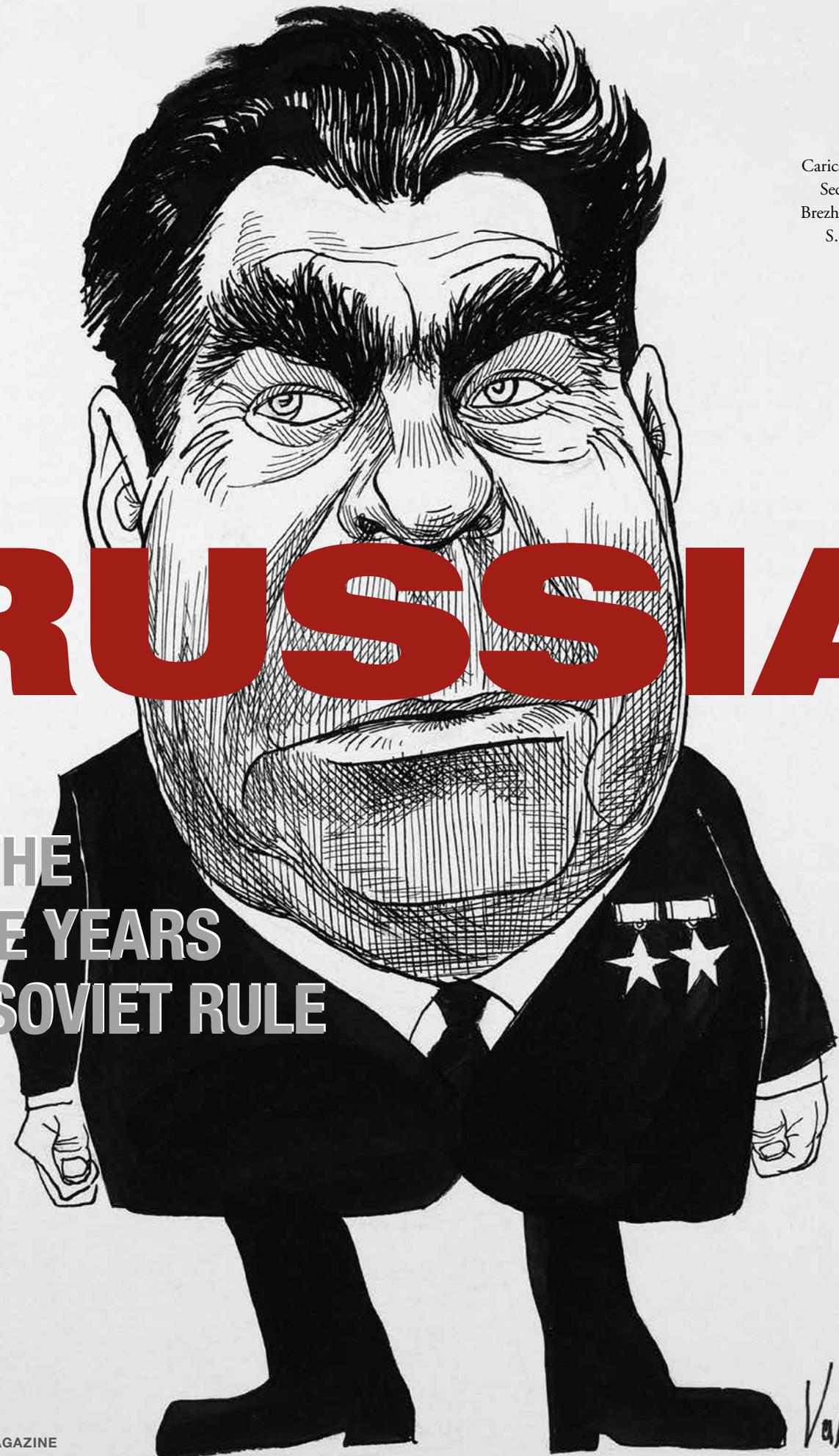


Caricature of General
Secretary Leonid I.
Brezhnev by Edmund
S. Valtman, 1968.

RUSSIA

IN THE
LATE YEARS
OF SOVIET RULE



BY THOMAS KENT

WHY DID CITIZENS COMPLY WITH A FAILING REGIME?

Thomas Kent, adjunct associate professor of journalism and of international and public affairs, was a correspondent for the Associated Press in Moscow from 1976 to 1978 and from 1979 to 1981. In this piece, adapted from presentations at the Harriman Institute and Columbia College, he answers an often-asked question: Why did Russians put up with the privations of life in the late years of Soviet rule?



President Gerald R. Ford and General Secretary Leonid I. Brezhnev after signing the Joint Communiqué on the Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms, Vladivostok, November 1974

To many Westerners, the last decades of the Soviet Union are a puzzle. How did a regime with so many failings survive? Most Russians were well aware that people lived far better in the West, that the dream of perfect communism, or even perfect socialism, wasn't going to come true, and that Leonid Brezhnev's leadership was ineffectual and sclerotic. In contrast to the revolutionary fervor of the 1920s, the racing industrialization of the 1930s, or the sacrifice and victory of the war years, Russia, from Brezhnev's ascent in the mid-1960s until the arrival of Mikhail Gorbachev, was mainly in the business of getting by. It was a grim time of privation and ineptitude with little prospect of reward. But despite shortages of food, housing, and health care, there was never any significant threat to his rule. While Brezhnev's elderly and decrepit Politburo was the regular butt of jokes, it reigned over a docile nation.

Russians, we know from the 1990s and since, are capable of expressing discontent. So why was opposition to the regime so little in evidence despite the best efforts of the country's own dissidents to agitate for democracy and the best subversion that Western propaganda could muster? Why were there so many people who not only didn't oppose the government but actually supported it, or at least got out of bed and went to work each day more or less planning to do a good job, rarely challenging the regime that ran things?

To that question, most Westerners give the same answer. They lay the quiescence of Russians to the massive intelligence and security apparatus that had institutionalized terror since 1917. Given informers, phone taps, labor camps, how could

Russians be anything but compliant? The KGB under Yuri Andropov was a reality. However, by the time the Brezhnev regime reached its height, or its nadir, people hardly lived in a state of constant terror. Some people were given significant jail sentences on charges like anti-Soviet propaganda, but not many; most dissidents who dared to hold public demonstrations against the government were jailed for as little as ten or fifteen days. People no longer faced imprisonment for slacking on the job. Significant numbers listened regularly to Western radio broadcasts with impunity. The KGB was there, but it was not a national preoccupation: as Russians liked to say when asked about it, "I don't think about Andropov, and I certainly hope he doesn't think about me."

History suggests that in any authoritarian regime, the leadership stays in power through more than brute intimidation. Devices commonly include appeals to nationalist or religious sentiment, techniques of social organization, and a common fear of external enemies. Combined with just a shadow of repression, these factors can create a society where people not only serve the state conscientiously but feel they're doing the right thing.

So, too, in the Soviet Union. Many people were cynical of the regime to a degree—"They pretend to pay us, and we pretend to work." But the prevailing mood was hardly one of terror and resentment. There was much more to the Soviet people's mindset than that. So how was society organized in the Brezhnev period? What factors kept people in line and even earned their support? Certainly it would be a mistake to entirely discount the intelligence and police apparatus. In a million little

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ways, Russians knew the authorities were always there. A colleague of mine remembers going to a riverbank one January 1 to watch Muscovites jump into the icy Moscow River in the annual show of toughness and spirit. Some kind of argument started between a couple of people on the bank. A man in plain clothes stepped out of the crowd. He told them to quiet down. They did. No badge flashed, no explanation of who he was . . . but everyone knew as much as they needed to. If he wasn't a genuine KGB agent, his very stride, his controlled voice, and even his stare alone indicated he was someone—someone associated with the police, someone in the party, someone from a local committee with authority. All that was important was that he represented some larger apparatus that could make things difficult for the protagonists.

There were thousands and thousands of people with some connection to authority. If you liked telling others what to do (and plenty of people did), you, too, could be one of the nation's enforcers, even in your spare time. You could join the *druzhinniki*, the volunteer auxiliary police. In return, you got an armband, a little stick you could hold up to stop traffic—pretty much whenever you felt like it—and plenty of connections with the real police for whatever they might be worth. You could join “comrades’ courts,” panels of amateur judges with the right to impose fines on neighbors for infractions like disorderly conduct. A whole additional assortment of committees based on apartment buildings, neighborhoods, trade unions, and party cells felt free to inquire into pretty much anyone's conduct, morality, and personal life.

In an exquisite arrangement, real security agents sometimes appeared at public events sporting the armbands of the humble *druzhinniki* or other volunteer groups. This muddied the waters just perfectly. Anybody with an armband, anybody on a committee, anybody who looked like they *could* be on a committee conceivably could be someone highly dangerous if crossed. For people who might get out of line, this arrangement created the impression that the forces of order were pervasive. And, most important, all those who drew even the smallest bit of power from being a *druzhinnik* or committee member had a personal stake in preserving the existing system.

Beyond police power lay the heavy hand of administrative control. The language of the time was rich with terms—*propuski*, *propiski*, *spravki*, *trudovye knizhki*, *pasporta*, and *udostovereniya*—each referring to one of the little documents that ruled where you could work, where you could live, and where you could travel. All of them took the blessing of the bureaucracy to get; offend a comrades’ court today, have trouble getting a critical document stamped tomorrow. Yet those of us in the Soviet Union during the Brezhnev period felt that repression, be it police or bureaucratic, was hardly the key to the obedience and loyalty the Soviet people offered the regime.

To begin with, the regime traded on Russians’ patriotism and their indisputable love for their country. This included a general acceptance of the right of Communists to lead it. Despite the cynicism of some, the idealism of the Communist revolution never quite faded in the Brezhnev period, in spite of all the promises that had failed to work out. However bad life was, Soviet citizens felt they were all in it together. Most of them lived in the same difficult situation—there was equality in their deprivation. There were no Russian capitalists profiting at their expense. (Whatever luxuries government officials enjoyed they hid well behind high dacha walls and their cars’ tinted glass. Conspicuous consumption, the downfall of elites in many countries, was not a practice in the Soviet Union.)

Youth groups sometimes engaged in projects like the *kommunisticheskii trudovoy semestr*, a semester or summer they'd spend without pay on projects like building summer camps for children. There was a selflessness to this work (though it might help them advance in the Communist Youth League), and they felt few other countries had young people doing those sorts of things. Russians laughed at Brezhnev, but they rarely joked about Lenin. Many were convinced that despite all the unpleasant realities of the USSR, the principles Lenin espoused were still valid, still embodied their national purpose, and still legitimized the Soviet state. Beyond maintaining equality among most citizens, Soviet authorities won widespread support by lavishing attention on children. (When Westerners asserted that the Soviet leadership was living a life of luxury, Soviet officials delighted in the gotcha response, “Yes, we do have a privileged class—our

For a country with pervasive censorship, the Soviet Union claimed to publish more newspapers, journals, and books than any other nation in the world.

children!”) To the extent that a basically poor country could afford it, children were well cared for and had the best of whatever medical care was available. They benefited from an extensive network of sports clubs, summer camps, and cultural activities ranging from ballet to circus.

In fact, the government devoted large expenditures to intellectual, cultural, and sports activities for everyone. For a country with pervasive censorship, it claimed to publish more newspapers, journals, and books than any other nation in the world . . . many of questionable value, but all at low prices and, from a statistical standpoint, a lot of *kultura* per capita. The regime also espoused the dignity of work, any work. A well-performing trolleybus driver or farmer could expect bonuses, hagiography on his enterprise’s bulletin board, a free trip to a resort or spa, and maybe even a medal of the same level that political leaders wore.

Perception of a real Western military threat also bound Russians together, and to the Brezhnev regime. The United States and the rest of NATO looked threatening to ordinary Soviets. If Americans favored Mercator map projections that made Russia look like a colossus stretching across half the globe, Russia favored polar projections that showed their country ringed by U.S. bases and client states. The Soviet press regularly asserted that the United States spared no expense for weaponry. The implication was that if not for Russia’s need to keep up, the nation’s standard of living might be higher. When Americans in senior positions regularly denounced and threatened the Soviet Union, their words essentially confirmed for ordinary Russians

Right: Ford and Brezhnev, Vladivostok, November 1974





A military parade in Red Square marks the sixty-first anniversary of the October Revolution (November 7, 1978). (Bettman/Corbis/AP Images)

what their own government was saying about U.S. intentions.

Such sentiment peaked after Ronald Reagan's casual quip in August 1984 about bombing the Soviet Union. The president was testing a microphone before a radio address and said, just to test the sound level, "I'm pleased to tell you today that I've signed legislation that will outlaw Russia forever. We begin bombing in five minutes." Most Americans took it as a there-he-goes-again Reagan moment. Russians were horrified. For them, it was evidence not only that bombing Russia was always on Reagan's mind but that the United States—untouched in World War II while Russia was nearly destroyed—could treat war as comic material.

Soviet propagandists juxtaposed this bellicose image of the West with Russia's foreign policy. Russians were well aware of Moscow's support for a variety of Asian, African, and Latin American causes, usually portrayed as national liberation movements being opposed by the United States and other Western interests. Key among them was the struggle against apartheid, with South Africa's white government backed

by the United States and liberation figures, including Nelson Mandela, championed by Moscow. All this managed to convince many citizens that their country was indeed the world's principal force for peace and progress (there was a Soviet propaganda radio station by that specific name), while the United States was the most likely source of war and oppression. Soviet propaganda skillfully portrayed the nation's dissidents—poorly organized individuals known to most citizens only through Western broadcasts—as a fifth column inspired by the West. All this was reinforced by a huge emphasis on Russia's suffering in World War II. The Soviet state drew a straight line from the war to the Brezhnev era, encouraging veterans to wear their medals, creating occasions for them to tell children about their exploits, and jumping them to the head of the line at stores and cinemas.

Given the concept of the Soviet Union as a peace-loving state that must always be prepared for war, it was eminently reasonable to Russians that high schools should train children in handling automatic weapons. The military also enjoyed

a near monopoly on offering some of the most exciting things a young Russian could do. An automobile might be unaffordable to a Russian teenager, but if he joined DOSAAF—the Voluntary Society for Cooperation with the Army, Air Force, and Navy—he could find himself driving a car, a truck, or a tank on the DOSAAF practice grounds. Same if he wanted to drive a power boat or fly a plane. While any American teenager might drive a car or wire up an amateur radio transmitter on his own, such things were often available in Russia only through DOSAAF or groups like it—and discussion of the Western threat was always part of the curriculum. Not for nothing was it called "military-political training."

The West was also regularly portrayed as a bastion of social injustice, pornography, and labor unrest, held together only by bribery and repression. Often under headlines like *Vot ikh demokratiya*—"Such is their democracy"—Soviet reporters would visit American homeless shelters or interview bitter, jobless American workers. Strikes large and small, anywhere in the Western world, would be reported in adjoining articles in Russian newspapers,

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implying they were all part of a common wave of resistance against capitalist bosses. Soviet propaganda gave Russians plenty of reason to doubt that everything in Western countries was as good as they might have heard. It worked. Often Russians, asked if they knew about Western freedom of speech and press, would respond, “Yes. That means anyone can publish pornography, right?”

A stream of foreign visitors, including many Americans, unwittingly helped validate what Soviet propaganda was saying. A program on Soviet TV consisted of interviews with visiting foreigners who would politely enthuse about the Moscow subways, the Bolshoi Theater, or anything else they could think of to praise. Sometimes their eagerness to please extended to noting that everyone in Russia had a job when the United States had so many unemployed, and that in Russia, health care was free.

But what about assertive Russians who might genuinely be tempted by the idea of Russia’s people making their own decisions about their daily life? Those who got interested in the idea on too grand a scale could be dealt with by the KGB. But at a more ordinary level, the system was hugely successful in co-opting those Russians who identified inefficiencies, petty corruption, and silly rules that trammled daily life and sapped the economy. The Soviet press had a controlled level of investigative reporting. Poor-quality goods and pointless rules were exposed for all to see, with due credit to those who had reported them. Arrests of low-level officials for corruption were publicized widely.

To be sure, such exposés usually appeared only in regional newspapers. If reported nationally, they focused on failings in individual towns. There was never a suggestion that mismanagement and corruption were

endemic nationwide. Lacking the Internet or an unfettered press, there was little way for citizens to know whether the privations or corruption they experienced were systematic or just anecdotal to their region.

Citizens who became particularly fond of improving processes and exposing misdeeds often benefited from a faux politics that gave them some genuine power while demonstrating the advantages of coloring within the lines. Not only did the system of low-level neighborhood, trade union, and Communist Party bodies have authority over minor issues like housing and factory work rules, it also elevated smart and prudent members to city, regional, or even higher-level *soviets*, or legislative bodies. The Supreme Soviet in Moscow, the nation’s highest lawmaking council, and national congresses of the Communist Party were rife with milkmaids, construction workers, and hundreds of others with minimal political training. Top party authorities made the real decisions. At the same time, the higher the soviet, the greater the personal privileges of membership, and the more lavish the annual meetings. One might call this true bread-and-butter politics . . . not because the soviets had authority over bread-and-butter issues, but because of the butter, salmon, and caviar canapés that the members enjoyed during breaks in the sessions. The lesson was obvious as individuals who had some authority at a local level rose in the soviets: Accepting that you had no real power over larger and larger issues brought larger and larger benefits. The effect was to retain within the system some who might otherwise have become larger-scale voices of protest.

Even if you weren’t in a soviet, the road to special privileges was still open to almost every Soviet citizen. Only the elite got luxury goods from the West. But a factory

mechanic might get tickets to a first-run movie at his factory club, which he could slip to the butcher for hard-to-get sausage. The woman at the shoe store might look out for a certain size for the doctor, who would give her family priority for an appointment. The official who controlled the waiting list for apartments might give extra consideration to an Aeroflot flight attendant who brought her a scarf from Paris. Everyone, it seemed, knew a guy who could get something done in return for a small favor. This democratization of access and connections bound millions of people into a system where they had as much to lose as to gain if the system were threatened.

All these factors went into the social and political algorithm that let Brezhnev survive. Russians of the period were nationalistic, sometimes idealistic people, who worked hard enough for the regime so that it didn’t fall apart completely. They realized things were far from perfect. But, like most people, they saw more good in their own country than ill. And they lived in a system that had finely honed control and reward, propaganda, and patriotism for the preservation of the Soviet state. □

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