainable consumer goods. When compared to years of war, terrorism, corruption, and economic upheaval that followed the demise of the Soviet Union, the Brezhnev period may appear to many to have been a “golden age” of sorts. Other post-Soviet cultural and political factors may have also encouraged this nostalgia. Svetlana Boym maintains that “the old Soviet movies that reappeared on Russian TV” in the 1990s spurred a wave of warm feelings for the

---

<sup>101</sup> The sculptor, Nikolai Bugaev, told the Moscow newspaper *Gazeta*, that he needed “to create [Leonid] Il’ich at about 55 or 60 years old, how he was remembered by the residents of Novorossiisk, a healthy strong man.” Mariia Aleksandrovna, “Pamiat’ v bronze: Brezhnev vernulsia v Maluiu zemliu,” *Gazeta*, 17 September 2004.

<sup>102</sup> Writer Aleksandr Maisurian, a biologist by training, casts the former General Secretary as a “fairytale hero,” a common man who somehow reached great heights. Maisurian, *Drugoi Brezhnev* (see note 2). Russian TV personality Leonid Mlechin paints a similar portrait in his popular biography of the deceased leader. Mlechin, *Brezhnev* (see note 67). Historian Sergei Semanov offers the most rapturous praise for the deceased leader, insisting that the Brezhnev era marked a “golden age” in Russian history. Sergei Semanov, *Brezhnev: Pravitel’ “zolotogo veka”* (Moscow: Veche, 2002).

<sup>103</sup> Edwin Bacon, “Reconsidering Brezhnev,” in Bacon and Sandle, eds., *Brezhnev Reconsidered* (see note 6), 4-5.

1970s.<sup>104</sup> Looking at early twenty-first century, we might also point to President Vladimir Putin's revival of elements from the Soviet past, such as the reintroduction of the old national anthem, as a catalyst for nostalgia. As Boym reminds us, however, wistful longing for the past does not necessarily connect an individual or a society to the reality of their history. "Nostalgic reconstructions," she argues, "are based on mimicry; the past is remade in the image of the present or a desired future, collective designs are made to resemble personal aspirations and vice versa."<sup>105</sup> Perhaps, then, the next task is to deconstruct the nostalgic Brezhnev, not as a means of understanding a legacy or vestige of the past, but rather to uncover the desires that some Russians harbor for their present and their future.

---

<sup>104</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 61.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 354.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

- 23<sup>rd</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Moscow: Novosti, 1966.
- 24<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union: Documents. Moscow: Novosti, 1971.
- Abramenko, L.I., ed. *Sovetskii anekdot: Antologiya I*. Moscow: DataStrom, 1991.
- Academy of Sciences of the USSR. *Leonid I. Brezhnev: Pages from His Life*. Foreword by L.I. Brezhnev. Oxford and New York: Pergamon Press, 1982.
- Adams, Bruce. *Tiny Revolutions in Russia: Twentieth-Century Soviet and Russian History in Anecdotes*. New York and London: Routledge Curzon, 2005.
- Banc, C. and A. Dundes. *First Prize, Fifteen Years! An Annotated Collection of Romanian Political Jokes*. London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1986.
- Borev, Iu., ed. *XX vek v predaniakh i anekdotakh*, volume 4. Khar'kov: Folio and Rostov-on-Don: Fenikhs, 1996.
- Brezhnev, L.I. *Leninskim kursom*. 9 volumes. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1970-1982.
- Brezhnev, L.I. *Vospominaniia*. Expanded 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1983.
- "The Brezhnev Syndrome." *Time*, 20 January 1975.
- Brezhneva, L. Ia. *The World I Left Behind: Pieces of the Past*. Translated by Geoffrey Polk. New York: Random House, 1995.
- Cherniaev, Anatolii. "The Unknown Brezhnev." *Russian Politics and Law* 42 (May-June 2004): 34-66.
- Churbanov, Yurii. *Moi test' Leonid Brezhnev*. Moscow: Algoritm, 2007.
- Dolgopolova, Z., ed. *Russia Dies Laughing: Jokes from Soviet Russia*. London: Andre Deutsch, 1982.
- Draitser, Emil, ed. *Forbidden Laughter: Soviet Underground Jokes*, translated by Jon Pariser. Los Angeles: Almanac, 1978.

- Dubovskii, Mark, ed. *Istoriia SSSR v anekdotakh, 1917-1992*. Smolensk: Smiadyn', 1991.
- For the Triumph of Peace and Socialism: Documents of the Official and Friendly Visit of the CC CPSU General Secretary, L.I. Brezhnev, to the Republic of Cuba*. Moscow: Novosti, 1974.
- Honouring an Outstanding Champion of Peace: On the Meeting at which the International Lenin Prize "For Strengthening Peace Among Peoples" was presented to L.I. Brezhnev, General Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee, July 11, 1973*. Moscow: Novosti, 1973.
- Iakovlev, Georgii. "Kak soszdavalis' memuary Brezhneva." In *L.I. Brezhnev: Materialy k biografii*, edited by Iurii Aksiutin, 285-90. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1991.
- Institute of Marxism-Leninism, CPSU Central Committee. *Leonid Il'ich Brezhnev: Kratkii biograficheskii ocherk*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1981.
- Lif, A., ed. *Forbidden Laughter (Soviet Underground Jokes)*. Vol. 2. Los Angeles: Almanac, 1979.
- Maloletova, N.P. and N.B. Iakimova, eds. *Vydaiushchiisia borets za mir i kommunizm: K 75-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniie L.I. Brezhneva*. Moscow: Kniga, 1981.
- Olin, Nikolai, ed. *Govorit "Radio Erevan"*. Brazzaville and Munich: Logos, 1970.
- Pravda* (Moscow). Selected issues. 1 January 1964 – 16 November 1982.
- Raleigh, Donald J. *Russia's Sputnik Generation: Soviet Baby Boomers Talk about Their Lives*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2006.
- Ruksenas, Algis, ed. *Is That You Laughing, Comrade? The World's Best Russian (Underground) Jokes*. Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1986.
- Serov, Alexei, ed. *Leonid Brezhnev: The Period of Stagnation, An Unbiased Analysis of the Negative Experience of Leonid Brezhnev's 18-year Leadership (1964-1982) Today Helps Us Find Correct Solutions to Questions Put by Perestroika*. Moscow: Novosti, 1989.
- Shepievker, Anatolii. *Smekh vopreki vsemu: 100 russkikh anekdotov*. Self-published, 1982.

Shribman, David. "3 Ex-U.S. Presidents Assert Death Marks End of an Era." *The New York Times*, 12 November 1982.

Shturman, Dora and Sergei Tiktin, eds. *Sovietskii Soiuz v zerkale politicheskogo anekdota*. Jerusalem: Express, 1987.

*Vestnik Arkhiva Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii*. Moscow: Archive of the President of the Russian Federation, 2006.

## Secondary Sources

### *Books*

Alexeyeva, Ludmilla and Paul Goldberg. *The Thaw Generation: Coming of Age in the Post-Stalin Era*. Boston, Toronto and London: Little, Brown and Co., 1990.

Apor, Balázs, Jan C. Behrends, Polly Jones, and E.A. Rees, eds. *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships: Stalin and the Eastern Bloc*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

Bacon, Edwin and Mark Sandle, eds. *Brezhnev Reconsidered*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

Bialer, Seweryn ed. *The Domestic Context of Soviet Foreign Policy*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press and London: Croom Helm, 1981.

Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books, 2001.

Breslauer, George W. *Khrushchev and Brezhnev as Leaders: Building Authority in Soviet Politics*. London, Boston and Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1982.

Brooks, Jeffrey. *Thank You Comrade Stalin! Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Bushnell, John. *Moscow Graffiti: Language and Subculture*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990.

Corney, Fred. *Telling October: Memory and the Making of the Bolshevik Revolution*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004.

Darnton, Robert. *The Forbidden Bestsellers of Pre-Revolutionary France*. New York and London: WW Norton and Co., 1995.

Davies, Sarah. *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda, and Dissent, 1934-1941*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

- Dornberg, John. *Brezhnev: The Masks of Power*. New York: Basic Books, 1974.
- Dunlop, John. *The Rise of Russia and the Fall of the Soviet Union*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- Figes, Orlando and Boris Kolonitskii. *Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999.
- Held, Joseph, ed. *The Cult of Power: Dictators in the Twentieth Century*. Boulder: East European Monographs, 1983.
- Hollander, Paul. *Political Will and Personal Disbelief: The Decline and Fall of Soviet Communism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.
- Kotkin, Stephen. *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Machiavelli, Niccolò. *The Prince*. Edited and translated by David Wooton. Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1995.
- Maisurian, Aleksandr. *Drugoi Brezhnev*. Moscow: Vagruis, 2004.
- Medvedev, Roy. *Lichnost' i epokha: Politicheskii portret L.I. Brezhneva*, volume 1. Moscow: Novosti, 1991.
- Mlechin, Leonid. *Brezhnev*. Moscow: Prospekt, 2006.
- Ouimet, Matthew J. *The Rise and Fall of the Brezhnev Doctrine in Soviet Foreign Policy*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2003.
- Petrone, Karen. *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades: Celebrations in the Time of Stalin*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000.
- Remnick, David. *Lenin's Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire*. New York: Random House, 1993.
- Ries, Nancy. *Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation during Perestroika*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997.
- Satter, David. *Age of Delirium: The Decline and Fall of the Soviet Union*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1996.
- Semanov, Sergei. *Brezhnev: Pravitel' "zolitogo veka"*. Moscow: Veche, 2002.
- Stites, Richard. *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society since 1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

- Taubman, William. *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era*. New York and London: W.W. Norton and Co., 2003.
- Tompson, William. *The Soviet Union under Brezhnev*. Harlow and London: Pearson Longman, 2003.
- Tucker, Robert C. *Stalin as Revolutionary, 1879-1929: A Study in History and Personality*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co, 1973.
- Tumarkin, Nina. *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1983.
- . *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia*. New York: Basic Books, 1994.
- Volkogonov, Dmitrii. *Sem' vozhdiei: Galareia liderov SSSR*. Vol. 2. Moscow: Novosti, 1995.
- Weiner, Amir. *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Wortman, Richard S. *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy*, 2 volumes. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.
- Youngblood, Denise J. *Russian War Films: On the Cinema Front, 1914-2005*. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2007.
- Yurchak, Alexei. *Everything was Forever Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.
- Zubkova, Elena. *Russia After the War: Hopes, Illusions, Disappointments, 1945-57*, translated by Hugh Ragsdale. Armonk: M.E. Sharp, 1998.

#### *Articles and Book Chapters*

- Aleksandrovna, Mariia. "Pamiat' v bronze. Brezhnev vernulsia v Maluiu zemliu." *Gazeta*, 17 September 2004.
- Brandenburger, David. "Stalin as Symbol: A Case Study of the Personality Cult and its Construction." In *Stalin: A New History*, edited by Sarah Davies and James Harris, 249-70. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

- Breslauer, George W. "The Twenty-Fifth Congress: Domestic Issues." In *The Twenty-Fifth Congress of the CPSU: Assessment and Context*, edited by Alexander Dallin, 7-25. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1977.
- Evans, Alfred B., Jr. "Developed Socialism in Soviet Ideology." *Soviet Studies* 29, no. 3 (July 1977): 409-28.
- Gill, Graeme. "The Soviet Leader Cult: Reflections on the Structure of Leadership in the Soviet Union." *British Journal of Political Science* 10 (April 1980): 167-86.
- Graham, Seth. "Varieties of Reflexivity in the Russo-Soviet *Anekdot*," in *Reflective Laughter: Aspects of Humour in Russian Culture*, edited by Lesley Milne, 167-79. London: Anthem, 2004.
- Hanson, Stephen E. "The Brezhnev Era." *The Cambridge History of Russia*, vol. 3, *The Twentieth Century*, edited by Ronald Grigor Suny, 292-315. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Keller, Bill. "Soviet Libraries Purge Books Giving Pre-Gorbachev Views." *The New York Times*, 17 August 1988.
- Kirsanov, Nikolai "Ne osobenno tseremonias' s faktami." In *L.I. Brezhnev: Materialy k biografii*, edited by Iurii Aksiutin, 30-38. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1991.
- Kuchkov, Aleksandr. "Marshal pobedy. Opala, ili 20 let spustia." *Krasnaia zvezda*, 23 October 1999.
- McNeal, Robert H. "Review: Brezhnev's Collected Works." *Slavic Review* 36 (Sept., 1977): 488-93.
- Medvedev, Roy. "The Death of the 'Chief Ideologue'." *New Left Review* 36 (Nov-Dec., 1982): 55-65.
- . "Fars s primes'iu tragedii." In *L.I. Brezhnev: Materialy k biografii*, edited by Iurii Aksiutin, 122-45. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1991.
- "Soviet Award System Altered To End Brezhnev-Era Abuses." *The New York Times*, 23 August 1988.
- Tabachik, Dmitrii. "Zapiataia v biografii genseka." In *L.I. Brezhnev: Materialy k biografii*, edited by Iurii Aksiutin, 38-45. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1991.

Taubman, William. "The Khrushchev Period, 1953-1964." *The Cambridge History of Russia*, vol. 3, *The Twentieth Century*, edited by Ronald Grigor Suny, 268-291. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006

Tucker, Robert C. "The Rise of Stalin's Personality Cult." *The American Historical Review* 84 (April 1979): 347-66.

Tumarkin, Nina. "Religion, Bolshevism, and the Origins of the Lenin Cult." *Russian Review* 40 (Jan., 1981): 35-46.

Viola, Lynne. "Popular Resistance in the Stalinist 1930s: Soliloquy of the Devil's Advocate." *Kritika* 1, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 45-69.

Weiner, Amir. "Saving Private Ivan: From What, Why, and How?" *Kritika* 1, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 305-336.

#### *Dissertations and Research Papers*

Graham, Seth Benedict. "A Cultural Analysis of the Russo-Soviet Anekdot." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2003.

Korsch, Boris. "The Brezhnev Personality Cult—Continuity (The Librarian's Point of View)." Research paper no. 65. Marjorie Mayrock Center for Soviet and East European Research, Hebrew University of Jerusalem: Jerusalem, 1987.