

**THE PRUDENT PRETENDER: LEONID ILYICH BREZHNEV AND THE  
ART OF THE KREMLIN POLITICS**

**By**

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## **STATEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP**

This thesis contains no material that has been accepted for any award or any degree or diploma in any university or other institution. It is affirmed by the candidate that, to the best of her knowledge, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due references are made in the text of the thesis.

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**Abstract:**

*This study investigates the role of Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev in the 1964 Coup and his consolidation of power after the ouster of Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev. Mostly under the influence of the stagnation interpretation of his rule, Brezhnev's role in the Khrushchev's removal was underestimated, and he was depicted as a mediocre politician who could not take any important decision without consulting his colleagues. However, it is necessary to make a division between the "early" and "late" Brezhnevs. He was in power for eighteen years and suffered serious health problems; thus it is very natural that his deteriorated health affected his performance and policy-making role in his last nine years in power. Hence, I analyze the "early" Brezhnev to understand how he overthrew his patron in 1964 and consolidated his power by eliminating his rivals over almost one decade. Contrary to the general view depicting Brezhnev as a vain and weak figure, he was one of the main initiators of the 1964 coup and able to keep power skillfully almost until his death.*

**Keywords:** Consolidation of power, the 1964 Coup, Kremlin politics, Politburo, Dnieper Mafia

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**Abbreviations:**

CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
RSFSR	Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WWI	World War I
WWII	World War II
CP	Communist Party
KGB	<i>Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti</i> (Committee for State Security)
CC	Central Committee (of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union)
MOOP	Ministry of the Protection of Public Order

## **Some Members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union during Brezhnev**

### **Era:**

**Alexander N. Shelepin** (1918-1994) served as head of KGB between 1958 and 1961. He was replaced by his protégé Vladimir Y. Semichastny. Leaving the KGB, Shelepin was promoted to Central Committee Secretariat in November 1961 and held office until 1967. He was also appointed as First Deputy Prime Minister in 1962. He became a full member of Politburo following the removal of Khrushchev in 1964 and stayed in office until 1975.

**Alexei N. Kosygin** (1904- 1980) served as Chairman of the State Planning Committee (Gosplan) from March 1959 until May 1960 when he was appointed as First Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers. He was a full member of the Politburo between 1960 and 1980. After the removal of Khrushchev, Kosygin became Chairman of the Council of Ministers and held office until retiring from office in 1980 due to his deteriorated health.

**Anastas I. Mikoyan** (1895- 1978) served as Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union from July 1964 until he was forced to retirement in December 1965. He was replaced by Nikolai Podgorny. Mikoyan was a full member of the Politburo between February 1935 and April 1966.

**Andrei A. Grechko** (1903-1976) became Marshal of the Soviet Union in March 1955. He served as the Commander-in-Chief of the Ground Forces between 1957 and 1960. Being one of the protégés of Brezhnev, Grechko was assigned as the Minister of Defence in April 1967. He was elected to full membership in the Politburo in March 1973 and remained in office until his death.



**Andrei P. Kirilenko** (1906-1990) served as Brezhnev's chief lieutenant from 1966 to late 1976. He had replaced Brezhnev as First Secretary of the Dnepropetrovsk Regional Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine in 1950. Kirilenko was appointed the First Secretary of the Sverdlovsk Regional Committee of the Communist Party in 1955. He became a full member of the Politburo in 1962 and held office until 1982.

**Frol R. Kozlov** (1908-1965) was one the protégés of Nikita S. Khrushchev. He served as Secretary of the Central Committee, but because of his deteriorated health he was replaced by Brezhnev in the spring of 1963. Kozlov was also a member of the Politburo since June 1957, but relieved of his duties in November 1964, following the removal of Khrushchev.

**Mikhail A. Suslov** (1902- 1982) served as Second Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1965 until his death in 1982. He was a full member of the Politburo between July 1955 and January 1982, besides keeping office for a brief period between October 1952 and March 1953. During Brezhnev era he was called as Chief Ideologue of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

**Nikolai V. Podgorny** (1903-1983) served as First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine from 1957 to 1963. He became Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union in December 1965, replacing Anastas I. Mikoyan. He was a full member of the Politburo between May 1960 and May 1977. Podgorny served as head of the state until removed from the office in June 1977.

**Petro Y. Shelest** (1908- 1996) was the First Secretary of the Communist Party in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic between 1963 and 1972. After the ouster of

Khrushchev, Shelest became a full member of the Politburo in November 1964 and held office until being forced into retirement by Leonid Brezhnev in 1973.

**Vladimir Y. Semichastny** (1924-2001) was appointed as Chairman of the KGB in November 1961 replacing his mentor Alexander N. Shelepin. Semichastny was the head of KGB during the ouster of Khrushchev and actively participated in the 1964 coup. However, Brezhnev removed Semichastny from office in May 1967 and appointed Yuri Andropov Chairman of the KGB.

**Yuri V. Andropov** (1914- 1984) was appointed head of the KGB in May 1967 and became a candidate member of the Politburo. He was promoted to full member of the Politburo in 1973. After Brezhnev died in November 1982, Andropov became the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

## INTRODUCTION

“Father appointed the young Brezhnev to his first party post in Dnepropetrovsk during the years of terror. In those days, Stalin seemed an untouchable deity; even in his wildest dreams, Brezhnev could not imagine himself close to the Leader. But now he had replaced not just Khrushchev, but Stalin himself.”<sup>1</sup>

In this thesis, in contrast to traditional interpretations depicting Brezhnev as a mediocre politician getting power by chance, I argue that Brezhnev was one of the ringleaders of the 1964 coup, and he prudently and skillfully climbed the ladders of Soviet hierarchy by playing according to the rules of Kremlin politics. A deep understanding of Brezhnev’s political career and a clear interpretation of the 1964 coup enables us to gain an insight into the art of post-Stalin Kremlin politics.

There are two main reasons traditionally causing us to overlook Brezhnev’s political skills and his leading role in the ouster of Brezhnev. First, the long lasting effect of the “stagnation hypothesis”<sup>2</sup> dominating the academic literature until late 1990s, which induced a depiction of Brezhnev as a vain, dull, incapable, and mediocre politician. Thus, most of the accounts written before the twenty-first century underestimated Brezhnev’s political skills and his leading role in the 1964 coup.<sup>3</sup> Even though in the last decade, the stagnation view has been challenged by

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<sup>1</sup> Sergei Khrushchev, *Khrushchev: An Inside Account of the Man and His Era* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1990), 401.

<sup>2</sup> In second half of 1980s Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev labeled the Brezhnev era as one of “stagnation” and missed opportunities. Thanks to this conceptual framework, Brezhnev was depicted as the leader of stagnation, a weak figure, who could not take any decision without consulting his colleagues. See: William Tompson, *The Soviet Union under Brezhnev* (Harlow: Pearson/Longman, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Fedor Burlatskiy, “Burlatskiy Views Brezhnev, ‘Age of Stagnation’,” *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, September 14, 1988, in *The Khrushchev and Brezhnev Years*, ed. Alexander Dallin. (New York; London: Garland, 1992): 54-64; Roy Medvedev, *Khrushchev* (New York: Anchor, 1983); Michel Tatu, *Power in the Kremlin: from Khrushchev to Kosygin* (New York: The Viking, 1969); Dmitrii A.

a few scholars providing more balanced interpretation of Brezhnev era, Brezhnev's personality traits, his political skills, and his role in the ouster of Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev have been awaiting reevaluation.<sup>4</sup>

The second reason causing an underestimation of Brezhnev's political skills and his leading role in the coup was his deteriorated health in 1976. As it is for stagnation hypothesis, it is necessary to evaluate Brezhnev's political power by making a division between the "early" and "late" Brezhnevs. He held power for eighteen years and suffered serious health problems during the last nine years of his tenure. It is very natural that his deteriorated health did affect his leadership, his behaviors, and, his power negatively. For this reason, contrary to stagnation view, I focus on the "early" Brezhnev to reveal his underestimated political skills and knowledge of Kremlin politics.

The structure of the thesis is as follows:

In the first chapter, I concentrate on Brezhnev's early political career until the 1964 coup and significant events affecting his road to power. As a little child of the Revolution, Brezhnev experienced the most devastating events such as the World War One and Civil War. Exposed to difficulties of the war, Brezhnev had learned how to adapt and survive in new conditions. This experience would guide him, while he was climbing the ladders of the Soviet hierarchy. I pay special attention to how he was

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Volkogonov, *Autopsy for An Empire: The Seven Leaders Who Built The Soviet Regime* (New York: Free Press, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> See: William Tompson, *The Soviet Union under Brezhnev* (Harlow: Pearson/Longman, 2003); Edwin Bacon, "Reconsidering Brezhnev," in *Brezhnev Reconsidered*, ed. Edwin Bacon and Mark Sandle (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012); William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (New York: W.W. Norton&Company, 2003); Viktor Dönninghaus and Andrei Savin, "Leonid Il'ich as Giver and Receiver, The Light Cast on the General Secretary's Personality by Offerings and Tributes," *Russian Studies in History* 52 (2014): 45-70; Viktor Dönninghaus and Andrei Savin, "The Brezhnev Era Through the General Secretary's Eyes, Leonid Il'ich's 'Diaries' or Work Notes as a Historical Source," *Russian Studies in History* 52 (2014): 12-18; Viktor Dönninghaus and Andrei Savin, "Leonid Brezhnev, Public Display Versus the Sacrality of Power," *Russian Studies in History* 52 (2014): 71-93.

promoted by maneuvering skillfully according to Kremlin politics. Brezhnev's early political career was a good example of how a loyal apparatchik could successfully reach high levels of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Understanding Brezhnev's road to power offers a better grasp to evaluate his role in the ouster of Khrushchev.

In the second chapter, I present three different interpretations of the 1964 coup, contradicting each other and turning the history of the 1964 coup into an impasse. Even though there are a considerable number of interviews and accounts of witnesses, historians still have not agreed on who was the ring leader, why they wanted to remove Khrushchev, and when the conspiracy was sparked. By going through different interpretations and benefiting from primary sources, I present a cogent version of the 1964 coup and show the importance of Brezhnev's agency in the ouster of Khrushchev.

In the third chapter, I analyze Brezhnev's consolidation of power after Khrushchev's removal. Even though after 1964, on paper Soviet Union was ruled under the collective leadership, Brezhnev began to eliminate his rivals and emerged as the leading figure by the mid-1970s. In this chapter I focus on Brezhnev's political tactics and behaviors from the period between 1964 and mid-1970s, because his deteriorated health began to affect his performance and power in his later years. Contrary to the general view, rather than being a weak figure getting the power by chance, Brezhnev proved his political knowledge and skills by tactfully consolidating his power under the strict rules of Kremlin Politics.

Finally, I conclude with a general summary of my thesis and emphasize in contrast to the stagnation view that Brezhnev was not a weak politician, but an experienced and skillful politician who knew how to act according to the rules and

played the leading role in the 1964 coup. He proved his political skills not only by successfully rising through the party ranks and overthrowing his patron, but also consolidating his power by eliminating all his rivals almost in a decade. While many politicians underestimated his ability to achieve and to preserve power, Brezhnev maneuvered prudently and became the leading figure in the Soviet politics in mid-1970s.



## Chapter I. Road to Power

What leads a loyal protégé to dig the grave for his or her patron? How could a Soviet politician get power through the strict rules of the Kremlin politics? Leonid Brezhnev's life could provide a good example of a party apparatchik, who skillfully rose through the party ranks and became the first secretary of Soviet Union. It was difficult to predict that Brezhnev, the loyal protégé of Khrushchev, would become the leader of the Soviet Union by overthrowing his patron. Even after he became the first secretary of the party after the 1964 October coup, some party members saw him as a mediocre politician who could not hold power for a long time. In contrast to these kinds of assumptions, Brezhnev proved his political skills and showed how well he could act according to the rules of Kremlin politics. Thus, understanding Brezhnev's road to power will offer a better grasp to evaluate the 1964 coup and the rules of the Soviet politics. In this respect, I will focus on the evolution of Brezhnev's political life, important events affecting his political career, and his tactics enabling him to climb up the ladders of Soviet hierarchy.

### I. Child of the Revolution:

On December 19, 1906 Brezhnev was born into a poor, working class family living in Dneprodzerzhinsk, an industrial town in southern Ukraine.<sup>5</sup> This town was known until 1936 as Kamenskoye and was a frontier town that developed around the Dneprovsky steel factory built there in the 1880s by the South Russian Metallurgical Company.<sup>6</sup> Brezhnev's mother and father, Ilya Yakovlevich Brezhnev (1874- 1930)

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<sup>5</sup> Andrei Burovsky, *Brezhnev bez Lzhi: Da Zdravstvuet "Zastoj!"* (Moscow: Jauza, 2013), 11.

<sup>6</sup> Ina L. Navazelskis, *Leonid Brezhnev* (New York: Chelsea House, 1988), 14.

and Natalia Denisovna Mazalova (1886-1975) lived in Kursk region before moving to Kamenskoye.

There are some uncertainties about Brezhnev's ethnic origin. According to some claims, Brezhnev's family was originally Jewish and after the revolution his father took the surname of his wife's sister's husband to hide his Jewish identity.<sup>7</sup> Brezhnev might be half-Jewish because of his father. It is known that he knew the Polish language (which is typical of Polish Jews, even living in Russia).<sup>8</sup> However, Stalin thought that Brezhnev was Moldavian. According to the rules of the Soviet system the head of the party organization in a republic should be representative of the titular nation. Andrei Burovsky argues that if Stalin was right, Brezhnev might have had Moldavian, Romanian or Gypsy blood.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, going through Brezhnev's party dossier, Dimitri Volkogonov pointed out that during the war, Brezhnev entered "Ukrainian" as his nationality in a Party registration document; however, once he achieved top positions of the CPSU, he was described as "Russian" in all his biographies.<sup>10</sup> Another argument attaching to Brezhnev a Jewish identity is that Brezhnev's wife, Victoria, was coming from a Karaite family who traditionally practiced Judaism.<sup>11</sup>

While Brezhnev's ethnic origins remain a mystery, it is clear that Brezhnev's family migrated to the industrializing Ukraine during the final decade of the nineteenth century. His father was a "Great Russian" steelworker from Kursk (also Khrushchev's native region). They had been steelworkers for four generations, and Leonid Brezhnev

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<sup>7</sup> Burovsky, *Brezhnev bez Lzhi*, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Burovsky, *Brezhnev bez Lzhi*, 12.

<sup>9</sup> Burovsky, *Brezhnev bez Lzhi*, 12.

<sup>10</sup> Dimitri Volkogonov, *Autopsy for an Empire: The Seven Leaders Who Built the Soviet Regime* (New York: The Free Press, 1998), 265.

<sup>11</sup> Vladislav M. Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 233.



represented the fifth.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Brezhnev was the first Soviet leader coming from true proletarian background.<sup>13</sup> The steelworkers called the Brezhnevs a mill dynasty.<sup>14</sup>

Brezhnev had two siblings: an older sister, Vera, and a younger brother named Yakov. His father was working in the steel mill each day and his mother, Natalya, was a deeply religious woman and having a dominant influence at home. She supported Brezhnev's education by aiming that he would be a skilled worker in the steel factory in which his father had been working.<sup>15</sup>

Brezhnev attended an all-boy's high school, the *klassicheskaya gimnaziya*, in September 1915 by passing the examinations for reading, writing, and arithmetic. Mostly, the children of administrators and officials of the factory were able to attend this privileged school rather than those of ordinary people.<sup>16</sup> To pass the entrance exams, it was necessary to have a tutor for teaching these skills to Brezhnev. Even though it was expensive for a poor family to save money for the tutor, the Brezhnev family managed it somehow. The curriculum at the school was very rigorous. Brezhnev worked hard, but he remained a mediocre student. He was not a distinguished student. Brezhnev was not a talkative child and preferred to be reserved.<sup>17</sup>

Brezhnev graduated from the school in 1921 and, most important in the years between childhood and adolescence Brezhnev experienced three major events, World War I, the Russian Revolution, and the subsequent Russian Civil War. By experiencing

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<sup>12</sup> Navazelskis, *Leonid Brezhnev*, 14.

<sup>13</sup> Ian Derbyshire, *The Politics in Soviet Union from Brezhnev to Gorbachev* (Cambridge: W&R Chambers, 1987), 22.

<sup>14</sup> Leonid I. Brezhnev, *Pages from His Life* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1982), 2.

<sup>15</sup> Navazelskis, *Leonid Brezhnev*, 14.

<sup>16</sup> Burovsky, *Brezhnev bez Lzhi*, 12.

<sup>17</sup> John Dornberg, *Brezhnev: The Masks of Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 45.

these three events, Brezhnev learned lessons in survival and adaptability that he would use for the rest of his life.<sup>18</sup> Childhood impressions are usually the most lasting.

Nicholas II's decision to enter World War I enormously damaged the Russian economy, and the war became very unpopular among most of the Russian people. Negative effects of the war reached also to Brezhnev's hometown, Kamenskoye. It is argued that in the turmoil of WWI, Brezhnev's family largely stayed apolitical and did not join protests or strikes and did not change their apolitical standing through the revolution and civil strife, but it seems unlikely that they were apolitical under the catastrophe of the Civil War.<sup>19</sup> Both Red and White Armies occupied the southern Ukraine, and Brezhnev witnessed the destruction caused by both sides. The control of Kamenskoye changed hands several times between 1918 and 1921. The power struggle between Reds and Whites caused many killings, and the inhabitants of the town began to participate in the Civil War.

Brezhnev graduated from high school in 1921 together with small number of classmates and there is no evidence that he was involved in any political activity during this period. Indeed, in 1915 there were 40 boys in his class, but by 1921, only 15 remained, because of the destruction of the World War I and the Civil War. Brezhnev would later recall this period as follows:

“I remember my school years, my own and those of lads of my age. Soviet Russia had been ravaged by the World War and then by the Civil War against the landowners, capitalists, and foreign interventionists, who tried to stamp out our revolution. There was unprecedented dislocation and starvation. In those trying days, when we had to economize on practically everything, Lenin, the Communists, and the Soviet power were doing all they could to feed and clothe the children and teach them to read and write.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Navazelskis, *Leonid Brezhnev*, 17.

<sup>19</sup> Navazelskis, *Leonid Brezhnev*, 17.

<sup>20</sup> Brezhnev, *Pages from*, 7.

It seems that he had sympathy towards the Bolsheviks like most of the industrial workers in the town, but still it stays a mystery whether his family or the young boy Brezhnev took any political action during WWI or the Civil War. Nevertheless, Brezhnev had a clear background to join Bolsheviks one year after the establishment of the USSR.

## **II. A Loyal Party Apparatchik:**

In 1923, at the age of 17, Brezhnev became involved in politics and joined the *Komsomol* (Kommunisticheskii Soyuz Molodyozhi), the Young Communist League.<sup>21</sup> The Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) had consolidated its power, and the new Soviet government had begun to recruit young cadres for its party organizations. By being a loyal member of CPSU, a person could get the best jobs in the country. By coming from a working class family, Brezhnev had the necessary background to join the party. He would be educated ideologically under the intensive teaching and indoctrination of the Komsomol. The key point was to be loyal to the system, because the party granted a quick rise only to its loyal party members. Brezhnev understood this matter very well and proved his trustworthiness to the party.<sup>22</sup> Hence, he climbed up the ladders of power quickly by being a loyal party member. “Had it not been for the Revolution Leonid Brezhnev might have become little more than a skilled worker in the Kamenskii factory.”<sup>23</sup> The Komsomol paved the way for his future political career. Later he was to say, “For me the Komsomol was a fine school. My world outlook and my attitude to the policy of our government and party stem from it.”<sup>24</sup>

After graduating from high school, Brezhnev attended a vocational program in metallurgy (the extraction and uses of metals) in Kamenskoye until 1923. Then, he

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<sup>21</sup> Derbyshire, *The Politics*, 22; Navazelskis, *Leonid Brezhnev*, 21.

<sup>22</sup> Navazelskis, *Leonid Brezhnev*, 21.

<sup>23</sup> Dornberg, *Brezhnev: The Masks*, 46.

<sup>24</sup> Brezhnev, *Pages from*, 8.

migrated to Kursk with his family and enrolled in a four-year agricultural program at the Technicum for Land Utilization and Reclamation.<sup>25</sup> This program prepared him for a career as a surveyor and melioration technician.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, under the Komsomol's guidance Brezhnev became trained as an agricultural surveyor.

After his graduation from the Technicum for Land Utilization and Reclamation in 1927, he was sent to Belorussia to work on collectivization programmes in the region. Brezhnev's assignment to Belorussia became possible because of his active membership to Komsomol. It was his first assignment as a surveyor in a district near Orsha. According to some sources, Brezhnev first met his wife, Viktoria Petrovna, a nurse, in Orsha, and he married her in 1928.<sup>27</sup> Brezhnev's job included convincing the peasantry of the benefits of the new system: less hardship, new equipment and modern techniques of agriculture.<sup>28</sup> Even though he was a land surveyor and consolidator, his main duty was implementing government policies in the region regardless of how these policies affected peasantry.<sup>29</sup>

After his successful efforts in Belorussia, in 1929 Brezhnev was assigned to Bisertsky district in Sverdlovsk province in the Urals; during his tenure there, Brezhnev quickly rose through the ranks. In 1927 Stalin had laid the ground for forced collectivization and rapid industrialization, and this became the main pillars of the five-year plan announced in 1929. Consequently, during his brief tenure in Bisertsky, Brezhnev witnessed the devastating results of the collectivization policy.<sup>30</sup> However, as a loyal and ambitious man, Brezhnev obeyed the rules of the Communist Party and followed the orders for forced collectivization. While Brezhnev was serving as a land

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<sup>25</sup> Dornberg, *Brezhnev: The Masks*, 52-53; Navazelskis, *Leonid Brezhnev*, 21.

<sup>26</sup> Dornberg, *Brezhnev, The Masks*, 53.

<sup>27</sup> Burovsky, *Brezhnev bez*, 13, Dornberg, *Brezhnev: The Masks*, 53-55.

<sup>28</sup> Navazelskis, *Leonid Brezhnev*, 28.

<sup>29</sup> Navazelskis, *Leonid Brezhnev*, 27.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Crump, *Brezhnev and the Decline of the Soviet Union* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 28.

surveyor, he was elected as the chief of the Bisertsy district agricultural department in Sverdlovsk province and was eventually named deputy chairman of the District Executive Committee.<sup>31</sup> It seems that Brezhnev's loyalty and unquestioning devotion to Stalin's collectivization policy brought him the favor of his superiors.<sup>32</sup>

After his successful efforts in the Urals region, in September 1930, Brezhnev was sent to the capital to study at the prestigious Moscow Agricultural Academy.<sup>33</sup> His unquestioning loyalty and devotion to collectivization policy of Stalin attracted his superiors' attention.<sup>34</sup> However, he did not stay long at the Agricultural Academy and turned back home to Kamenskoye leaving agriculture altogether. This sudden change in his career has never been explained fully, because there was no logical answer to why a young man already having experience as an administrator and official went back to the life of a simple worker. There were some suggestions that Brezhnev got into some trouble in the capital either ideological or personal, so he was expelled or left there of his own will. It remains a mystery why Brezhnev was sent back to his home town.

Nevertheless, by 1931 Brezhnev returned to Dnepropetrovsk as a full member of CPSU. He was working at night in the Kamenskii zavod (by then renamed the F. E. Dzerzhinsky plant), along with his father and younger brother.<sup>35</sup> Besides working at the factory, he enrolled at the newly opened M. I. Arsenichev Metallurgical Institute to study engineering at night. He began to follow a career in industry rather than agriculture. Brezhnev was also running the Komsomol organization at the fledgling

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<sup>31</sup> Brezhnev, *Pages from*, 8; Burovsky, *Brezhnev bez*, 13; Dornberg, *Brezhnev: The Masks*, 53.

<sup>32</sup> Navazelskis, *Leonid Brezhnev*, 29.

<sup>33</sup> Burovsky, *Brezhnev bez*, 13; Navazelskis, *Leonid Brezhnev*, 29.

<sup>34</sup> Navazelskis, *Leonid Brezhnev*, 29.

<sup>35</sup> Dornberg, *Brezhnev: The Masks*, 55.

metallurgical institute, and as Komsomol chief at the institute, Brezhnev was also responsible for the young Communists at the technicum.<sup>36</sup>

Hence, the Bolshevik Revolution granted many opportunities to the young loyal party member Brezhnev by granting him a rapid rise.<sup>37</sup> In 1931 Brezhnev was accepted into full membership of the CPSU after completing his duties successfully in Belorussia and Urals.<sup>38</sup> He was one of the new recruits and his quick rise was not only caused by his unswerving obedience to Stalin's order, but in addition Stalin's great purges creating many vacancies.

In 1935 Brezhnev graduated from the institute as a metallurgical engineer. This put him in a special category of party members who became members of the "technical intelligentsia" through solid Soviet educations.<sup>39</sup> However, Soviet sources are contradictory about what he did exactly. While some argue that Brezhnev joined the Red Army, others claim that he worked in the Kamenskii zavod as an engineer. By late 1936, it seems certain that Brezhnev was working in the plant and in the following year he became director of the new local Metallurgical Polytechnicum.<sup>40</sup>

### **III. Patron and Protégé**

By Stalin's order, in 1938 Nikita Khrushchev came to Ukraine to become the new first secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party. To stay in favor, Khrushchev needed to purge the old and independent minded leaders of the local Ukrainian Communist party and replace them with a new and more loyal generation of personnel. In spring 1938 "more than 1,600 party members were promoted to fill empty provincial and municipal posts as secretaries and department heads".<sup>41</sup> Three hundred

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<sup>36</sup> Dornberg, *Brezhnev: The Masks*, 56.

<sup>37</sup> Navazelskis, *Leonid Brezhnev*, 13.

<sup>38</sup> Burovsky, *Brezhnev bez*, 13.

<sup>39</sup> Dornberg, *Brezhnev: The Masks*, 61.

<sup>40</sup> Derbyshire, *The Politics*, 22; Dornberg, *Brezhnev: The Masks*, 62.

<sup>41</sup> Dornberg, *Brezhnev: The Masks*, 66.

of these became directors of various departments, and Brezhnev was one of them.<sup>42</sup> He was a loyal Stalinist, a Russian who was familiar with Ukraine and possessed a technical background for industrial modernization needed in the region. Thus, he was a trustworthy apparatchik to fill one of the vacant posts. He was appointed as the head of the Department of Ideology and Indoctrination for the Dnepropetrovsk region on 7 February 1939. Remarkably, it would be the first task tying the political future of Brezhnev to his patron Khrushchev. While Khrushchev protected and promoted his protégés who were useful to him, Brezhnev, as one of Khrushchev's men, followed and implemented his patron's policies in Ukraine, contributing to Khrushchev's success under Stalin's control. During Khrushchev's stay in Ukraine between 1938 and 1947 as Ukrainian Party First Secretary, Brezhnev had the chance to work closely with Khrushchev as the party secretary in charge of propaganda at the oblast capital of Dnepropetrovsk.<sup>43</sup> During this process he was impressed by Khrushchev's loyalty, energy, and adaptability to each new change in official policy line, and by following his patron's way of working, he rose up to the ranks of the local Ukrainian Communist party branch rapidly.<sup>44</sup> On April 4, 1940 Brezhnev was moved to a new position in Dnepropetrovsk Obkom as a party secretary responsible for the defense industry.<sup>45</sup>

During his tenure in Ukraine, Brezhnev also began to develop his own ties and around 1938 the "Dnieper Mafia", Brezhnev's entourage of supporters, began to take shape. He was not the only young Communist benefiting from the Khrushchev's assumption of power in Ukraine; there were others who quickly rose in this period. Some of them were the members of the Dnieper Mafia, vital props of Brezhnev's

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<sup>42</sup> Navazelskis, *Leonid Brezhnev*, 36.

<sup>43</sup> Derbyshire, *The Politics*, 23.

<sup>44</sup> Derbyshire, *The Politics*, 23.

<sup>45</sup> Edwin Bacon and Mark Sandle, ed., *Brezhnev Reconsidered* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 7.

power.<sup>46</sup> For example, Brezhnev's schoolmates or close friends such as Konstantin Stepanovich Grushevoi and Nikolai Anisimovich Shchelokov began to climb up the political ladder during Khrushchev's reorganization of the Party in Dnieper basin and consolidated their power during the Brezhnev era by being close associates of Brezhnev.<sup>47</sup> Many of Brezhnev's associates and subordinates from this time received high government and party posts thirty years later, in the Brezhnev era. While Grushevoi became colonel general of the Soviet Army and chief political officer of Moscow Military District, Shchelokov was appointed as the Soviet Union's Minister of Interior and an Army General. Thus, the former was one of Brezhnev's vital links to the Soviet military establishment, the latter secured public order according to Brezhnev's order. Hence, Brezhnev successfully seeded the beginnings of close relations with his entourage three decades before he came to power and members of "Dnieper Mafia" consisted of party officials from industrial and military ranks, and these ties would grow considerably after WWII, while Brezhnev was serving as local oblast chief between 1946 and 1949.<sup>48</sup>

#### **IV. Years of the World War Two:**

After the German invasion of Ukraine in the summer of 1941, Brezhnev entered the Red Army with the rank of lieutenant colonel as deputy chief of the political administration of the Southern Army Group.<sup>49</sup> In April 1942 Brezhnev was promoted to colonel and transferred to the staff of the 18<sup>th</sup> Army as its chief political commissar.<sup>50</sup> Toward the end of the war Brezhnev was made a major general and became head of the political directorate of the Fourth Ukrainian Army Group.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Dornberg, *Brezhnev: The Masks*, 67.

<sup>47</sup> Dornberg, *Brezhnev: The Masks*, 67.

<sup>48</sup> Derbyshire, 23.

<sup>49</sup> Dornberg, *Brezhnev: The Masks*, 75.

<sup>50</sup> National Review, December 10, 1982, 1529; Dornberg, 76.

<sup>51</sup> Dornberg, *Brezhnev: The Masks*, 76.



However, even though it is controversial issue whether Brezhnev actually joined troops in trenches and escaped from death, he was awarded the Order of the Red Banner for bravery in March 1942.<sup>52</sup>

As the Eighteenth Army moved west and occupied Transcarpathia, previously part of Czechoslovakia, Brezhnev was charged with bringing Transcarpathia into the Soviet Union while still retaining his duties as political commissar in the army.<sup>53</sup> He tried to control socio-political issues and to gain popular support to make the area a part of the Soviet Ukrainian republic. As a master of propaganda, while luring peasants with land opportunities confiscated from landlords, he promised the populace free elections.<sup>54</sup> He was able to achieve a coalition government dominated by pro-Soviet Communists.

By the end of war Brezhnev was sent to Czechoslovakia to establish a pro-Soviet regime in this newly liberated country. Because he was experienced on this issue, he used the same tactics implemented in Transcarpathia. After the war ended he left Czechoslovakia and went to Moscow to attend the pretentious parade organized on 24 June 1945, with Stalin's order to celebrate the victory over Germany. Representatives of the Red Army were the most honored units in review, including a composite regiment of the Fourth Ukrainian Army.<sup>55</sup> Brezhnev was among those who led that regiment through the square. Later he left Moscow and returned to Transcarpathia to arrange all the final steps to mold it into a truly Soviet region.

## **V. Apprenticeship for Power:**

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<sup>52</sup> Brezhnev, *Pages from*, 24. Crump, *Brezhnev and the Decline*, 40; Navazelskis, *Leonid Brezhnev*, 42.

<sup>53</sup> Navazelskis, *Leonid Brezhnev*, 43.

<sup>54</sup> Navazelskis, *Leonid Brezhnev*, 43.

<sup>55</sup> Dornberg, *Brezhnev: The Masks*, 86-87.

He left Transcarpathia in August 1946 and returned to Dnepropetrovsk. Upon his arrival in Ukraine he was appointed first party secretary of Zaporozhye, an industrially important region. As the rest of the country, Zaporozhye was devastated during the war, and Brezhnev's task was to rebuild the Zaporozhye Iron and Steel Works, known as Zaporozhstal and the Dneproges, the enormous dam on the Dnieper River.<sup>56</sup> Brezhnev had to work hard to repair Dneproges, which had considerable importance as the first large hydroelectric complex built in the Soviet Union, and he was supposed to get Zaporozhstal working before the 1946 Five-Year Plan deadline was up. Brezhnev did not waste time and began to rebuild the industry in the region. Meanwhile, Khrushchev fell from favor in March 1947, when he was relieved of his positions as first secretary of the Communist party in Ukraine, the Kiev regional committee and Kiev city committee. This urged Brezhnev strongly to finish his jobs before the deadline, because his patron's fall would probably affect his career soon.

Brezhnev kept his promises and got Dneproges and Zaporozhtal operating before the deadline by showing extra effort. He was awarded the Order of Lenin, and his award was presented by Stalin. At the same time, as a case typical of Stalin's rule, Khrushchev was soon back in favor and regained his former positions by the end of 1947.

Brezhnev left Zaporozhye and returned to Dnepropetrovsk as first secretary of the regional party organization (*Obkom*). While he was responsible for the overall state affairs in the region, he made considerable efforts to improve agricultural production. Dnepropetrovsk became the first Ukrainian region to complete the quotas set for the 1948 harvest.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Crump, *Brezhnev and the Decline*, 46; Navazelskis, *Leonid Brezhnev*, 44.

<sup>57</sup> Navazelskis, *Leonid Brezhnev*, 47.

As a successful and loyal apparatchik, Brezhnev left Dnepropetrovsk in the beginning of 1950 to become one of the top deputies of Khrushchev in Moscow. In the 1950s Khrushchev was one of the rising figures in the center. He assigned Brezhnev to serve temporarily in the Agricultural Department of the CPSU Central Committee. Later, in July 1950, Brezhnev was sent to Kishinev, the capital of Moldavia, where he would become the new party leader of the Republic by stepping into the shoes of a purged official.

This new assignment was a considerable promotion, but also was a demanding post requiring fulfilling the expectations of the center. Brezhnev had taken the rule of recently purged party machine, and ordered to fully “Sovietise” and establish CPSU authority in the republic, which had only been annexed in 1944 during World War II. His task was to complete collectivization of agriculture, begun in 1948, and to suppress those peasants hostile to Soviet power.<sup>58</sup> Brezhnev’s job was difficult, but he adapted quickly to the needs of the situation, suppressed internal opposition, tried to liquidate the local kulak community, and introduced collectivized agriculture.<sup>59</sup> Brezhnev contributed to establishment of local industry largely relating to agricultural production and support building up new towns along with a considerable amount of enterprises.<sup>60</sup>

Brezhnev’s success in Moldavia impressed Stalin; thus, Brezhnev was inducted into the CPSU Central Committee and Secretariat and became candidate member of the Politburo at the Nineteenth Party Congress in October 1952. Furthermore, Brezhnev entered into Stalin’s inner circle of closest advisers in 1952-53. After Stalin’s death in March 1953, however, Brezhnev lost both his Secretariat and

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<sup>58</sup> Dornberg, *Brezhnev: The Masks*, 106.

<sup>59</sup> Derbyshire, *The Politics*, 23.

<sup>60</sup> Crump, *Brezhnev and the Decline*, 52.

Politburo candidate seats immediately as a result of de-Stalinist reactions. However, he would get rid of this setback thanks to his close relations with the new leader, Nikita Khrushchev.

After Stalin's death a bitter struggle for power took place between Khrushchev, Lavrenti Beria, and Georgi Malenkov. While Khrushchev had power over the Party, Beria had control over the Police and Malenkov over the government apparatus. At first glance, it seemed that this kind of power distribution could bring the check-and-balance system, but at that time the Soviet system was familiar with one-man rule rather than collective leadership. The nature of the system paved the way for consolidation of power in the hands of the party chief. First Malenkov and Khrushchev came together to destroy Beria. After the elimination of Beria, Khrushchev began to eliminate political power of Malenkov.<sup>61</sup>

After restoring the positions of power with the September 1953 Central Committee Plenum, Khrushchev wanted to take into action his enormous agricultural project. To overcome chronic grain shortages Khrushchev planned to extend farming to hitherto uncultivated lands in Kazakhstan, Western Siberia, the lower Volga and in some parts of the North Caucasus. He aimed within two years to expand grain planting by 13 million hectares using intensive mechanization. To guide and carry his "Virgin Lands" project, Khrushchev needed a loyal and experienced protégé, and Brezhnev was the one possessing all requirements. However, at the turn of the year 1953-54, Khrushchev had not consolidated his power against Molotov yet; thus he could not put Brezhnev formally in charge. While an associate of Malenkov, Panteleimon K. Ponomarenko was assigned the first secretary; Brezhnev became merely the second secretary of the republic.<sup>62</sup> To make the project work well, they had to overcome

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<sup>61</sup> Taubman, Khrushchev, 265-266.

<sup>62</sup> Dornberg, Brezhnev: The Masks, 133.

limited transportation, backwardness, worst living conditions, and disorganization.

Brezhnev recalled this period as follows:

The development of the virgin lands is part of my life. It all began on a frosty Moscow day at the end of January 1954, when I was summoned to the Central Committee. The problem was familiar to me already and this was not the first time I had heard about the virgin lands; what was new was that I would be entrusted with their development on a massive scale. The project was to be launched in Kazakhstan in the coming spring and the schedule was tight. It would be a tough assignment and no one tried to hide the fact. But they also said that at that moment no task was more important, and that the Central Committee had decided to send P. K. Ponomarenko and me to tackle it.<sup>63</sup>

Even though there were lots of negative sides of the project, in November 1954 the harvest provided successful results. “Kazakhstan alone could boast that it had delivered almost twice as much as grain as the year before”.<sup>64</sup> Although this was a provisional triumph, Khrushchev gained victory over Malenkov for his so-called successful project and could eliminate Malenkov’s allies and supporters. Most important, Malenkov resigned as Prime Minister of the Supreme Soviet on February 8, 1955. Thanks to his patron’s victory over Malenkov, Brezhnev became the first secretary of Kazakhstan with the elimination of Ponomarenko.

However, even though some successes, such as the excellent 1958 harvest, were achieved in the early years, a steady decline occurred in following years. The project was damaged by erosion, dust storms and loss of soil fertility. The living conditions stayed abysmal and forced most of voluntary workers to return to their hometowns. Whether Khrushchev’s Virgin Lands project was a triumph or a failure, for the two years 1954 and 1955 Brezhnev showed successful efforts and was sent to

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<sup>63</sup> Leonid I. Brezhnev, *Virgin Lands: Two Years in Kazakhstan, 1954-5* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1979), 2-3.

<sup>64</sup> Dornberg, *Brezhnev: The Masks*, 139.

Moscow in February 1956, reelected as a candidate member of the Politburo and a Secretariat.

## **VI. Consolidating Power of the Patron**

The Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party in February 1956, provided Khrushchev a commanding majority in the Central Committee, the Secretariat, and the Presidium, and was to become the providential turning point of Brezhnev's political career. Brezhnev was named as secretary of the Central Committee and a candidate member of the new Presidium (Politburo). First, he returned to Alma Ata for a short time to appoint his successor, wind up his affairs, and then bring his family back to Moscow.

Finally, Brezhnev reached where he stood before his March 1953 demotion and had the power to extend his networks within the Soviet system. Under the body of Party Secretariat, he was responsible for cooperation with overseas communist parties and supervising the coordination of new space and nuclear missile program of Soviet Union as the head of the Central Committee's department for defense.<sup>65</sup> During his long-term tenure Brezhnev built up influential connections not only within the central party, but also in the provinces and within military, heavy industry, agricultural and diplomatic leadership cadres. For instance, Brezhnev would establish good and long-lasting relations with Yuri Vladimirovich Andropov and Boris Nikolayevich Ponomarev. The former was heading the Central Committee's department for relations with "ruling" Communist parties; the latter was leading the Central Committee's department for relations with non-ruling parties.

Khrushchev became the undisputed leader by trouncing the anti-party group led by Georgy Malenkov, Vyacheslav Molotov and Lazar Kaganovich in June 1957

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<sup>65</sup> Bacon and Sandle, *Brezhnev Reconsidered*, 8; Derbyshire, *The Politics*, 24.

and this action consolidated the power of his protégés. Brezhnev had backed his patron strongly against the anti-party group even though he did not have voting power in the Presidium at that time.<sup>66</sup> The elimination of old oligarchic group enabled Khrushchev to promote his own protégé. According to Anastas Mikoyan, “The new Presidium after 1957 was full of mediocrity that was inferior to the old oligarchy in energy, talents, knowledge, and horizon.”<sup>67</sup> However, to Khrushchev, it seemed advantageous, because his new appointees were dependent on him.<sup>68</sup>

Because Brezhnev’s ascending fortunes were linked closely to the career of Khrushchev, Brezhnev was promoted to full membership of the Politburo at the Central Committee Plenum of 1957. Brezhnev was one of main beneficiaries of Khrushchev’s victory over the anti-party group in June 1957, as he joined the newly elected Party Presidium as one of its fifteen full members. Brezhnev served as one of the party leader’s closest and most influential advisors when Khrushchev was at the zenith of his power between 1957 and 1960. He was also appointed as the deputy chairman of the bureau in charge of the CPSU within the RSFSR in 1958.<sup>69</sup> This new position gave Brezhnev power over cadre assignments and patronage. Hence, Brezhnev was expanding his entourage, the vital supporting force to oust his patron.

## **VII. Towards the Plot:**

In 1960 Brezhnev’s fortunes began to change while Khrushchev’s authority began to be challenged by conservative opponents.<sup>70</sup> The party’s military leaders sharply criticized Khrushchev because of his “soft” attitudes toward the West. While

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<sup>66</sup> William Taubman, *Khrushchev, The Man and His Era* (New York and London: W. W. Norton&Company, 2003), 318-319.

<sup>67</sup> Anastas Mikoyan, *Tak bylo: Razmyshleniia o minuvshem* (Moscow: Vagrius, 1990), 604, in Zubok, *A Failed Empire*, 120-121.

<sup>68</sup> Zubok, *A Failed Empire*, 121.

<sup>69</sup> Dornberg, *Brezhnev: The Masks*, 153.

<sup>70</sup> Derbyshire, *The Politics*, 24.

the patron was under political fire, his protégés suffered. Consequently, Brezhnev was removed from the Politburo and Secretariat and assigned to a largely ceremonial post of the Head of Presidium.

Although his new post did not include any political importance, Brezhnev knew how to use this post in his own interests. By being highly visible, Brezhnev boosted his fame not only in Soviet Union but also through other countries. His responsibilities included meeting with foreign delegations, attending ceremonial organizations representing the Soviet Union, and signing documents into law. Brezhnev was enjoying everything relating to this office such as the reception for presidents, state visits, honor guards etc. He liked to be the center of attention and to see his pictures in the papers and magazines.<sup>71</sup> Most important, being resilient, Brezhnev followed a strategic line; he made full use of his new post by establishing good ties with overseas dignitaries visiting Soviet Union, portraying himself as an international statesman, and keeping a high public profile.<sup>72</sup>

On the other hand, during this period, Brezhnev was aware that the political tide of the events began to turn against his patron; thus, he gradually began to distance himself from Khrushchev. Brezhnev began to declare public opposition to a number of Khrushchev's new policies. There were three main issues over which he differed from his patron: giving priority to consumer goods rather than heavy industry and defense; military plans based mostly on nuclear defense to the detriment of conventional ground-force numbers; the withdrawal of troops from Germany and the 1962 Berlin crisis.<sup>73</sup> Brezhnev advocated for a more conservative stance on all three issues. This stance brought him considerable benefits. First, he emerged as an

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<sup>71</sup> Sergei Khrushchev, *Khrushchev on Khrushchev: An Inside Account of the Man and His Era* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1990), 33.

<sup>72</sup> Derbyshire, *The Politics*, 24.

<sup>73</sup> Derbyshire, *The Politics*, 24.



attractive center-right alternative to the incumbent Khrushchev. Second, following Frol Kozlov's stroke in April 1963, the "kingmaking" Mikhail Suslov began to see Brezhnev as heir-apparent.<sup>74</sup> Hence, his prescience for his patron's future provided him to take the necessary actions to raise his power rather than losing it totally with a failing patron.

While Brezhnev was searching for new ways to increase his power by distancing himself from his patron, in 1959 Khrushchev declared that his successor would be Frol Kozlov, a party leader from Leningrad rather than his so-called loyal protégé Brezhnev.<sup>75</sup> Kozlov was transferred to Moscow from Leningrad, where he had served as Khrushchev's lieutenant since Stalin's death. However, unlike Brezhnev and some others, Kozlov's career was not shaped exclusively under Khrushchev protection. Thus, after his promotion to candidate status in the Presidium, he emerged as the primary challenger to Khrushchev's one-man rule, as well as Brezhnev's chief rival. Nevertheless, Khrushchev's first choice was Kozlov, but he suffered a stroke in April 1963 and never recovered.

According to Sergei Khrushchev, it was a troublesome process to find a new heir to replace Kozlov. Khrushchev had to find someone knowing "economy, defense, and ideology, but most of all how to analyze people."<sup>76</sup> Indeed, Khrushchev had Alexander Shelepin in mind, but he was not experienced on economy and had been in the bureaucracy all the time. Thus, he wanted to appoint Shelepin as the first secretary of Leningrad province, because in this way Shelepin could get real-life experience and accumulate necessary knowledge to be the first secretary. However, Shelepin was offended by this appointment, because he saw this move from a bureaucratic job in the

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<sup>74</sup> Crump, *Brezhnev and the Decline*, 59; Derbyshire, *The Politics*, 25.

<sup>75</sup> Harrison E. Salisbury, "After Khrushchev Who?," *The Saturday Evening Post*, March 5, 1960, 20.

<sup>76</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev*, 31.

Central Committee to the first secretary of Leningrad as a demotion.<sup>77</sup> Hence, this made Shelepin one of the opponents to Khrushchev's rule. Nikolay Podgorny was another possibility to be the heir apparent by having lots of experience in the field, but Khrushchev did not have a high opinion about him. Khrushchev defined him as "narrow" by pointing out Podgorny's failure on the food industry matters since coming over to the Central Committee.<sup>78</sup>

Khrushchev did not see Brezhnev fit to this job either, although Brezhnev had obtained all necessary experience in the central party apparatus and in the field. He thought that Brezhnev's characteristic features were far from requirements of being a leader. He believed that Brezhnev "cannot hold to his own course; he gives way too easily to influence of others and to his own moods... Before the war when we appointed him as Dnepropetrovsk province secretary, the boys nicknamed him 'the ballerina,'" because "anyone who wants to can turn him around." Khrushchev also shared his ideas about Brezhnev with his colleagues. As Petro Shelest, the Ukrainian Party Secretary, witnessed while Brezhnev was reporting complaints about the poor quality of bread on phone to Khrushchev on 25 January 1964, Khrushchev berated Brezhnev for not having enough ability and intelligence.<sup>79</sup>

Meanwhile due to illness of Kozlov, Brezhnev had to carry the duties of the Secretariat of the Central Committee while remaining President. Benefiting from Kozlov's illness, Brezhnev was able to form "a safe, centrist and obvious compromise choice to replace Khrushchev".<sup>80</sup> If Frol Kozlov, an influential Soviet politician, had

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<sup>77</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev*, 31.

<sup>78</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev*, 32.

<sup>79</sup> Pyotr E. Shelest, *Da ne sudimy budete: Dnevnikovye zapisi, vospominaniia chlena Politbiuro TSK KPSS* (Moscow, 1995), 186.

<sup>80</sup> Derbyshire, *The Politics*, 21.

not had a stroke in 1963, Brezhnev would probably not have become the leader of the CPSU.

However, after it became clear that Kozlov would not recover, in July 1964, Brezhnev was released from his duties as State President and re-elected to the Secretariat as its second-ranking member. Khrushchev declared, “You all know that Comrade Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev was elected a secretary of the Central Committee in June 1963. The Central Committee now deems it expedient for Comrade Brezhnev to concentrate his energy on his duties at the Central Committee. In this connection, the Central Committee moves that he be relieved of his responsibilities as chairman of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet.<sup>81</sup>” Anastas Ivanovich Mikoyan was appointed to the post of Supreme Soviet Presidium chairman.

This decision might have offended Brezhnev, because he loved the “trappings of office,” but by being the second secretary of the party he would have more power by involving intense work inside the overgrown party mechanism.<sup>82</sup> In July 1964 Khrushchev elevated Brezhnev to deputy party leader, while making Podgorny a rival heir apparent.<sup>83</sup> With the aim of securing his position, Khrushchev tried to create rivalry between Brezhnev and Podgorny to prevent concentration of power in the hands of the one, but ironically Brezhnev and Podgorny, the patron’s protégés, had already begun to conspire to oust him soon.

### **VIII. Conclusion:**

Brezhnev knew well how to benefit from the newly established communist system and to climb the ladders of the Soviet hierarchy. Four main features can be listed as the main pillars of Brezhnev’s success. First, he was a loyal party apparatchik

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<sup>81</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev*, 76.

<sup>82</sup> Martin McCauley. *The Khrushchev era: 1953-1964* (London: Longman, 1995), 78; Khrushchev, *Khrushchev*, 32-33.

<sup>83</sup> Taubman, *Khrushchev*, 616.

carrying out the orders of the center without questioning any policy. This was one of the important requirements to rise through the party ranks in Soviet system. During his first assignments in Belorussia and the Urals, Brezhnev devoted himself to the collectivization of agriculture and showed his loyalty to Stalin. After he became one of the protégés of Khrushchev in Ukraine, he followed orders of his patron without opposing him. Consequently, his patrons promoted him as he completed each job successfully.

Second, it seems that Brezhnev was seen a mediocre politician, but it protected him from suspicion and involvement in a bitter rivalry.<sup>84</sup> As many examples showed that heroic or strong figures could lose their powers suddenly because of the intrigues of their rivals and enemies, it seemed best to be seen as ordinary while trying to reach the power insidiously. By being a mediocrity, Brezhnev not only avoided the hostility of his colleagues, but also did not cause suspicion of Khrushchev, while he was conspiring to oust him. Even after the coup, most of the people saw Brezhnev as a temporary leader who could not hold power for a long time.

Third, Brezhnev was always prudent while taking any political action. The rules of Kremlin politics required thinking twice before making a move, because decisions taken without contemplation might induce fatal consequences. Brezhnev acted prudently in many cases such as finishing assigned projects before deadlines set by Stalin and distancing himself from Khrushchev in the 1960s skillfully.

Finally, he was lucky by being the second generation of the communist system benefiting from the vacant posts left by Stalin's purged officials. He quickly rose through the party ranks by using each chance he faced. If the Bolshevik Revolution

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<sup>84</sup> See: Fyodor Burlatsky, "Brezhnev and the End of the Thaw: Reflections on the Nature of Political Leadership," *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, September 14 1988.

had not occurred, Brezhnev might have been little more than a skilled worker. Hence, Brezhnev was good at using all chances the system provided him.

All in all, with four components of his success, loyalty, mediocrity, prudence, and good fortune, Brezhnev maneuvered according to rules of the Soviet politics. In October 1964, with thirty-three years of full party membership, Brezhnev was able to become the first secretary of the Communist Party by overthrowing his patron, and he then held on to power for the rest of his life.



## **Chapter II: The Dilemma of the 1964 Coup**

Kremlin power shifted to new hands in 1964, while the coup itself remained a mystery and was euphemistically called “the October plenum”. There are a considerable number of interviews, memoirs and analyses of insiders<sup>85</sup>, which became available in the last decade of Soviet Union during glasnost. Consequently, historians have presented contradictory versions of the coup for more than two decades; thus, the history of the 1964 coup turned into a controversial issue. However, with special lenses over all these available sources, we can glean enough information to fathom what happened in 1964 and how Khrushchev was removed by his own entourage. Achieving a clear understanding of Khrushchev’s ouster contributes to our understanding of Soviet politics in the first half of 1960s by widening our perspective as well. In this respect, this chapter will present a different interpretation of the coup by constructing a more cogent version to solve the impasse of the October Plenum.

### **I. Who was the Ringleader?**

Accounts of insiders and works of Western and Soviet observers diverge from each other in defining the main players of the 1964 coup. While some accuse Mikhail Suslov, others blame Alexander Shelepin, or Leonid Brezhnev and Nikolay Podgorny. Even though these various versions of insiders’ accounts make it difficult to define the prominent movers of the conspiracy, insiders’ accounts help to clear the divergence among several sources. By focusing on who said what and who claimed who as taking the lead in the plot, the question will be clarified under four main sections.

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<sup>85</sup> In this study, I used the term “insiders” by assigning a meaning that those who actively participated in the 1964 coup or witnessed the events first-hand.

### **a) Suslov's League (Defenders of Suslov as the ringleader)**

The role of Mikhail Suslov on the 1964 coup is one of the most controversial points. Soviet and Western accounts diverge on this issue sharply, while some of them attached to Suslov an important role by depicting him as the ringleader of the plot, others put him in the second ranks of the conspirators.

The most widely accepted view, expressed mostly in Western academic circles, was that Suslov was the leader of the conspirators, because of his obvious opposition to Khrushchev for some time and his presentation of the report in the October 1964 Central Committee plenum addressing Khrushchev's errors. Later Brezhnev and Podgorny, who were close to Khrushchev, were persuaded to join Suslov, the long-time ideologist-in-chief. This widely accepted view was ossified in the work of Michael Tatu, *Power in the Kremlin*, written just after the coup, in which he contended that Suslov was the ringleader of the conspiracy.<sup>86</sup> Tatu portrayed the plot as originating only a few days before the coup and as restricted to a small circle, so logically he tended to depict Suslov, one of the prominent opponents of Khrushchev's rule, as the main player in the coup. Moreover, Anatoly Dobrynin, Soviet Ambassador to the United States at that time, found Suslov largely responsible for the Khrushchev's fall, and saw him as the ringleader of the coup.<sup>87</sup>

Among the Soviet writers only Roy Medvedev has held this view. While in his first book Medvedev gave the leading role to Suslov, in his second book he altered the story somewhat and labeled Suslov along with Shelepin as the "prime movers".<sup>88</sup> Even though Medvedev's account was based on some insider's accounts, thus sounding

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<sup>86</sup> Michel Tatu, *Power in the Kremlin: from Khrushchev to Kosygin* (New York: Viking, 1969), 403.

<sup>87</sup> Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents* (New York, Times Books, 1995), 129-130.

<sup>88</sup> Roy Medvedev, *Khrushchev* (New York, Anchor, 1983), 235.

convincing, like Tatu's, his argument was refuted on many points by the recent accounts of both observers and insiders.

Contrary to the early versions of the coup, those who witnessed or observed the events insisted that Suslov was not the ringleader of the plot. Pyotr Shelest, at that time the head of the Ukrainian Party organization, believed that the role of Suslov was exaggerated and Suslov indeed stayed in the second circle of plotters.<sup>89</sup> Suslov did not have the desire to join the plot, and he usually obeyed the decisions of the Party.<sup>90</sup> Specifically, Shelest claimed that Suslov, Kosygin and some others occupied a "cautiously wait and see" position, since they were concerned about the future consequences of the removal of Khrushchev in foreign and domestic affairs.<sup>91</sup> When Suslov first heard about the plot, he feared that, "It would cause a split in the party or even a civil war".<sup>92</sup>

Besides Shelest's account, Gennady Voronov, a Politburo member from 1961 to April 1973, in an interview conducted by *Izvestiya* on 18 November 1988, pointed out that Suslov was not the ringleader of the coup, because he only moved strategically following the stronger one; thus they assigned him to represent the report prepared in advance to criticize Khrushchev at the plenum and he just followed the orders.<sup>93</sup> Shelest agreed with Voronov on the issue that the report presented in the plenum was not written by Suslov, but prepared by a group of friends: Shelepin, Polyansky, attended by Pyotr Demichev and Andropov.<sup>94</sup> Moreover, Sergei Khrushchev also

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<sup>89</sup> Pyotr E. Shelest, "O Khrushcheve, Brezhneve i Drugikh", *Argumenty i Fakty*, January 14, 1989, 5.

<sup>90</sup> James G. Richter, *Khrushchev's Double Bind: International Pressures and Domestic Coalition Politics* (Maryland, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 169.

<sup>91</sup> Pyotr E. Shelest, *Da ne sudimy budete: Dnevnikovye zapisi, vospominaniia chlena Politbiuro TSK KPSS* (Moscow, 1995), 216.

<sup>92</sup> Shelest, *Da ne*, 216.

<sup>93</sup> Werner Hahn, "Who Ousted Nikita Sergeevich?" *Problems of Communism* (1991): 111.

<sup>94</sup> Shelest, *Da ne*, 236-237.



claimed that the report was prepared by Polyansky.<sup>95</sup> Nevertheless, whether it was indeed created only by Polyansky or a group of people working with him, all observers pointed out that Suslov was instructed to present the report, because Brezhnev and Podgorny refused to do it.<sup>96</sup> In addition to the accounts of Shelepin and Voronov, Sergei Khrushchev did not see Suslov as the ringleader: "Suslov was not involved in the plot until the very last minute." As Shelest pointed out, "Suslov did not know about it until the very last minute".<sup>97</sup> However, even if Suslov was not the mastermind of the plot, he emerged as one of the leading figures because of the timidity of others. According to Shelest, in an early October meeting at Podgorny's dacha, Brezhnev, Suslov and Podgorny did not achieve consensus on what to do with Khrushchev; they were totally indecisive, and most important, at the October Presidium session, it was not Brezhnev or Podgorny, but Suslov who opened the attack on Khrushchev.<sup>98</sup>

All in all, in the light of accounts of insiders, it is obvious that Suslov was not the ringleader of the coup, and he even joined the conspirators much later. Even though he was depicted as the one of the main opponents of Khrushchev, he was not the initiator of the plot and never led the conspirators.

#### **b) Shelepin's League:**

Fyodor Burlatsky, among the first writers to analyze the mechanics of the political process in the Soviet Union and a former Khrushchev speech writer, insisted that neither Brezhnev nor Suslov initiated the plot; the main player was Shelepin who brought Suslov on board first and Brezhnev only later.<sup>99</sup> He attributed great importance

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<sup>95</sup> Sergei Khrushchev, *Khrushchev on Khrushchev: An Inside Account of the Man and His Era* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1990), 158.

<sup>96</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev on Khrushchev*, 158.

<sup>97</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev on Khrushchev*, 136; Shelest, "O Khrushcheve," 5.

<sup>98</sup> Pyotr Shelest, "I Foresaw Everything That Would Happen," *Ukraina* (Kiev), No. 21, May 1990 and No. 22, June 1990, in Hahn, "Who Ousted Nikita," 112.

<sup>99</sup> Fyodor Burlatsky, "Mirnyi zagovor" protiv N. S. Khrushcheva', in Yuri V. Aksyutin, ed., *N. S. Khrushchev: materialy k biografii* (Moscow, Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1988), 211, in William J. Tompson, "The Fall of Nikita Khrushchev," *Soviet Studies* 43 (1991): 1102.

to the younger generation in the power struggle and named Shelepin as the leader of 'the post-war generation' of Soviet leaders, including men such as Semichastny, Polyansky, Voronov and Andropov, while putting Brezhnev, Suslov and Kosygin into the 'class of 37' raised up in the turmoil of the Stalinist purges.<sup>100</sup> The young generation, including Shelepin, and they were fifteen or twenty years younger than the Khrushchev-Mikoyan-Suslov generation.

Burlatsky might have been right by giving importance to the younger generation, since Khrushchev was planning to rejuvenate cadres and to introduce new blood into the leadership. According to Harrison E. Salisbury, an expert on Soviet Russia, the post war generation was full of vim, vigor and robust, thus they could become successors of Khrushchev, if Khrushchev spurring them on to play a most active role, continued to hold office until 1964.<sup>101</sup> According to Sergei Khrushchev, his father contemplated about whom to propose to Kozlov's place and said, "I would like to appoint someone a bit younger. I used to have Shelepin in mind. He seemed a good candidate".<sup>102</sup> However all of these assumptions did not work and Shelepin joined the conspirators.

Shelepin was unlikely to become the ringleader of the plot for several reasons. First, Shelepin was still relatively young and while holding a powerful position, chairman of the Party-State Control Commission and a Central Committee secretary, he was not yet a member of the Presidium. Even though his election to the membership of Presidium after the coup could prove that he was one of the important players of the plot, it is hard to claim that he was the ringleader.<sup>103</sup> According to Pyotr A. Rodionov,

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<sup>100</sup> Fyodor Burlatsky, "Brezhnev and the End of the Thaw: Reflections on the Nature of Political Leadership" *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, September 14 1988, 13-14, (translated in Isaac J. Tarasulo ed. *Gorbachev and Glasnost: Views from the Soviet Press*, Wilmington: SR Books, 1989) 54-55.

<sup>101</sup> Harrison E. Salisbury, "After Khrushchev, Who?," *The Saturday Evening Post*, March 5, 1960, 86.

<sup>102</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev on Khrushchev*, 31.

<sup>103</sup> Tompson, "The Fall of," 1102.

who was then the first deputy director of the CPSU Central Committee's Institute of Marxism-Leninism, Shelepin's ambitions were directed toward Brezhnev and he believed that only after the removal of Khrushchev could he easily challenge Brezhnev.<sup>104</sup> P.A. Rodionov, second secretary of the Georgian CP claimed that Shelepin played a lesser but significant role in the plot, while he had aimed to achieve one of the top positions.<sup>105</sup> According to Sergei Khrushchev, apart from Brezhnev and Podgorny, Shelepin and Polyansky had been involved in the plot from the very beginning; however, he was not the ringleader.<sup>106</sup> Moreover, Gennady Voronov, a Politburo member from 1961 to April 1973, gave his *Izvestiya* interview dating on November 18, 1988, and challenged the idea that Shelepin along with Semichastny were the leading initiators of the plot by pointing out that the 'senior comrades of that time' did not see Semichastny and Shelepin as important power holders, dismissing them as 'yesterday's Komsomols'.<sup>107</sup> Moreover, Semichastny talked at length and did not point anything similar to the Burlatsky's argument.<sup>108</sup> In addition, Shelest said that Shelepin along with Andropov and Polyansky were moonlighting materials for the upcoming Plenum of the Central Committee, but with an explicit role in the plot.<sup>109</sup>

### **c) League of Brezhnev & Podgorny:**

According to most of the participants or observers of the coup, Brezhnev and Podgorny were the main initiators of the coup.<sup>110</sup> First, the leader of KGB, Semichastny, who had joined the coup near the beginning, pointed out that Brezhnev and Podgorny initiated the coup and led it until the end.<sup>111</sup> In addition, Sergei

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<sup>104</sup> P. A. Rodionov, "Kak nachinal'sya zastoi," *Znamya*, 8 (1989), p. 185 in Tompson, "The End of," 1103.

<sup>105</sup> Tompson, "The End of," 1102.

<sup>106</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev on Khrushchev*, 45-46.

<sup>107</sup> Hahn, "Who Ousted," 111.

<sup>108</sup> Vladimir E. Semichastny, "Kak Smeshchali N. S. Khrushcheva," *Argumenty i Fakty*, 20 (1989): 5.

<sup>109</sup> Shelest, *Da ne*, 210.

<sup>110</sup> See: Semichastny, "Kak Smeshchali"; Shelest, *Da ne*; Khrushchev, *Khrushchev on Khrushchev*.

<sup>111</sup> Semichastny, "Kak Smeshchali," 5.

Khrushchev agreed with Semichastny on the dual leadership of the conspiracy.<sup>112</sup> He even dated the composition of Brezhnev-Podgorny bloc to 1963.<sup>113</sup> Brezhnev was again appointed as a Central Committee secretary (he had previously held it in 1952-1953 and from 1956 to 1960), as a result of Kozlov's stroke in April 1963. However, he continued to keep his job as Presidium chairman, so having two posts at the same time gave him a considerable amount of power. Thus, Khrushchev contended that while Brezhnev was serving as both a Central Committee Secretary and Presidium chairman in 1963, the Brezhnev-Podgorny bloc began to take shape: "They were a couple of old pals who were now Presidium members and Central Committee secretaries and thus had vast power".<sup>114</sup> Moreover, according to Shelest, beyond the shadow of a doubt, Brezhnev and Podgorny were the chief leaders of Khrushchev's removal; however, he saw Brezhnev as a weak person while praising Podgorny as the chief.<sup>115</sup>

Only two observers made a direct distinction between Brezhnev and Podgorny: while Voronov claimed that the ringleader was Brezhnev, Alexei Adzhubei, son-in-law of Khrushchev, asserted that it was Podgorny. Voronov, the premier of the Russian Federation at the time, pointed out that Brezhnev was the main player of the coup, since he began to contact many Central Committee members a long time ago and used his interpersonal skills during the hunting activities at Zavidovo by canvassing Central Committee members to overthrow Khrushchev.<sup>116</sup> He added, "Brezhnev himself put by each name on a list of Central Committee members either a plus (for those who were ready to support him in the struggle against Khrushchev) or minus. Each person

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<sup>112</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev on Khrushchev*, 66-67.

<sup>113</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev on Khrushchev*, 66.

<sup>114</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev on Khrushchev*, 66.

<sup>115</sup> Shelest, *Da ne*, 209; Shelest, "O Khrushcheva," 5.

<sup>116</sup> Hahn, "Who Ousted," 111.

was individually worked over.”<sup>117</sup> On the other hand, Adzhubei, claimed that the main player of the plot was Podgorny: “I knew Podgorny well. He was a man of limited abilities, but greedy for power, crude, and not easily frightened. He was not like Brezhnev who was easily frightened. It is now clear that he and others had been working on all the Central Committee members since the summer. Brezhnev also decided to stake everything during the summer. But that was after Podgorny.”<sup>118</sup>

Even though Brezhnev and Podgorny equally led the plot, insiders mostly gave details about Brezhnev’s interpersonal skills during the process, paving the way for the coup. For example, in the case of Shelest, it was not Podgorny, but Brezhnev who informed Shelest about the plot and tried to persuade him to join them. According to Shelest, after complaining about how hard it was to work with Khrushchev, Brezhnev began to cry and said, “Without you and such a large organization as the Communist Party of Ukraine, we cannot do anything to improve our position”.<sup>119</sup> Shelest pointed out that Brezhnev really had an artistic skill when trying to convince people.<sup>120</sup> Afterwards, Shelest asked his boss, Podgorny, to interrogate what was going on and after learning that Podgorny had been participating in Brezhnev’s plan, he joined the plot. In addition, Voronov stated that Brezhnev himself had worked on him for a “whole night, before persuading him to join the conspiracy.”<sup>121</sup>

All of the participants in the plot who have so far spoken out have been unanimous in naming Brezhnev and Podgorny as the ringleaders. It was hard to believe that the coup was not initiated by Khrushchev’s enemies, but by his protégés; thus

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<sup>117</sup> Hahn, “Who Ousted,” 111-112.

<sup>118</sup> *Le Monde* (Paris), February 19-20, 1989, in Hahn, “Who Ousted,” 113.

<sup>119</sup> Shelest, *Da ne*, 201.

<sup>120</sup> Shelest, “O Khrushcheva,” 5.

<sup>121</sup> “Adzhubei wrote in an October 1989 *Ogonek* issue (No. 41, p. 9) that Voronov in a “videotape recording” said that Brezhnev and Andropov had persuaded him to join by showing him a list of all the other Presidium members who had joined the plot”, in Hahn, “Who Ousted,” 112; Khrushchev, *Khrushchev on Khrushchev*, 82.

until the publication of insiders' accounts in the second half of the 1980s, Suslov was considered the mastermind of the plot. However, according to all available sources, there is little doubt that Brezhnev and Podgorny were the initiators of Khrushchev's removal.

## II. Reasons to Oust Khrushchev:

There were several reasons that enabled the conspirators to guarantee the consent of Central Committee members and paved the way for the legitimization of Khrushchev's removal. The insecurity of cadres, agricultural reforms, foreign policy decisions, and the intensified cult of personality were the main pillars of the discontent.

The instability of cadres initiated by Khrushchev was the first primary reason inducing the 1964 coup. According to Burlatsky, Khrushchev was removed mostly because of 'his insatiable thirst for change'.<sup>122</sup> It was well known that Khrushchev had a plan to rejuvenate the composition of the Presidium of the Central Committee by replacing elderly members with those 45-50 years old.<sup>123</sup> Khrushchev's continuation in power was thus seen as precarious both for his fellow colleagues and for the very stability of the entire Soviet regime. On the one hand, 'his policies' failures might have given rise to social unrest, while, on the other, his increasing personal dominance within the leadership undermined the oligarchical arrangements around which the post-Stalin leadership had attempted to build a stable political order.'<sup>124</sup> He also led the decisions of the Twenty Second CPSU Congress in 1961, restricting party functionaries' time in office to two terms with exception to party leaders, including himself. His intensified arbitrary decisions on personnel could better explain why

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<sup>122</sup> Fyodor Burlatsky, "Khrushchev: Sketches for a Political Portrait," *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, 24 February 1988 (translated in Isaac J. Tarasulo ed. *Gorbachev and Glasnost: Views from the Soviet Press*, Wilmington, SR Books, 1989), 45-46.

<sup>123</sup> Shelest, *Da ne*, 221.

<sup>124</sup> Thompson, "The Fall of," 1112.

those who were dependent on Khrushchev's patronage also led the conspiracy to oust him.<sup>125</sup>

Khrushchev's economic and agricultural policies were another reason inducing the emergence of opposition. To strengthen the Soviet economy, Khrushchev led the reform dividing party's provincial and district committees into separate industrial and agricultural organizations in the fall of 1962. The logic of the reform was to solve the problems of the complexity in province-level management. Provincial party secretaries and their apparatus had been serving both for industrial and agricultural rule, and it was difficult to become an expert on both areas. However, this reform did not improve the economy and the bifurcation of leaders in the provinces made the situation more complicated as the size of the apparatus increased considerably. This new organization induced deep dissatisfaction among party and economic leaders at all levels.<sup>126</sup> It caused a considerable amount of confusion and induced the formation of twin parties - a worker's party and a peasant's party.<sup>127</sup> With the introduction of this reform initiated by Khrushchev, provincial party leaders, who formerly had power over regions as large as medium-sized countries, were reduced to being experts on industry or agriculture. According to Burlatsky, from the beginning, Khrushchev's idea of dividing the party's obkoms and raikoms into industrial and agricultural ones did not sound logical, but he thought that it was approved by his colleagues to decisively undermine Khrushchev's prestige among party leaders.<sup>128</sup> Moreover, Suslov discussed this issue in the plenum as a sign of Khrushchev's own mistake, although members of Central Committee had approved it collectively.

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<sup>125</sup> Richter, *Khrushchev's Double*, 169.

<sup>126</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev on Khrushchev*, 21.

<sup>127</sup> Medvedev, *Khrushchev*, 239.

<sup>128</sup> Fyodor Burlatsky, *Khrushchev: Sketches for a Political Portrait*, *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, 24 February 1988 (translated in Isaac J. Tarasulo ed. *Gorbachev and Glastnost: Views from the Soviet Press*, Wilmington, SR Books, 1989), 45.

Khrushchev's declining personal popularity is another reason that paved the way for his ouster. According to Sergei, his father's popularity declined with the delay in the introduction of the shorter working week and the food shortages.<sup>129</sup> Declining personal popularity of Khrushchev in the public's eyes proved itself with the lack of any counter attack or any kind of resentment after Khrushchev's removal. According to Georgi Arbatov, a senior official in the Central Committee apparat at that time, "There was virtually no outcry in the Party or among the public. In fact, the changeover was met with approval, and even joy, almost everywhere".<sup>130</sup> Moreover, not a single person went out into the streets to defend Khrushchev when he was overthrown.<sup>131</sup> Khrushchev and his policies became irrelevant in the eyes of public, as he could not find a successful way of ruling compared to traditional Stalinist policies despite all his efforts.<sup>132</sup>

Khrushchev's personal behaviors changed over time and thus, it contributed to the decline of his personal popularity. Previously, he had been called the 'Corn Man', not precarious to anyone; later he began to contact people as 'Mr. Pedantic'. On various occasions he tried to behave as if he was a master in every sphere: agriculture, science, diplomacy, and art etc. While Khrushchev tried to teach farmers how to run their farms, he even ventured to lecture the American maize expert Roswell Garst on the right way of sowing maize.<sup>133</sup>

Furthermore, Khrushchev was oblivious that he was undermining his own position in the party and government apparat by offending many of his colleagues. Although he deployed great interpersonal skills enabling him to hold onto power under

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<sup>129</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev on Khrushchev*, 70-72, 75-76; Thompson, "The Fall of," 1111.

<sup>130</sup> Georgi Arbatov, *The System, An Insider's Life in Soviet Politics* (New York, Times Books, 1992), 105.

<sup>131</sup> Arbatov, *The System*, 106.

<sup>132</sup> Arbatov, *The System*, 106.

<sup>133</sup> Medvedev, *Khrushchev*, 239.



the rule of Stalin, it seems that he forgot them during his own tenure. For instance, in January 1964, Kiril Mazurov, the Belorussian Party leader (Khrushchev had a high opinion of him) and Khrushchev went to Poland. When they returned to Belorussia, they fell out over economic policy and when Khrushchev came back to Moscow, he urged the Presidium to find a way to remove Mazurov. Khrushchev later cooled down, changed his mind and took no action; however, Mazurov learned about how Khrushchev had wanted to get rid of him, and this turned him against the First Secretary.<sup>134</sup> Consequently, Mazurov was enlisted in the plot.<sup>135</sup> With such imprudent behaviors, Khrushchev paved the way for his own fate.

More remarkably, in the Central Committee plenum on 14 October 1964 Suslov mentioned that when members of Presidium attempted to warn Khrushchev, they heard nothing from Khrushchev ‘except for coarse rebuffs and insults’.<sup>136</sup> When Brezhnev was trying to explain why they planned to overthrow Khrushchev and to persuade the Ukrainian Party leader Shelest to join the conspirators, he complained much about the difficulty of working with Khrushchev in the center, because he always took decisions independently, belittling his colleagues by giving them nicknames and different labels.<sup>137</sup>

The issue of the Academy of Sciences discussed in the October Plenum was another reason for the removal of Khrushchev. Alexander Nesmeyanov’s removal from the post of president of the USSR Academy of Sciences, in favor of Trofim Lysenko, a biologist, offended many representatives of literature, art and science and

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<sup>134</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev on Khrushchev*, 49-50.

<sup>135</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev on Khrushchev*, 49-50, and Thompson, “The Fall of,” 1104.

<sup>136</sup> “Report of M. Suslov to CC CPSU Plenum”, *Istoricheskii arkhiv*, no. 1, 1993, pp. 5, 7, 8; Rossiya, *kotoruyu my ne znali*, pp. 303-4, in Richard Sakwa, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union 1917-1991*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 349.

<sup>137</sup> Shelest, *Da ne*, 201.

set them against Khrushchev's rule.<sup>138</sup> Lysenko's whimsical scientific theories were far from being successful and ruined the careers of many Soviet scientists. Moreover, Khrushchev called for abolition of the Academy of Sciences, history of which went back to eighteenth century.<sup>139</sup> Hence, Khrushchev's arbitrary decisions concerning this institution also led to general resentment towards Khrushchev's rule.

Another reason to oust Khrushchev was the rapid rise of his personality cult in the beginning of 1960s. To expand his cult of personality, Khrushchev was accused of his increasing visibility in the press and specifically 'relied on the sycophancy of the press and the broadcasting services to bolster his self-esteem.'<sup>140</sup> According to the report presented by Suslov in the October Plenum, "It is harder to struggle with a living cult than with a dead one. If Stalin destroyed people physically, Khrushchev destroyed them morally. The removal of Khrushchev from power is a sign not of the weakness but of the strength of the party, and this should be a lesson".<sup>141</sup>

Khrushchev was also accused of favoring his family members as in the case of his son-in-law. Even though Adzhubei had been serving as the editor-in-chief of *Izvestiya*, he became involved in the diplomatic relations and 'assumed the role of shadow Foreign Minister'.<sup>142</sup> One of the important events, which sparked the conflagration and caused the GDR leaders' indignation with their Soviet colleagues, was Adzhubei's speech during his visit to West Germany. He slightly talked to Walter Ulbricht, the chairman of the State Council of the German Democratic Republic, stating, 'it would cost nothing to accept the unification of the two

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<sup>138</sup> Burlatsky, "Khrushchev: Sketches for," in Tarasulo, 45.

<sup>139</sup> William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (New York: W.W. Norton&Company, 2003), 616.

<sup>140</sup> Medvedev, *Khrushchev*, 237-238.

<sup>141</sup> "Report of M. Suslov," in Sakwa, *The Rise and Fall*, 349.

<sup>142</sup> Medvedev, *Khrushchev*, 238.

Germanies'.<sup>143</sup> How much this created discontent among the Soviet elites showed itself in the October Presidium meeting ousting Khrushchev, when the Central Committee removed ex-premier's son-in-law from his job at *Izvestiya*, labeling him 'obsequious, incompetent, and irresponsible'.<sup>144</sup>

Khrushchev's adventurous actions during the Cuban missile crises and conflict with China caused dissatisfaction among the party elites, composing the backbone of the opposition. Khrushchev was criticized for worsening relations with China. Under Khrushchev's rule Sino-Soviet relations reached the bottom. Khrushchev's de-Stalinization policies, launched at Twentieth Party Congress, were seen a threat to both Marxism-Leninist orthodoxy and to Chinese national interests.<sup>145</sup> Thus, Mao thought that China must replace the Soviet Union as the new leader of the communist movement. Khrushchev was supporting 'peaceful coexistence' with the West, and did not support the national liberation movement in Algeria and stayed aloof towards American intervention to Vietnam.<sup>146</sup> However, Chinese leaders regarded peaceful coexistence as a piece of utopia, seeing wars between communism and capitalism as inevitable.<sup>147</sup> Khrushchev also prevented China from building up its own nuclear strength and launched a campaign against steel-eaters and supported nuclear deterrence.<sup>148</sup> Hence, Khrushchev's de-Stalinization policies worsened relations with China and after the removal of Khrushchev Soviet leadership gradually got rid of many of the ideas of Twentieth Party Congress. Even though the conservative wind of the government sharing common political views with communist China began to heal

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<sup>143</sup> Fyodor Burlatsky, "Brezhnev and the End of the Thaw: Reflections on the Nature of Political Leadership", *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, 14 September 1988, pp 13-14 (translated in Alexander Dallin ed. *The Khrushchev and Brezhnev Years* (New York: Gardling, 1992), 67.

<sup>144</sup> Medvedev, *Khrushchev*, 238.

<sup>145</sup> William E. Griffith, "Sino-Soviet Relations, 1964-1965," *The China Quarterly* 25 (1966): 4-5.

<sup>146</sup> Alfred D. Low, *The Sino-Soviet Dispute: An Analysis of the Polemics* (London: Associated University Presses, 1976), 213.

<sup>147</sup> Arbatov, *The System*, 100.

<sup>148</sup> Low, *The Sino-Soviet Dispute*, 213; Sakwa, *The Rise and Fall*, 345.

relations with China by renouncing the extremes of the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, the removal of Khrushchev did not result in a sudden improvement of relations.<sup>149</sup>

Cuban missile crisis in 1962 concluded with the Soviet Union withdrawing its nuclear missiles from Cuba and in return the U.S. promised not to invade Cuba and to dismantle its Jupiter missiles in Turkey. While deciding to install nuclear weapons in Cuba, Khrushchev did not expect a strong American response to Soviet missiles in Cuba. Hence, thanks to efforts of leaders of the two countries nuclear devastation of the globe was avoided. Although Khrushchev got a deal to maintain the peace, the Soviet back down was humiliating not only for the USSR but also for Khrushchev personally.<sup>150</sup> Even though the decision to send missiles to Cuba were signed by every member of the Presidium, it was Khrushchev's idea and his authority; thus he would be the one who was embarrassed and criticized because of the face-saving deal with the U.S.<sup>151</sup> With this deal, Khrushchev pulled Soviet weapons out of Cuba without making it obvious that he could not resist U.S. threats. However even though Khrushchev was criticized for his errors in foreign policy, neither the Cuban missile crisis nor the worsened relations with China was mentioned at the plenum about Khrushchev's removal. While the Cuban missile crisis and the deterioration of relations with China contributed to Khrushchev's downfall, these were not the main reasons of his ouster.<sup>152</sup>

All in all, in the eyes of Soviet elites Khrushchev began to follow an independent line regardless of the issues causing resentment in the country. Reorganization in the economy and plans to rejuvenate party cadres were all far from

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<sup>149</sup> Arbatov, *The System*, 102; Low, *The Sino-Soviet Dispute*, 212.

<sup>150</sup> Peter Kenez, *A History of the Soviet Union from the Beginning to the End* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 210.

<sup>151</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev on Khrushchev*, 247.

<sup>152</sup> Kenez, *A History*, 210.

the interests of the party apparat and members of Presidium. His foreign policy decisions that induced the Cuban Missile Crisis and corrupted relations with China damaged the international prestige of the country. Most important, his increased cult of personality and arbitrary decisions on personnel compromised the future of party elites who attempted to remove him to guarantee their posts.

### **III. When did the Conspiracy Start?**

Dating the beginning of the conspiracy has an important effect on the interpretation of subsequent events. Timing can change the tide of the events as being the main core of actions; thus, to understand the coup accurately, it is necessary to reach accurate dating. One of the advocators of the short-term preparation for the coup, Tatu, pointed out that the plot was shaped on or around 10 October; thus, he tended to believe that the ringleader of the coup was Suslov, the well-known enemy of Khrushchev, rather than Khrushchev's entourage, Brezhnev and Podgorny.<sup>153</sup> However, all the participants of the coup made it clear that the conspiracy did not begin in October but much earlier, providing enough time to plotters for a successful result.

Even though those who witnessed the events are unanimous about the existence of a longer process for the preparation of the coup, they provided different dates for the beginning of the conspiracy. According to Semichastny, the head of the KGB at that time, the campaign to overthrow Khrushchev began in the early spring of 1964 and added that he was involved in the plot from the beginning, since without support of the KGB they could not attempt to remove Khrushchev.<sup>154</sup> Shelest noted in his diary that he was approached by Brezhnev for the first time on 3 July 1964 during the latter's visit to Crimea.<sup>155</sup> This was the date when he was informed; however, the plot could

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<sup>153</sup> Tatu, *Power in the Kremlin*, 405.

<sup>154</sup> Semichastny, "Kak Smeshchali," 5.

<sup>155</sup> Shelest, *Da ne*, 198-200.

have been initiated a couple of months earlier. According to Sergei Khrushchev, the plot was initiated early in 1964, and most probably in March when Brezhnev and Podgorny had a conversation about this issue with Shelepin.<sup>156</sup> Hence, it seems clear that the conspiracy had begun at least three months before the October Plenum and most probably it started near the beginning of 1964.

#### **IV. How did They Oust Khrushchev?**

Khrushchev travelled a lot in his last year in office, and this enabled the opposition to consolidate and carry out their conspiracy against him.<sup>157</sup> He was away from Moscow either in the USSR or abroad, “for some 170 days in 1963 and 150 during the first nine and half months of 1964 alone.”<sup>158</sup> Khrushchev’s trip to Pitsunda in Abkhazia gave plotters the opportunity they needed to accelerate their preparations for the coup.<sup>159</sup> On 1 October Khrushchev went to Crimea to relax and Shelest welcomed him as the party leader of the region. On 4 October, even though Shelest insisted that Khrushchev stay in Crimea, he rejected and went to Pitsunda where Mikoyan had been resting. Then, Shelest reported to Podgorny and Brezhnev the content of the conversations with Khrushchev and let them know that Khrushchev flew to Pitsunda.<sup>160</sup> Consequently, during Khrushchev’s holiday, members of CC Presidium meeting at Brezhnev’s apartment decided to have the October Plenum to remove Khrushchev and called him in the evening of October 12 to return to Moscow.<sup>161</sup>

##### **a) Who Called Khrushchev Back to Moscow?**

To identify the person who called Khrushchev to persuade him to come back to Moscow from Pitsunda was another controversial issue. Some scholars base their

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<sup>156</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev on Khrushchev*, 67.

<sup>157</sup> Martin McCauley, *The Khrushchev era: 1953-1964* (London: Longman, 1995), 76.

<sup>158</sup> Taubman, *Khrushchev*, 617.

<sup>159</sup> Thompson, “The Fall of,” 1106.

<sup>160</sup> Shelest, *Da ne*, 220-221.

<sup>161</sup> Semichastny, “Kak Smeshchali,” 5.

arguments on Sergei Khrushchev's account, pointing out that it was Suslov who called Khrushchev to inform him that the Presidium had convened and requested his presence.<sup>162</sup> However, Sergei Khrushchev's argument does not make a cogent case and is rife with holes. First, he tried to support his argument with an insider's account, the head of the KGB, Semichastny, but made false assumptions. According to Sergei Khrushchev, Brezhnev was supposed to have made the call, but he could not bring himself to do it, and Suslov took the lead and made the call. To support his argument he quoted from Semichastny's account: "It was not easy to talk him into it," and "we practically had to drag him to the phone."<sup>163</sup> At first glance, it is likely to agree with Sergei Khrushchev assuming Suslov took the lead since Brezhnev really hesitated and did not want to make the call as Semichastny pointed out. On the other hand, Semichastny indeed added that "with a trembling voice Brezhnev called Khrushchev and told him that next day there will be the Presidium meeting where some issues will be discussed."<sup>164</sup> Thus, Semichastny clearly pointed out that it was not Suslov, but Brezhnev who called Khrushchev to persuade him to come back to Moscow, but it seems that Sergei Khrushchev did exclude this statement intentionally to support his own argument.

Second, even though he also mentioned the account of another insider, Pyotry Shelest who did not attach any leading role to Suslov and clearly pointed out that "Suslov did not know about it [the plot] until the very end", Sergei Khrushchev insisted that it was Suslov who made the call.<sup>165</sup> Indeed, according to Shelest on October 12 at

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<sup>162</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev on Khrushchev*, 135-136; McCauley, *The Khrushchev era*, 80.

<sup>163</sup> Excerpts from the unpublished version of Semichastny's interview with V.A. Starkov published in *Argumenty i Fakty* May 20-26, 1989 appear in Khrushchev, *Khrushchev on Khrushchev*, 135-136.

<sup>164</sup> Semichastny, "Kak Smeshchali," 5.

<sup>165</sup> Excerpts from the unpublished transcript of Shelest's interview with V. A. Strakov, the published versions of which appears in *Argumenty i Fakty*, January 14-20, 1989, appeared in Khrushchev, *Khrushchev on Khrushchev*, 136.

first they decided that it should be Podgorny to call Khrushchev for a meeting of Presidium, since he was responsible for all the activities of Central Committee, but Podgorny was reluctant to do it.<sup>166</sup> After some discussions and speeches of Podgorny, they thought that if Podgorny called, it would be illogical and cause some suspicion, since Khrushchev and Podgorny had talked about this issue before, and Podgorny had not reported any problem. That is why, it was decided that Brezhnev should make the call.<sup>167</sup> Despite Shelest's account, Sergei Khrushchev states, "Nonetheless, Suslov quickly regained his footing and was calm and unbending in his phone conversation with Father.<sup>168</sup>" It is difficult to fathom why Sergei Khrushchev turned a deaf ear to accounts of Semichastny and Shelest and tried to claim Suslov took the lead to make the call while he believed that Brezhnev was the ringleader of the coup. Perhaps, by asserting that Brezhnev feared and hesitated to call his father and that Suslov made the call, Sergei Khrushchev tried to depict Brezhnev as a weak person unable to act in crucial and decisive moments.

Accounts of participants of the conspiracy who witnessed the events made it clear that it was not Suslov but Brezhnev who called. In addition to Shelest and Semichastny's accounts, Medvedev asserts that it was Brezhnev who called from Moscow to invite Khrushchev to the Central Committee meeting.<sup>169</sup> However, with a trivial divergence Dmitri Volkogonov pointed out that because Brezhnev hesitated to make the call, first Suslov spoke on the phone, then Brezhnev talked to Khrushchev.<sup>170</sup> Hence, it seemed obvious that Brezhnev called despite all his hesitation and fear.

#### **b) The October Plenum of 1964:**

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<sup>166</sup> Shelest, *Da ne*, 223-224.

<sup>167</sup> Shelest, *Da ne*, 223-224.

<sup>168</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev on Khrushchev*, 136.

<sup>169</sup> Medvedev, *Khrushchev*, 235-236; Shelest, *Da ne*, 224; Semichastny, "Kak Smeshchali," 5.

<sup>170</sup> Dmitri Volkogonov, *Autopsy for An Empire: The Seven Leaders Who Built the Soviet Regime* (New York: The Free Press, 1998), 253.



Just two weeks before the removal of the Khrushchev many members of the Central Committee knew about the measures to be taken against Khrushchev; however, no one could have predicted what would happen.<sup>171</sup> Even the organizers of the plot were in some kind of uncertainty and prostration. However, from Khrushchev's point of view everything was going well. Even on 25 September, less than one month before the coup, when Khrushchev asked about his performance to other members of the CC, Brezhnev was the one who presented most of the praise to Khrushchev, as a part of his own strategy.<sup>172</sup> He knew well how to clear the road to act his intrigues freely.<sup>173</sup> With these prudent and skillful tactics of the leading conspirator, Khrushchev remained oblivious about the ongoing conspiracy initiated by his entourage.

According to Shelest and Sergei Khrushchev, before leaving for his vacation, Khrushchev had already heard about the preparation of a coup.<sup>174</sup> According to Shelest, Khrushchev got a letter giving information about the preparation of the coup, and named Podgorny and Ignatov among the conspirators.<sup>175</sup> In addition, Sergei Khrushchev said that he received a call informing the preparation of a coup and he shared this information with his father.<sup>176</sup> When Khrushchev heard about it, he said: "No, it's incredible. Brezhnev, Podgorny, Shelepin- they are completely different people. It cannot be... Ignatov - that's possible. He is very dissatisfied and he is not a good man anyway. But what can he have in common with the others".<sup>177</sup> Without any doubt Khrushchev directly asked Podgorny whether he heard about such news or not;

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<sup>171</sup> Shelest, *Da ne*, 214.

<sup>172</sup> Shelest, *Da ne*, 215.

<sup>173</sup> Shelest, *Da ne*, 215.

<sup>174</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev on Khrushchev*, 107-108; Shelest, *Da ne*, 217-218.

<sup>175</sup> Shelest, *Da ne*, 217.

<sup>176</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev on Khrushchev*, 107-108.

<sup>177</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev on Khrushchev*, 108.

Podgorny claimed that he did not know and offered to entrust this issue to the KGB. Khrushchev intuitively rejected this idea and entrusted Mikoyan with this issue. Mikoyan made some investigations, but Ignatov denied the charge. Then the letter was handed over to the KGB, but as was easy to guess the letter did not go anywhere. It was one of the fatal mistakes of Khrushchev to trust his retinue. However, it was the key issue that accelerated the speed of conspirators. News related to “their business” began to spread around and it even reached Khrushchev; thus, they had to accelerate the process during Khrushchev’s absence from Moscow.<sup>178</sup>

On October 4, Khrushchev went to Pitsunda where Mikoyan had already been on holiday. Eight days later, on the evening of October 12 the conspirators decided to call Khrushchev to take their plan into action. All of them met at the Brezhnev’s apartment.<sup>179</sup> Brezhnev made the call and requested that the general secretary return to Moscow by October 13, explaining the importance of the meeting.<sup>180</sup> Khrushchev asked, “What happened to you there? Cannot do without me?”; “I will think and consult Mikoyan, call me later.”<sup>181</sup> Brezhnev called him one hour later, and he told them that he would fly the next day at 11 a.m. to Moscow with Mikoyan. As Mikoyan said later, Khrushchev actually sensed something worse after the call, but Mikoyan ignored it and eased him.<sup>182</sup>

On October 13 all the members of the Central Committee of the CPSU arrived to Moscow. The KGB led by Semichastny took an active part in all this process by providing full security.<sup>183</sup> Before Khrushchev arrived at the Kremlin, all his guards

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<sup>178</sup> Shelest, *Da ne*, 218.

<sup>179</sup> Semichastny, “Kak Smeshchali,” 5; Khrushchev, *Khrushchev on Khrushchev*, 135; According to Shelest they were not in Brezhnev’s apartment, but in the meeting room of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the CPSU in the Kremlin, see Shelest, *Da ne*, 224.

<sup>180</sup> Semichastny, “Kak Smeshchali,” 5.

<sup>181</sup> Shelest, *Da ne*, 224.

<sup>182</sup> Shelest, *Da ne*, 224.

<sup>183</sup> Shelest, *Da ne*, 221.

were replaced by the order of Semichastny to block all transfer of information between inner and outer world.<sup>184</sup> When Khrushchev arrived at Moscow, the KGB leader welcomed him.<sup>185</sup>

In the first meeting of the October Plenum, on October 13 Khrushchev was led to chair the Presidium meeting, since members of Central Committee pretended everything was going according to democratic procedures.<sup>186</sup> However it would differ from previous meetings, because party elites would criticize Khrushchev harshly and discuss his mistakes. The meeting ended late in the night without any resolution, and they decided to continue their meeting tomorrow, 14 October.<sup>187</sup>

On the second day, Brezhnev opened the Central Committee plenum by stating “the situation in the Presidium had become abnormal, and the fault for this lay above all with Comrade Khrushchev, who had embarked on a path that transgressed the Leninist principles of collective leadership of the life of the Party and the country, highlighting his own personality cult.”<sup>188</sup> And similar to yesterday’s meeting, members of the Central Committee declared their criticism towards Khrushchev’s rule. Moreover, Suslov presented the report containing every argument said in the two days. Only Mikoyan tried to vindicate Khrushchev in the meeting, but it did not work. He proposed to let Khrushchev keep one of his two posts by defending his contributions to the country, but it was rejected unanimously.<sup>189</sup>

Consequently, Khrushchev was forced to resign and he could not find another supporter for his rule except Mikoyan. He made a long speech and tried to vindicate

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<sup>184</sup> Shelest, *Da ne*, 225.

<sup>185</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev on Khrushchev*, 145-146.

<sup>186</sup> No stenographic report of the meeting was taken, although Shelest did take personal notes on it. See Shelest, *Da ne*, 223-242; Shelest, “O Khrushcheve,” 5.

<sup>187</sup> Shelest, *Da ne*, 234.

<sup>188</sup> Archives of the President of the Russian Federation, APRF, f.2, op. 1, d.752, 11. 1-2, in Volkogonov, *Autopsy for An Empire*, p. 255.

<sup>189</sup> Shelest, “O Khrushcheve,” 5, Khrushchev, *Khrushchev on Khrushchev*, 149.

himself. He pointed out that his policies and decisions criticized by members of the CC were in fact taken collectively and nobody had attempted to warn him about his mistakes, rather they chose to applause his decisions.<sup>190</sup> He said, “I understand that this is my last political speech, my swan song, so to speak I will not appear before the plenum, I would like to address one request to the plenum...” but his speech was interrupted by Brezhnev: “There will be no request”.<sup>191</sup>

The committee approved the resolution, unanimously releasing Khrushchev from his duties on account of his age and health. Moreover, it was decided that the posts of First Secretary of the Central Committee and Chairman of the Council of Ministers would never again be united in one person. Brezhnev was elected the party leader, while Kosygin became the Premier.<sup>192</sup>

The removal of Khrushchev was made public two days later from the presidium meeting. In the press there was no mention of the conspiracy; the message released to the country was brief and to the point:

On 14 October of this year a plenum of CPSU Central Committee was held. The plenum approved the request of Comrade N. S. Khrushchev to be relieved of his responsibilities as First Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU, member of the Presidium of the CC of the CPSU, and Chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers, in connection with his advanced years and deteriorating health. The plenum of the CC of the CPSU elected as First Secretary of the CC of the CPSU Comrade L. I. Brezhnev.<sup>193</sup>

## **V: Conclusion:**

In this chapter, first, I laid out three types of different interpretations on the main players in the 1964 coup. For more than two decades many believed that the ringleader of the plot was Suslov. However, a small number of memoirists also

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<sup>190</sup> Shelest, “O Khrushcheve,” 5.

<sup>191</sup> Shelest, “O Khrushcheve,” 5; Khrushchev, *Khrushchev on Khrushchev*, 157.

<sup>192</sup> Tompson, “The Fall of,” 1114.

<sup>193</sup> Pravda, 16 October 1964, in Sakwa, *The Rise and Fall*, 350.

asserted that it was Shelepin. Nevertheless, in the light of insiders' accounts published in the late 1980s in the period of glasnost, it became clear that the coup was not planned or led by Khrushchev's enemies, such as Suslov, but by some of his own protégés Brezhnev and Podgorny. Even though Shelest, an ambitious politician who sought top-level positions, actively participated in the plot, he was not the ringleader. As to insiders' accounts, there is no doubt that Brezhnev and Podgorny were the masterminds of the plot.

After identifying the ringleaders of the coup, I discussed the reasons initiating the removal of Khrushchev to get a clear understanding of the logic of the plot. Even though there were plenty of reasons to oust him, the most important one, which made Khrushchev's protégés the leading conspirators, was Khrushchev's intensified arbitrary decisions toward personnel which compromised the future of both ruling elites and the country.

Dating the coup accurately is another pillar to understand the conspiracy. Dating could change the main core of the events, thus to get comprehensive knowledge on the conspiracy, exact dating should be achieved first. According to most of the observers and insiders, preparations for the plot took more than three months and less than one year. In addition, conspirators accelerated their preparations at the beginning of October.

Even though Khrushchev had already heard some news related to ongoing machination, he preferred to rely on his entourage. However, too much trust to his entourage paved the way for his downfall. For the first time in the history of the Soviet Union, a leader was not removed by death, but by his own protégés skillfully acting according to the rules of Kremlin politics.

### Chapter III: Consolidation of Power

After Khrushchev's ouster, a collective leadership emerged: Leonid Brezhnev heading the Communist Party, Alexei Kosygin running the government, and Nikolai Podgorny acting as head of the Presidium. Even though on paper the Soviet Union was ruled under the collective leadership, one man, Brezhnev, began to consolidate his power and emerged as the leading figure by mid-1970s.<sup>194</sup> According to the stagnation view, Brezhnev was depicted as a vain man, barely able to stand under the weight of undeserved medals, not able to make a coherent speech.<sup>195</sup> However, as it is for stagnation hypothesis, it is necessary to make a division between the "early" and "late" Brezhnevs. He was in power for 18 years and suffered serious health problems during the last nine years. It is very natural that his deteriorated health affected his performance and policy-making role in his last years. For this reason, in this chapter I will only examine the political behaviors and tactics of "early" Brezhnev, who tried to consolidate his power from 1964 to mid-1970s. While Brezhnev was just one of the members of the collective leadership after the October 1964 Plenum, how was he able to achieve absolute power by eliminating his rivals and consolidating his power during almost one decade? Understanding Brezhnev's tactics and maneuvers in this process enables us to gain an insight into the art of post-Stalin Kremlin politics.

#### I. A "Weak" Figure in Leadership

After the ouster of Khrushchev, Brezhnev was regarded as "a weak" figure by the majority of politicians in the Central Committee *apparatus* and was seen a "temporary figure" among the leadership, but this made Brezhnev's job easy while

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<sup>194</sup> Ian Derbyshire, *The Politics in the Soviet Union from Brezhnev to Gorbachev* (Cambridge: Chamber, 1987), 21.

<sup>195</sup> Edwin Bacon, "Reconsidering Brezhnev," in *Brezhnev Reconsidered*, ed. Edwin Bacon and Mark Sandle (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 10.

consolidating his power.<sup>196</sup> No one expected that he would stay long or become the unique leader by eliminating all his rivals.<sup>197</sup> Not only members of Soviet leadership described Brezhnev's accession as somewhat shaky at the start, but also Western observers depicted Brezhnev as a "gray, colorless and weak" person in the fall of 1964.<sup>198</sup> Burlatsky states, "He (Brezhnev) assumed power as smoothly as if someone had tried the crown of Monomakh<sup>199</sup> on various heads well in advance and settled on this one. And this crown fitted him so well that he wore it for eighteen years without fears, cataclysms, or conflicts of any kind."<sup>200</sup> Keep supports Burlatsky's argument that Brezhnev was "a typical regional apparatchik."<sup>201</sup> He found Brezhnev a mediocrity, but pointed out that this was an advantage in the jockeying for power.<sup>202</sup> Brezhnev's presence as a weak figure was one of the reasons that moved him to the top by the consent of the members of the conspiracy.

Brezhnev's rivals (as well as many others) underestimated his ability to preserve his power. Burlatsky argues that "power was thrust upon Brezhnev as a gift of fate".<sup>203</sup> He claims that while Stalin and Khrushchev fought to get power by eliminating all their rivals, Brezhnev did not spend any effort to achieve his post and to keep it until his death. Andropov asserted, "Once you got to the top of the Party

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<sup>196</sup> William Tompson, *The Soviet Union under Brezhnev* (London: Pearson/Longman, 2003), 15; Pyotr E. Shelest, "O Khrushcheve, Brezhneve i Drugikh", *Argumenty i Fakty*, January 14, 1989, 5.

<sup>197</sup> Alexander Chubarov, *Russia's Bitter Path to Modernity: A History of the Soviet and Post-Soviet Eras* (New York and London: Continuum, 2001), 144.

<sup>198</sup> Harry Gelman, *The Brezhnev Politburo and the Decline of Détente* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University, 1984), 74; William J. Tompson, "The Fall of Nikita Khrushchev," *Soviet Studies* 43 (1991): 1116.

<sup>199</sup> Vladimir Monomakh was an early Russian ruler. "To wear Monomakh's crown" is a proverbial expression meaning to bear the burden of state responsibilities.

<sup>200</sup> Fyodor Burlatsky, "Brezhnev and the End of the Thaw: Reflections on the Nature of Political Leadership," *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, September 14 1988, (translated in Isaac J. Tarasulo ed. *Gorbachev and Glastnost: Views from the Soviet Press*, Wilmington, SR Books, 1989), 53.

<sup>201</sup> Burlatsky, "Brezhnev and the End of the Thaw," 56; John Keep, *A History of the Soviet Union 1945-1991* (New York: Oxford University Press), 193.

<sup>202</sup> Keep, *A History*, 193.

<sup>203</sup> Burlatsky, "Brezhnev and," 52.

leadership, there was no further need for legitimatization,<sup>204</sup> but Brezhnev had to fight skillfully to consolidate his power and keep it until his death. People who knew him very well did not have difficulty to understand how he came to power; as Anushavan A. Arzumanyan, who served with Brezhnev during the war mentioned, “You do not have to teach this man anything as far as the struggle for positioning and power is concerned.”<sup>205</sup>

Indeed, history repeated itself in the case of Brezhnev. His predecessors, Stalin and Khrushchev were almost outsiders and no one had expected that they would be the new leaders as in the case of Brezhnev. The Soviet Union did not have any orderly tradition to appoint a chief of the state. The one who knew the rules of Kremlin politics had more chance to become the party leader. Four years before the coup, statements of Harrison E. Salisbury, an expert on Soviet Russia, well depicted the rules of the Kremlin politics:

It becomes obvious from the careers of Stalin and Khrushchev that to win the great prize not only must a man possess supreme skill in political maneuver. He must be able to dissemble. He must be able to lull the suspicions of his rivals and retain the favor of his chief. He must have a solid power base and if possible, keep himself in the background until the moment of the bid for power. Perhaps, most important of all, the successful candidate must be able to identify himself with the currents of Russian spirit and destiny.<sup>206</sup>

By following his own prescription of tactics, Brezhnev was able to become the leader of the party and eliminated all his rivals over time. Ironically, Brezhnev seemed to follow the Khrushchevian style of taking power by behaving as a simple man without having any ambitions. Both men pretended they did not plan to achieve power. While people were depicting Brezhnev as a mediocrity, Khrushchev was called “Nikita

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<sup>204</sup> Georgi Andropov, *The System: An Insider's Life in Soviet Politics* (New York: Times Books, 1993), 118.

<sup>205</sup> Andropov, *The System*, 119.

<sup>206</sup> Harrison E. Salisbury, “After Khrushchev Who?,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, March 5, 1960, 84.



Kukuruzni,” which means “Nikita, the Cornman.”<sup>207</sup> Hence, pretending that they were simple men, both rulers gradually consolidated their powers.

In a sense, the CPSU was composed of two parties. There was the outer party, which had more than twelve million rank-and-file members at that time, most of whom did not have voting rights; thus they could not decide on party policies. In contrast, the inner party, comprised of several hundred thousand professional functionaries, controlled the destiny of the country by concentrating real power in the apparat structure.

The inner party was composed of party secretaries of three ruling units, from district through regional and union republics’ levels and Brezhnev assured their loyalty by cultivating good relations with them. Each day, Brezhnev spent about two hours on the phone ringing first party secretaries in the regions and republics.<sup>208</sup> As a rule, Brezhnev talked in the same way: “Look, Ivan Ivanovich, we are studying this matter. I wanted to consult you, to hear your opinion.”<sup>209</sup> So, these kinds of behaviors increased Brezhnev’s prestige and popularity in the eyes of party apparatchik.

Besides building good ties within the party apparatus, Brezhnev took care to establish good relations with his ministers. He assured loyalty of his ministers by allowing them “to represent their departments and taking their advice appropriately.”<sup>210</sup> He created the impression of “an impartial, calm, tactful leader who would not take a single step without consulting with other colleagues” and gaining their consent.<sup>211</sup> As Dobrynin states, “Brezhnev was a political actor who knew well the “corridors of power,” was used to “playing in a team” and not separately. He was

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<sup>207</sup> Salisbury, “After Khrushchev,” 84.

<sup>208</sup> Chubarov, *Russia’s Bitter*, 144; Burlatsky, “Brezhnev and,” 57.

<sup>209</sup> Burlatsky, “Brezhnev and,” 57.

<sup>210</sup> Ian D. Thatcher, “Brezhnev as Leader,” in *Brezhnev Reconsidered*, ed. Edwin Bacon and Mark Sandle (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 28.

<sup>211</sup> Burlatsky, “Brezhnev and,” 57.

Careful, unhurried, willing to listen to the opinions of his colleagues, wary of sudden turns or sharp new directions, preferring the aforementioned stability... He did not concern himself much with problems of ideology and did not show much interest in them.<sup>212</sup>

## II. Eliminating Rivals:

Podgorny was one of the first victims of Brezhnev's consolidation of power. He was a senior apparatchik, and his experience in party administration was second only to Brezhnev's.<sup>213</sup> Like Brezhnev, Podgorny was a product of the Ukrainian organization. He had been brought into the Secretariat along with Brezhnev in 1963 to bolster Khrushchev's position, but "had then lost out to Brezhnev in competition for seniority among Khrushchev's lieutenants".<sup>214</sup> Podgorny had played an active role in the removal of Khrushchev. According to Shelest, Podgorny backed Brezhnev from the start and without Podgorny's support Brezhnev could not have survived his first year in the office.<sup>215</sup> However, he did not know why Podgorny supported him.<sup>216</sup> Nevertheless, Brezhnev's subsequent sidelining of Podgorny suggests that he saw Podgorny as a threat.<sup>217</sup>

Brezhnev had good reasons to see Podgorny as a strong rival necessary to eliminate in his consolidation of power. After the removal of Khrushchev, Podgorny, a member of the Secretariat, emerged as a strong rival, having a centrist and moderating influence and being supported by protégés not only in Ukraine, his former

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<sup>212</sup> Anatoly F. Dobrynin, *Sugubo doveritel'no: Posol v Vashingtone pri shesti prezidentakh SShA (1962–1986)* (Moscow, 1997), 121, in *Brezhnev Reconsidered*, ed. Edwin Bacon and Mark Sandle (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 10.

<sup>213</sup> Gelman, *The Brezhnev Politburo*, 72.

<sup>214</sup> Gelman, *The Brezhnev Politburo*, 72.

<sup>215</sup> Shelest, "O Khrushcheve," 5.

<sup>216</sup> Shelest, "O Khrushcheve," 5.

<sup>217</sup> Tompson, *The Soviet Union*, 15.

stronghold, but also among Khrushchev's supporters throughout the country.<sup>218</sup> Moreover, Podgorny's role in the plenary session of November 1964, a month after the coup, demonstrated that he was held second place in the party.<sup>219</sup> Rather than Brezhnev, Podgorny delivered the Presidium's report to the plenum, informing about the abolition of Khrushchev's highly unpopular policy, bifurcation of the regional party apparatus into agricultural and industrial organizations.<sup>220</sup> Because he was chosen to deliver the report, Western observers also began to think that Podgorny "secured the very important Secretariat portfolio for supervision of cadre policy." At the same time his protégés were getting higher posts; Shelest was promoted, and A. M. Rumyantsev was appointed as the editor of *Pravda*.<sup>221</sup> To consolidate his power and become an unchallenged First Secretary Brezhnev had to destroy Podgorny's power base.

However, Podgorny's political mistakes made Brezhnev's job easy. In May 1965 in Baku during his speech, Podgorny vigorously advocated for consumer goods production rather than giving priority to heavy industry and defense capacity.<sup>222</sup> He supported soft policies in contrast to Soviet ideologues and the Soviet military.<sup>223</sup> This led to some unpleasantness for Podgorny, because Suslov rebutted him by asserting that material restrictions for the sake of defense is a present need.<sup>224</sup> However, Brezhnev advocated for two inspirational projects, agricultural modernization and enhancing military might, aiming to revive the heroic past. For Suslov, budget allocation to defense was a worthy one, for Kosygin a necessary one, and for Podgorny

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<sup>218</sup> Michel Tatu, *Power in the Kremlin: From Khrushchev to Kosygin* (New York: The Viking Press), 499; Gelman, *The Brezhnev Politburo*, 73.

<sup>219</sup> Tatu, *Power in the Kremlin*, 499.

<sup>220</sup> Gelman, *The Brezhnev Politburo*, 73.

<sup>221</sup> Gelman, *The Brezhnev Politburo*, 73.

<sup>222</sup> Tatu, *Power in the Kremlin*, 499-500.

<sup>223</sup> Gelman, *The Brezhnev Politburo*, 73.

<sup>224</sup> *Pravda*, June 5 1965 in Tatu, *Power in the Kremlin*, 500.

an unnecessary one.<sup>225</sup> Consequently, after that event Podgorny had some kind of “political disease” lasting until July 1965; for almost two months Podgorny could not welcome foreign delegations and meetings were canceled by just reporting that he was confined to his house by doctor’s orders.<sup>226</sup> Hence, Podgorny’s ideological difference over military spending differentiated him from party oligarchs and this paved the way for his demolition.

To destroy Podgorny, the best method would be to strike at the cadres in Kharkiv, the region where his clients were concentrated. Podgorny had headed the Kharkiv Obkom in the early 1950s, and it remained very much his political base. Later in that year the Party organization in Kharkiv was blamed for having serious shortcoming in its recruitment policies. The first victim of Podgorny’s protégés was V. N. Titov. In April 1965 Titov was removed from his post, the junior Central Committee Secretary for Organizational Party Work, in which he had had an active role in personnel selection at the highest level.<sup>227</sup> He was transferred to Kazakhstan as Second Secretary of the Republic’s Central Committee, and in September he was relieved of his duties.<sup>228</sup> Titov’s removal enabled Brezhnev to intensify his activities against the Kharkiv group. The last victim, N. A. Sobol, was removed from his key post of Second Secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party and transferred to the Government apparatus.<sup>229</sup>

On 9 December 1965, Podgorny was removed from the Secretariat, the true center of the party and assigned to the largely ceremonial post of Chairman of the

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<sup>225</sup> Richard D. Anderson, *Public Politics in an Authoritarian State: Making Foreign Policy During the Brezhnev Years* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 91.

<sup>226</sup> United Press International, June 23 1965 in Tatu, *Power in the Kremlin*, 500.

<sup>227</sup> Tompson, *The Soviet Union*, 16.

<sup>228</sup> Tatu, *Power in the Kremlin*, 501.

<sup>229</sup> Tatu, *Power in the Kremlin*, 502.

Presidium of Supreme Soviet.<sup>230</sup> However, as the Chief of the State, he remained a member of the Politburo and retained some influence, like Brezhnev in 1960s.<sup>231</sup> Podgorny and the Kharkiv men were not treated harshly but transferred to other positions gently. Andrei Kirilenko, one of the protégés of Brezhnev, took Podgorny's position as Central Committee secretary for personal policy.<sup>232</sup> Hence, it seems that Brezhnev was able to eliminate Podgorny by both benefiting from Podgorny's political mistakes and advocating for military spending seen necessary by the party's top officials.

Shelepin was the second victim of Brezhnev's power struggle. As a considerably younger man, he was an early threat to Brezhnev's power. After the ouster of Khrushchev, he was promoted and suddenly became a member of the collective leadership whose overall shape was still ill-defined.<sup>233</sup> He was the only Politburo member holding posts in both the government Council of Ministers (as Deputy Premier) and the central party apparatus (as a member of the secretariat).<sup>234</sup> In a team composed of Brezhnev, Kosygin, Podgorny and Suslov, mostly the old guards, Shelepin stood out as the man of the future.<sup>235</sup> He was also head of the Party-State Control Commission, which Khrushchev had established to use against his functional opponents throughout the party structure.<sup>236</sup> Thus, Shelepin had associates heading important party organs; one of his protégés, Sergey Pavlov, was running the Komsomol; another, Vadim Tikhonov, heading the uniformed police, or MOOP<sup>237</sup>;

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<sup>230</sup> Tompson, *The Soviet Union*, 16.

<sup>231</sup> Tatu, *Power in the Kremlin*, 502.

<sup>232</sup> Bacon, "Reconsidering Brezhnev," 12.

<sup>233</sup> Tatu, *Power in the Kremlin*, 503.

<sup>234</sup> Gelman, *The Brezhnev Politburo*, 73.

<sup>235</sup> Tatu, *Power in the Kremlin*, 503.

<sup>236</sup> Gelman, *The Brezhnev Politburo*, 73.

<sup>237</sup> Ministry for the Protection of Public Order (MOOP): In 1962, the institutional name of MVD, Ministry of Internal Affairs, was changed to MOOP.

and a third, Vladimir Semichastny, running the secret police, KGB.<sup>238</sup> Shelepin had also many friends and associates in the second ranks of the party.

Shelepin whose entourage members held key positions did not abstain from showing his ambitions and this induced his own demolition. According to Gelman, Shelepin did not hesitate to encourage his entourage to “spread the word that his rapid rise would soon reach its logical climax,” and this was a mistake.<sup>239</sup> Furthermore, Burlatsky argues that among the different generations of leaders in Soviet Union, “The only person made to look a fool was Shelepin, who thought he was the smartest. He did not advance a single step in his career, because not only Brezhnev but also Suslov and other leaders detected his authoritarian ambitions.”<sup>240</sup> Consequently, both unofficial Soviet and Western sources reported persistent rumors in Moscow that Brezhnev would soon be replaced “by a man with a little more dynamism and natural authority”.<sup>241</sup> Consequently, Shelepin’s ambitious ideas and behaviors came to the party oligarchs’ attention, and they began to see him as a threat to party authority and attempted to decrease his power.

Brezhnev was able to weaken Shelepin’s power at the same time with Podgorny. On 6 December 1965, the Party-State Control Committee (Commission), headed by Shelepin since 1962, was abolished. According to Tatu, “this was aimed primarily against their chief, Shelepin, for this was not his only responsibility or perhaps even his most important one.” When announcing the dissolution of the Committee, Brezhnev did not say a word about Shelepin; he simply explained that the Committee had some shortcomings in its work.<sup>242</sup> Whether its liquidation was directly

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<sup>238</sup> Gelman, *The Brezhnev Politburo*, 73.

<sup>239</sup> Gelman, *The Brezhnev Politburo*, 74.

<sup>240</sup> Burlatsky, “Brezhnev and,” 55.

<sup>241</sup> Edward Crankshaw, *Observer*, June 20, 1965 in Gelman, 76.

<sup>242</sup> *Pravda*, December 7 1965, in Tatu, *Power in the Kremlin*, 507.

against him or not, afterwards the Party was going to supervise its own organization rather than a commission, a product of Khrushchev's hated 1962 reform. Moreover, at Kosygin's suggestion, Shelepin lost his position as deputy prime minister to concentrate on his work within the Central Committee of the CPSU.<sup>243</sup> So, Shelepin lost one of the pillars of his power; he was not holding a post in the government anymore. However, he remained in the Secretariat until 1967, but with a less significant position dealing with trade and light industry, and he was finally transferred to the post of Chairman of the All Union Central Trade Council, a less powerful position than that of Podgorny.<sup>244</sup> Furthermore, while Brezhnev introducing "trust in cadres" in 1965, Shelepin was calling for a "restoration of obedience and order" by praising Stalin's leadership.<sup>245</sup> Consequently, Brezhnev won the support of conservatives by advocating for "stability of cadres," Shelepin could not find backing in the Presidium.<sup>246</sup> This seems an important accomplishment of Brezhnev against his rivals, because he had been already undermining Podgorny's authority and got majority in the Presidium to act against Shelepin.<sup>247</sup>

Moreover, throughout 1966-68 a number of high-ranking officials linked to Shelepin were demoted, including heads of KGB, the *militsiya* (the ordinary police), Communist Youth League, and the official news agency, TASS.<sup>248</sup> A few months before Shelepin's demotion, Semichastny lost his post as head of KGB, which was blamed for "the growth of dissent, and particularly for the defection abroad of Svetlana

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<sup>243</sup> Pravda, December 10 1965 in Tatu, *Power in the Kremlin*, 507; Tompson, *The Soviet Union*, 16; Gelman, *The Brezhnev Politburo*, 77.

<sup>244</sup> Tompson, *The Soviet Union*, 16.

<sup>245</sup> Robert Service, *A History of Modern Russia: From Tsarism to the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 379.

<sup>246</sup> Service, *A History*, 379.

<sup>247</sup> Gelman, *The Brezhnev Politburo*, 77.

<sup>248</sup> Jerry F. Hough and Merle Fainsod, *How the Soviet Union is Governed* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1979), 257-8; Tompson, 16.

Allilueva, Stalin's daughter".<sup>249</sup> According to Shelest, Brezhnev was afraid of the younger generation who took important positions.<sup>250</sup> Thus, Brezhnev got rid of younger ones such as Shelest and Semichastny, even though they had supported him while overthrowing Khrushchev. Shelest believed that Brezhnev came to the decision of removal of Semichastny by himself without asking other colleagues. During a Politburo meeting in which they were discussing various issues, Brezhnev suddenly took out a piece of paper and said, "Colleagues, we have one more issue." Nobody in the room knew what was going on and Brezhnev said to Semichastny, "We decided to assign you another job," and asked others in the meeting to approve that Andropov would be the new KGB leader.<sup>251</sup> Shelest argued that Brezhnev continued to eliminate people who he did not like or need in this way.<sup>252</sup> Brezhnev had learnt from Khrushchev's mistakes and carefully maneuvered to get rid of younger colleagues who might pose a threat in the future and replaced them with elderly individuals.<sup>253</sup>

On the other hand, personal conflicts between Shelepin and Brezhnev may have affected the former's interpretation. Semichastny, recalled later, "Frequently Brezhnev would tell Shelepin with some irritation 'You have a different opinion from mine on every issue.'"<sup>254</sup> Shelest opposed Brezhnev over agricultural policy at a Politburo meeting in 1967, afterwards Brezhnev reprimanded Shelest in his own office: "You have come out against me personally, although you know agriculture is my preserve. Don't try to teach me what to do!"<sup>255</sup> Hence, it seems likely that Shelepin distanced himself from party leaders and particularly from Brezhnev by behaving

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<sup>249</sup> Keep, *A History*, 196.

<sup>250</sup> Shelest, "O Khrushcheve," 5.

<sup>251</sup> Shelest, "O Khrushcheve," 5.

<sup>252</sup> Shelest, "O Khrushcheve", 5.

<sup>253</sup> Mary McAuley, *Soviet Politics 1917-1991* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 79. Gorbachev, 40-year-old, was an exception, because he joined Politburo towards the end of Brezhnev's life.

<sup>254</sup> Keep, *A History*, 196.

<sup>255</sup> Keep, *A History*, 196.



ambitiously, and this caused him to lose his posts. Shelepin was allowed to remain in the Politburo until April 1975, but his power based had already been destroyed.

Kosygin was another rival of Brezhnev, but not as strong or ambitious as others. He was the head of government apparatus and running the Soviet economy under the indirect supervision of the economic departments of the Central Committee apparatus.<sup>256</sup> Kosygin was generally regarded as a competent technician, so entrusted with running the government.<sup>257</sup> At the outset Brezhnev had a weak hold on this body. While Brezhnev had conservative tendencies, Kosygin had reformist inclinations. So their collective leadership created a counterbalance between conservatism and reformation. Keep finds Brezhnev fortunate in having Kosygin as a *de facto* junior partner.<sup>258</sup> However, Brezhnev seems to have seen Kosygin as a potential rival, though the tension between these two men was not harsh as it had been between Khrushchev and Malenkov in 1953-5.

Brezhnev skillfully became a more visible and powerful figure in foreign policy issues in the first half of 1970s by weakening Kosygin's position as the head of the government. Anatoly Dobrynin, Soviet ambassador to Washington under the Johnson administration (1963-69), recalled the power struggle between Kosygin and Brezhnev over correspondence between Moscow and Washington:

Kosygin claimed that honor to be his, since as the head of the government he would be entitled by normal international protocol to send messages to foreign heads of government. Brezhnev was itching to play a role on the world stage, but Kosygin argued that Brezhnev as party leader was in no position to usurp his function as the public representative and spokesman for the Soviet state. Initially Kosygin gained the upper hand within the Soviet leadership and was authorized to sign the messages, yet the battle was not over. Gromyko quietly supported Brezhnev, having secretly instructed ambassadors to explain discreetly to the leaders of their host countries "who was who" in the Soviet leadership. As a result, Brezhnev

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<sup>256</sup> Gelman, *The Brezhnev Politburo*, 74.

<sup>257</sup> Keep, *A History*, 195.

<sup>258</sup> Keep, *A History*, 195.

eventually got the upper hand, but during the Johnson administration the correspondence was still addressed to Kosygin.<sup>259</sup>

Brezhnev began to increase his influence on foreign affairs by receiving foreign dignitaries, meeting with them abroad and taking the leading role by dismissing protocols that might ordinarily requiring the attendance of either Kosygin as head of government, or Podgorny as head of state.<sup>260</sup> In August 1970, Willy Brandt stressed the noticeable increase of Brezhnev's power compared to his colleagues:

[Brezhnev] made rather a wary impression and spent considerable periods of time referring to his written material, whole passages of which he read aloud. But this was clearly the stage at which Brezhnev had resolved -and been empowered- to take personal charge of important aspects of Soviet policy towards the West. At the time, he and Kosygin struck me as the Kremlin's "1A" and "1B". A year later Brezhnev's definite and undisputed supremacy could not escape the eye or ear. He was also a master of his material.<sup>261</sup>

Furthermore, in 1977 Brezhnev also became head of the state by getting rid of Podgorny, besides serving as the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. However, Kosygin remained as Chairman of the Council of Ministers, and there was a division of responsibility. From this time on the Chairman of the Council of Ministers became responsible for economic policy in particular for the industrial sector. In this way Brezhnev could restrict Kosygin's responsibilities to consolidate his own power.

Kosygin's modest reformism differed him from Brezhnev in the upcoming years, but his economic reform plans did not achieve success by 1970 and attempts at further reforms were in vain.<sup>262</sup> People in the apparat used to recount Brezhnev's words on the subject of Kosygin's report at the September plenum: "What is he

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<sup>259</sup> Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 134.

<sup>260</sup> Tompson, *The Soviet Union*, 17.

<sup>261</sup> Willy Brandt, *People and Politics: The Years 1960-1975* (Boston: Little Brown, 1976), 334.

<sup>262</sup> Tompson, *The Soviet Union*, 8.

thinking of? Reform, reform. Who needs it, and who can understand it? We need to work better, that is the only problem.”<sup>263</sup> This well illustrates how Brezhnev and Kosygin differed on economic policies. Indeed, Kosygin’s reformist ideas did not find support from the Politburo, and Brezhnev was able to get support for his conservative way of ruling. It seems that Brezhnev knew well how to act according to the interests of the voting majority.

Brezhnev did not have a considerable difficulty in eliminating Kosygin, since he was not a strong rival. According to Tatu, “Kosygin had neither the capacity nor, probably, the ambition to compete with Brezhnev for political leadership. He only wanted the managers to have a free hand in running the economy without interference from the ideologist.”<sup>264</sup> In addition, Tatu pointed out that there is nothing to indicate that Kosygin tried to challenge the Secretary-General or “try to shake off the Party’s grip over the country’s activities”.<sup>265</sup> Tompson argues that Kosygin remained in his post until shortly before his death in 1980 without ever challenging Brezhnev’s position.<sup>266</sup> Kosygin had “practically” never held any Party post.<sup>267</sup> So he was not a strong rival for Brezhnev. Rather than personal rivalry, they might probably have had conflict over the respective jurisdiction of Party and Government.<sup>268</sup>

All in all, by being in the center of party interests, not behaving ambitiously, pretending to be a mediocrity, maneuvering tactically, Brezhnev could eliminate his rivals, Podgorny, Shelepin and Kosygin smoothly. Keep defines it as a “gentle purge” in which those who lost their jobs were usually assigned to another job.<sup>269</sup> They were

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<sup>263</sup> Burlatsky, “Brezhnev and,” 58-59.

<sup>264</sup> Tatu, *Power in the Kremlin*, 497.

<sup>265</sup> Tatu, *Power in the Kremlin*, 488-499.

<sup>266</sup> Tompson, *The Soviet Union*, 8.

<sup>267</sup> Tatu, *Power in the Kremlin*, 497.

<sup>268</sup> Tatu, *Power in the Kremlin*, 497.

<sup>269</sup> Keep, *A History*, 196.

not criticized or threatened as in the past. By destroying his rivals “gently” Brezhnev could continue to consolidate his power without facing a counter attack of his victims.

### **III. Enlarging his Patronage Network:**

The Twenty-Third Party Congress in 1966 marked the first signs of Brezhnev’s consolidation of power. Brezhnev had won majority support in both the Presidium and the Secretariat by December 1965.<sup>270</sup> At the congress he got the title of General Secretary, and the Presidium was renamed the Politburo as had been the case under Stalin. Between this congress and the next in 1971, he not only eliminated his rivals, but also tried to fill vacant posts with his own cronies. At this Congress, in contrast to his predecessors, Brezhnev promised, “trust in cadres” and “stability in cadres” to assure that the life and careers of party elites were safe.<sup>271</sup> The promised stability of cadres induced great loyalty to Brezhnev’s rule.

Brezhnev gave priority to promote his old cronies in party and state circles to enhance his authority. Individuals, whom he knew from Ukraine and Moldavia during his tenure as a party secretary of the republics, were persistently or consistently promoted to the top. They were, according to Chubarov, “self-centered politicians with a narrow provincial outlook who were poorly equipped to run the country when the need for change was more and more obvious.”<sup>272</sup> Most of them were modest intellectuals, but fond of privileges and perks. During the first five years of Brezhnev regime in which he consolidated his power, a significant turnover of officials was taking place. During this process over half of the senior officials were replaced.<sup>273</sup> At the Politburo level the proportion was 45 per cent (9 out of 20), in the Secretariat 60

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<sup>270</sup> Keep, *A History*, 196.

<sup>271</sup> Susanne Schattanberg, “Trust, Care, and Familiarity in the Politburo: Brezhnev’s Scenario of Power,” *Kiritika* 4 (2015): 839.

<sup>272</sup> Chubarov, *Russia’s Bitter*, 145.

<sup>273</sup> Keep, *A History*, 196.

per cent (6 out of 10), among heads of Central Committee departments 67 per cent (14 out of 21), and in the Council of Ministers 75 percent (67 out of 85).<sup>274</sup> Brezhnev was able to fill the vacant posts with his own clients from the so-called Dnieper Mafia.

Brezhnev skillfully appointed his protégés to key posts to consolidate his own power. Brezhnev's successor in Dnepropetrovsk, Andrei Kirilenko, joined the Secretariat and became responsible for cadres policy. N. A. Schelokov, who had served under Brezhnev in Dnepropetrovsk and Moldavia, was assigned as the USSR's Minister for the Preservation of Public Order/*MOOP* (later renamed Minister of Internal Affairs) in 1966, and kept this post until after Brezhnev's death. Konstantin Chernenko, Brezhnev's close ally from Moldavian days, was assigned as the head of the Central Committee's General Department in early 1965. He thereby controlled the flow of classified information within the upper echelons of the party apparatus.<sup>275</sup> Hence, by giving key positions to those old cronies he strengthened the power of their patron.

Moreover, Brezhnev allowed his colleagues to grow rich by benefitting from their posts, and appointed his relatives to lucrative and powerful positions.<sup>276</sup> It seems that in this way he tried to secure his own position, to maintain the status quo, and to prevent the emergence of any opposition group. He even had assured his cronies stability of cadres as long as they stayed loyal to him. For instance, Kirilenko's health had deteriorated, which other colleagues noticed at the XXVI Party Congress in March 1981; nevertheless, for the sake of their old friendship, Brezhnev kept him in the membership of the new Politburo. However, when his health worsened as he failed to recognize acquaintances, Brezhnev finally ordered Andropov to talk to Kirilenko and

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<sup>274</sup> John P. Willerton, *Patronage and Politics in the USSR* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 43-44.

<sup>275</sup> Tompson, *The Soviet Union*, 17.

<sup>276</sup> McAuley, *Soviet Politics*, 79.

persuade him to resign without offending him.<sup>277</sup> Kirilenko's resignation was not confirmed at the plenum until after Brezhnev's death. It well presents how loyal members of the Brezhnev's entourage stayed in power so long as their health allowed.

Brezhnev not only promoted his own clients from the Dnieper Mafia, but also tried to build coalitions with leaders in other networks, and this strengthened his own power.<sup>278</sup> By moving tactically, Brezhnev achieved coalitions with ruling elites representing a wide range of institutional and regional interests. Brezhnev supported higher defense expenditures, which appealed to the marshals, but also pushed for détente and more investment in light industry and agriculture. So, his ideas represented the interests of different groups. Furthermore, to put his plans into action he preferred to follow a conservative line, while keeping the traditional structures and rules of inner-party behavior in contrast to Khrushchev who had tried to merge old party traditions and practices with new structures.<sup>279</sup> It seemed that Brezhnev had taken lessons from his patron's mistakes and acted as "a decisive man with a clear view on how the Communist Party should be run".<sup>280</sup>

Many Brezhnev-era officials had risen because of Khrushchev's support, and they relied upon patronage connections to further enhance their own positions. Members of Brezhnev's so-called Dnepropetrovsk group were among others who assumed critical roles in top party and state positions. As we will see, they helped to form the nucleus for a large coalition that governed the USSR for nearly two decades. The viability of that coalition hinged on many factors, including Brezhnev's style of consensus decision making, his network's ability to bridge interests and generations, and an impressive level of regime and system performance that continued at least

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<sup>277</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev, *Memoirs Mikhail Gorbachev* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 143.

<sup>278</sup> Keep, *A History*, 196.

<sup>279</sup> McAuley, *Soviet Politics*, 76.

<sup>280</sup> Bacon, *Reconsidering Brezhnev*, 10.

during the first half of the regime. It seems that Brezhnev knew well how to control and administer his patronage network, and this contributed to the maintenance of coalition in the governing body.

Brezhnev's skills in furthering his patronage network were another factor contributing to the national coalition. "Brezhnev was an organization man rather than a policy man."<sup>281</sup> Besides putting his cronies into top positions within leading party and state organs, Brezhnev was also forging alliances with different rival groups. In this way he also gained their patronage network. Non-Brezhnev factions flourished throughout his eighteen-year tenure. Even though the most threatening factions were eliminated during the early period of Brezhnev's rule, others played a significant role in the development of a governing coalition. Thanks to getting alliance with these groups various interests could be converted into a more coherent one and different interest groups could be gathered under one powerful party ruler as personnel recruitment, turnover, and tenure practices were stabilized.<sup>282</sup>

According to Archie Brown, while Khrushchev "led from the front" by taking vital decisions without taking consent of his colleagues when he deemed it necessary, Brezhnev led from the middle by consistently considering the interests of ruling groups.<sup>283</sup> He claims that leading from the front could bring more power when you are in the office, but your tenure of office would likely to be shorter if something went wrong, and it would be too late to "seek the security of collective responsibility".<sup>284</sup> Maybe Brezhnev had taken lessons from the removal of Khrushchev on this issue. At the October 1964 Plenum Khrushchev was blamed mostly for his arbitrary decisions

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<sup>281</sup> Bacon, *Reconsidering Brezhnev*, 8.

<sup>282</sup> Willerton, *Patronage and Politics*, 45.

<sup>283</sup> Archie Brown, "The Power of the General Secretary of the CPSU" in Archie Brown and Peter Reddaway et al. ed. *Authority, Power and Policy in the USSR* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1980), 151-152.

<sup>284</sup> Brown, "The Power of," 152.

and abusing collective decision-making principles, so it is likely that Brezhnev avoided to act individually and sought to forge collective decisions. When a contentious matter was discussed in the Plenum or the Central Committee Secretariat, he preferred to postpone it until consensus was achieved. To prevent policy debate damaging consensus in the Politburo, Brezhnev did not have contentious issues on the agenda.<sup>285</sup> However, decisions taken collectively decreased Brezhnev responsibility for the possible consequences. He behaved prudently to secure his own position.

Brezhnev was able to consolidate his power by ensuring a balance of forces in the party's highest policy-making body, the Presidium of the CPSU's Central Committee.<sup>286</sup> According to Rakowska-Harmstone, Brezhnev furthered consolidated his power in 1973 by increasing the representation of the "power ministries in the Politburo". Brezhnev's protégés, Minister of Defence Andrei Grechko, Minister for Foreign Affairs Andrei Gromyko, and KGB Chairman Yuri Andropov, all became members of the Politburo with voting privileges at the Central Committee plenum in April, 1973. As Rakowska-Harmstone concludes, this decreased Brezhnev's vulnerability to opposition by balancing the influence of the Party apparatus.<sup>287</sup> He formed a stable and trusted team of advisers and leading ministers, quietly demoting potential rivals for power or those who had the potential to upset unity at the top.<sup>288</sup>

Thanks to his position as the First and later General Secretary of the CPSU, Brezhnev could gain control over the Central Committee, over the party apparatus, and over the all other institutions and bring his entourage to the top government and party positions by replacing his opponents and their supporters.<sup>289</sup> "Brezhnev accomplished

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<sup>285</sup> McAuley, *Soviet Politics*, 79.

<sup>286</sup> Tompson, *The Soviet Union*, 15.

<sup>287</sup> Bacon "Reconsidering Brezhnev," 12.

<sup>288</sup> Thatcher, "Brezhnev as Leader," 25.

<sup>289</sup> Basil Dmytryshyn, *USSR: A Concise History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978), 331.



this task with great skill and patience and without making a mockery of the collective leadership concept.”<sup>290</sup> By the mid-1970s he was the national leader. It took him longer than Khrushchev to establish his dominance, because he preferred to “accumulate power gradually rather than adopt the high risk strategy of his predecessor”.<sup>291</sup> Brezhnev’s consolidation of power was slow but relatively smooth, as he avoided open conflict with his colleagues.

#### **IV. Conclusion:**

Even though at the outset of Khrushchev’s removal Brezhnev was perceived as a weak figure who could not stay in power for a long time, he slowly emerged as the most powerful among political leaders by maneuvering skillfully in the period between 1964 to mid-1970s. As many people did, Brezhnev’s rivals underestimated his ability to preserve power. Brezhnev could be defined as an organization man who knew how to play according to the rules of Kremlin politics. It is clear that Brezhnev had taken lessons from his patron’s mistakes: in contrast to Khrushchev’s turnover policy, he advocated for stability of cadres and paved the way for loyalty of his colleagues; while Khrushchev took decisions arbitrarily, Brezhnev sought to forge collective decisions by consulting his colleagues, and while Khrushchev dismissed his potential rivals in his last years in office, Brezhnev behaved prudently and eliminated his rivals gradually. By being at the center of different interest groups, Brezhnev could get the majority to support him and this strengthened his power base against his rivals. Brezhnev tactfully appointed his cronies to key posts to strengthen his power and network. He also searched for alliances with different interest groups; thus, he maintained the national coalition. While examining Brezhnev’s leadership, it is necessary to make a division between “early” and “late” Brezhnevs. He has been

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<sup>290</sup> Basil Dmytryshyn, *USSR: A Concise*, 331.

<sup>291</sup> Martin McCauley, *The Soviet Union 1917-1991* (London and New York: Longman, 1993), 288.

criticized for a long time for causing stagnation of the system, depicted as fond of medals and luxurious items, or illustrated as a man who could not speak very well or could not even draft his own speech. However, it is necessary to dig out features of the early Brezhnev to understand how he built his traditional, centralized and hierarchical Soviet system. Understanding how a “weak” figure climbed to the ladders of the Soviet politics and consolidated his power almost in a one decade enables us to gain an insight into the art of Kremlin politics.



## CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I investigated Brezhnev's underestimated political skills and his leading role in the 1964 coup inducing the removal of Khrushchev. Under the influence of the stagnation interpretation and Brezhnev's deteriorated health in 1976, Brezhnev was long depicted as a weak leader who could not take any political decision without consulting his colleagues and a mediocre politician deprived of any political skills. Consequently, he was depicted as a passive member of the 1964 plot and obtained power by chance after Khrushchev's ouster. However, benefiting from accounts of insiders, I present a view contrary to the traditional view: Brezhnev was a skillful and prudent Soviet politician, who knew how to play according to rules of Kremlin politics. Understanding Brezhnev's road to power, his leading role in the 1964 coup, and his consolidation of power during the collective leadership provide insights into post-Stalin Soviet politics.

I began my thesis with an evaluation of Brezhnev's early political career until the ouster of Khrushchev in October 1964. As a young boy of revolution, Brezhnev had experienced both WWI and the Civil War. Exposed to these devastating events, Brezhnev learned lessons in adaptability and survival, which he would use throughout his political career. He knew how to benefit from the newly established communist system. By behaving like a loyal apparatchik, he rose through the party ranks successfully. During his early assignments in Belorussia and Moldavia, he showed his political skills and was able to impress his superiors. He became one of the protégés of Khrushchev and supported his patron in every circumstances until the beginning of 1960. Brezhnev experienced ups and downs in his political career, for example after the death of Stalin, or Khrushchev's decision to assign him to a largely ceremonial post of the Head of Presidium, but he never gave up to search for new ways to gain

power as was seen in 1964 coup. Understanding Brezhnev's early political career offers an insight into his leading role in the 1964 coup.

In the second chapter, I sought an answer to the question of the role of Brezhnev in the ouster of Khrushchev by delving into who were the ringleaders of the plot and how and why they ousted Khrushchev. First, I laid out three different interpretations on the main players of the plot, which contradicted each other considerably and have brought understanding the history of the 1964 coup to an impasse. For more than two decades, Suslov was depicted as the ringleader of the conspiracy. Furthermore, a small number of memoirists claimed that it was Shelepin who led the plot. Consequently, Brezhnev was depicted as a passive member of the conspirators and became the First Secretary of the Communist Party by chance. However, benefiting from accounts of witnesses, which became available in the late 1980s, I argue that Khrushchev was not removed by his enemies, but by his own protégés, Brezhnev and Podgorny. Rather than being a weak figure, Brezhnev initiated the conspiracy and led it strongly with Podgorny. Hence, the 1964 coup proved Brezhnev's political knowledge and skills. It was the first time in the history of the Soviet Union, a leader was not removed by death, but by his own protégés. Brezhnev demonstrated how it could be possible to get power even with a conspiracy but acting according to the rules of Kremlin politics.

Finally, I examine Brezhnev's consolidation of power after the removal of Khrushchev during almost one decade to reveal Brezhnev's political skills and his ability to preserve power. Even though at the outset of the 1964 coup many politicians and his rivals perceived Brezhnev as a weak and temporary figure and underestimated his political knowledge, Brezhnev maneuvered skillfully and eliminated his rivals in the period between 1964 and mid-1970s. For a better grasp to evaluate Brezhnev's leadership, it is necessary to make a division between the "early" and "late" Brezhnevs.

Because of his ill health since 1976, Brezhnev was depicted as an incapable leader without his own political program and could not take any important decision without consulting his colleagues. Brezhnev held onto power for eighteen years and suffered serious health problems during the last nine years of his tenure. It is very normal that his ill health affected his political performance and his power in his last years. Therefore, evaluating Brezhnev's leadership only focusing on late-1970s, when his health deteriorated considerably, will be a fatal mistake. Contrary to the stagnation interpretation, in this essay I focus on the "early" Brezhnev who showed his political skills and became the leading figure of the Soviet politics in mid-1970s, by consolidating his power skillfully.

All in all, this study reveals that Brezhnev was one the ringleaders of the 1964 coup and in contrast to the stagnation view, Brezhnev was a skillful politician who knew how to play according to the rules of Kremlin politics. His early political career, his leading role in the ouster of Khrushchev and his consolidation of power during the collective leadership era proved his political knowledge and skills. While his rivals and many politicians underestimated his ability to achieve and preserve power, Brezhnev maneuvered prudently and skillfully and became the leading figure in Soviet politics by the early 1970s. A deep understanding of Brezhnev's political career and his leadership offer insights into post-Stalin Soviet politics.

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