



## THE BREZHNEV ERA IN ANTHROPOLOGICAL RETROSPECTIVE

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**Abstract:** This article introduces materials from a conference held at the European University, St Petersburg, in 2016, 'Period of Stagnation? The Brezhnev Era 35 Years On'. In all of the disciplines represented at the conference (literary and cultural history, sociology, film studies, anthropology), there has been a significant re-evaluation of this historical period in recent years. Rather than 'stagnation', it is now understood as characterised by dynamism and by diverse and in many ways contradictory developments. Anthropology has been a relatively late arrival to the scene compared with history, sociology, and political science, but has an important vantage point in terms of the interpretation of many specific features of the culture of the 1960s — early 80s.

One such specific feature was the proliferation of civic initiatives, including the 'pathfinder' (*sledopyty*) movement, local history and 'local studies' (*kraevedenie*), the veterans' movements and so on. While subject to a significant level of state control, they also gave at least limited autonomy to rank-and-file members. In the case of the 'pathfinders', local activists received delegated authority for the shaping of memories of the War from the state, but, as Ekaterina Melnikova shows, over time, their contribution to the memory project moved a significant distance from the norms posited in government instructions.

The activation of grassroots movements was combined at this period with increasing interest in the principles of market economics, despite their dissonance with the prevailing ideals of Soviet culture as radically distinctive from that of 'capitalist countries' (*kapstrany*). As Sergei Alymov's article shows, this hiatus calls into question the conventional understanding of marketisation in the early 1990s as a profound departure from late Soviet ideology and practice.

If Alymov's article is concerned with conflicts within official ideology, and Melnikova's with the adjustment of top-down instructions in civic organisations, Alfrid Bustanov's discussion highlights the efforts of individual community groups and subcultures to accommodate official ideology, showing how translators and interpreters of the Qur'an tried to prove that the moral guidance in the text was not anti-Communist and to demonstrate that Islam was compatible with the findings of 'progressive science'.

The unifying motif of all the articles is their focus on the perception by different strata of Soviet society of their place in the political and social culture of their time and their analysis of views of official politics and ideology at a broad social level.

**Keywords:** Brezhnev era, grassroots movements, ideology, market economics, religious communities, Soviet society, state control.

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## The Brezhnev Era in Anthropological Retrospective

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One such specific feature was the proliferation of civic initiatives, including the 'pathfinder' (*sledopyty*) movement, local history and 'local studies' (*kraevedenie*), the veterans' movements and so on. While subject to a significant level of state control, they also gave at least limited autonomy to rank-and-file members. In the case of the 'pathfinders', local activists received delegated authority for the shaping of memories of the War from the state, but, as Ekaterina Melnikova shows, over time, their contribution to the memory project moved a significant distance from the norms posited in government instructions.

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The unifying motif of all the articles is their focus on the perception by different strata of Soviet society of their place in the political and social culture of their time and their analysis of views of official politics and ideology at a broad social level.

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Compared with the explosive transformations of the Khrushchev years, the period of Leonid Brezhnev's leadership created, at the time, a powerful expression of stasis to the point of inertia. This is what in turn made the explicitly negative term 'stagnation' so inviting when it started to be employed during the perestroika years. Yet, as Grigory Kertman has argued, 'in the years immediately following perestroika, the [retrospective view of the] era of "developed socialism" underwent <...> radical and sweeping changes in Russian popular opinion: the "accursed past" was visibly transformed into the "good old times"'. The reasons for this evolution are not hard to find: the collapse in the living standards of the general population, economic and political instability, lack of certainty about moral and social norms, the avalanche of institutional changes, the irresponsible behaviour of the social elite, the social infantilisation of the mass of the population, and the clumsy radicalism

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of the political leadership' [Kertman 2007: 5]. In the succeeding years, these contrasting assessments of the Brezhnev years, as political, economic, social and cultural nightmare, or as a lost paradise of communitarianism and hope, have acquired new nuances and depths, but not undergone significant change.

Scholars working on the Brezhnev years (historians, sociologists, economists) are, of course, inclined to avoid categorical assessments of this sort, at any rate when it comes to detailed analysis. Even if the overall picture is sketched in terms of judgements such as 'decline' or 'stability', the precise optic adopted is of significance and the image in close-up will look rather different. The era stigmatised by the sweeping term 'stagnation' turns out to have been shaped by many different processes that in some cases predate this period but were most fully developed then. This includes the whole spectrum of what in Russian is known as *inakomyslie*, or 'alternative thinking': the expansion of political dissidence, the growth of the so-called 'second culture' or the artistic underground, the emergence of *samizdat*, the growth of pluralism in the social sciences, and so on.<sup>1</sup> By the 2000s (at which point the requisite sense of at least limited historical distance had emerged), it was already customary to recognise the complex and contradictory nature of the era, the combination of reform and inaction, of social and economic achievements and reversals [Bacon, Sandle 2002; Hanson 2006].

This sense that the Brezhnev era is in fact hard to define and in many respects controversial was what prompted us to organise a conference in 2016 at the European University, St Petersburg, under the title 'Period of Stagnation? The Brezhnev Era Thirty-Five Years On'. The main semantic force in fact falls on the question mark, since we were intending to problematise not just the term 'stagnation' itself, but all the other ingrained stereotypes relating to the era. The speakers and participants spanned a wide disciplinary range in the humanities and social sciences: anthropologists, sociologists, historians, specialists in literature and cinema, researchers in the field of cultural studies. The topics discussed included the official politics of the period, shifts in concepts of Soviet identity, the history of the everyday, attitudes to heritage and historical memory, the treatment of social reality in literature and cinema, and so on.<sup>2</sup> The lively and productive discussions before, during, and after the conference resulted not just in the identification of new areas of study, but also, still more significantly, in the formulation of new research questions extending beyond the customary issues of popular support for top-level policy and the viability of political discourse into horizontal social relations

<sup>1</sup> See e.g.: [Rosenfeld, Norton 1995; Alekseeva 2001; Savitskiy 2002; Daniel 2005; Firsov 2008; 2012].

<sup>2</sup> The full programme may be downloaded here: <<https://eu.spb.ru/news/16923-period-zastoya-epokha-brezhneva-35-let-spustya>>.

and the paradoxicality of participatory mechanisms in a situation where the Thaw-era emphasis on the virtues of political argument (*diskussionost*) was combined with tight social regulation and with a significant increase in fear of political subversion.

The three articles published in the cluster here address the ‘period of stagnation’ from an explicitly anthropological perspective.<sup>1</sup> To date, there have been far fewer publications from this disciplinary perspective than work by historians, political scientists, or sociologists. Yet it is precisely an anthropological perspective, with its sensitivity to social diversity and propensity to look below the surface of culture, and its avoidance of easy evaluative judgements, that is particularly suited to explore many aspects of this uncomfortably recent past.<sup>2</sup>

One key factor in the Brezhnev era is that, despite the partial rehabilitation of Stalin in an ideological sense, grassroots initiatives (to be sure, of a kind compatible with the ‘general line’ of one-party governance) continued, as in the Khrushchev years, to enjoy far greater levels of support than between 1932 and 1953, at which point membership of an Esperanto society or a club for the profoundly deaf could be the cause of serious political repression.<sup>3</sup> One such initiative, the *sledopyt* movement, is addressed here in Ekaterina Melnikova’s essay. In studies to date, this movement is usually seen as a mere instrument of the political education of Soviet youth as directed top-down by the political elite. As a buzzword of the Putin era puts it, memory of the war was supposed to create ‘social bonds’ (*skrepy*). Melnikova, however, traces a split between the ‘heroic’ narratives promoted by state institutions and the ‘romantic’ perceptions of participants themselves, and demonstrates that the relations between these institutions and the *sledopyt* movement were multidirectional and diverse, and by no means classifiable merely in terms of the instrumentalisation of volunteer groups.

Melnikova’s article thus offers a case study of a grassroots initiative founded well before the Brezhnev era, but which was offered sponsorship, and hence a new relationship with the state, precisely in the 1960–70s. Other examples of this pattern include ‘local studies’ (*kraevedenie*), the campaign for the preservation of historic monuments, the Soviet veterans’ movement [Edele 2008], and so

<sup>1</sup> Several other articles based on materials from the conference (by Konstantin Bogdanov, Victoria Donovan, Christine Evans, and Jeanne Kormina) appeared in the September 2018 *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*.

<sup>2</sup> For examples of such treatments of the late Soviet period, see e.g.: [Boym 1994; Kharkhordin 1999; Utekhin 2004; Yurchak 2005; Kelly 2007; Abashin 2015; Mayofis et al. 2015; Ivanova 2018]. It is notable that anthropological studies of the late Soviet period completed during or immediately after the era itself have retained their interpretive validity (see e.g.: [Humphrey 1983; Nielsen 1987; Grant 1995]), in contrast to some other work by political and social scientists with its uncritical dependence on official Soviet data, or, on the other hand, moral triumphalism in the style of Cold War polemic.

<sup>3</sup> On the cultural politics of deafness in Soviet society, see the excellent analysis in: [Shaw 2017].

on. The relationship between state structures and these organisations was far from straightforward: for example, almost all those holding office were Party members, yet the ‘power vertical’, unlike most Soviet institutions, lay within the organisation itself rather than in the Party hierarchy, and engagement with top-level policy objectives tended to be limited. These idiosyncratic manifestations of late Soviet ‘civil society’ were the results neither of purposive governance ‘from above’, nor of end-directed initiatives ‘from below’. Rather, it was precisely in the often haphazard interaction between professional politicians, state actors, and local activists that their essential character lay, and with this, the specific colour of socio-political relations in the Brezhnev era.

As Melnikova argues, ‘The history of the *sledopyt* movement, like many other forms of social mobilisation in the Brezhnev period, was connected with a whole range of contradictions. All-union campaigns to perpetuate the memory of the war relied on civil initiatives, delegating commemorative functions to local activists instead of creating any state institutions of remembrance like those that exist in Europe and the USA <...> The *sledopyty* became not only *vox populi*, but also *manus populi*, the hands of the people, who created their own memory of the past, which thus acquired legitimacy and was capable of becoming a foundation of the national idea.’ One way of putting this is that the state ‘delegated’ war memory of a detailed and local kind (as opposed to the creation of generic large-scale monuments) to the Soviet population at large. The background for the activities of the *sledopyty* (as for veterans’ organisations) was thus a memory politics to which forgetting and elision were as integral as commemoration. In this respect, the *sledopyt* movement exemplifies a process by which the relationship between official memory politics and social memory in a broad sense has been at once creative and antagonistic. Grassroots organisations were able to gain ground because they were tolerated and indeed encouraged by state institutions, yet their agendas were often markedly different (a process that can also be observed in the post-Soviet period).<sup>1</sup>

The expansion and increased leverage of grassroots movements was one expression of a timid, limited, and conflicted, but contextually significant, pluralism that characterised the Brezhnev years as well as the period of Khrushchev’s leadership, and which was also manifested in the increasing tolerance of ‘alternative thinking’, above all, perhaps, in science and scholarship. Sergei Alymov’s article is focused precisely on this latter area, tracing in detail the debates on

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<sup>1</sup> An example would be the ‘Immortal Regiment’ (*bessmertnyy polk*) movement, which began as locally-organised parades to mark Victory Day (participants hold up photographs of relatives who fought in the Great Patriotic War) and which has in some respects resisted appropriation by the Post-Soviet government as part of official ‘war memory’.

Soviet identity among philosophers and economists between the 1960s and 80s. As the widespread discussions of loss of collective spirit at this period show [Kelly 2001], official behaviour guidance at this period had lost the traction that it enjoyed in the 1920s and 30s, when new Soviet elites (the so-called *vydvizhentsy*) self-consciously aimed to model themselves on propaganda images of ‘the new Soviet man’ [Hellbeck 2006]. At one level this was explained by the sheer success in inculcating models of ‘Soviet’ behaviour [Kharkhordin 1999], but at the same time, social developments such as the intensive construction of separate family housing and the increased opportunities for leisure had led to modulation of some aspects of Soviet behaviour, and practitioners of the social sciences, now restored to a political respectability they had not enjoyed since the 1920s, acted as key observers of this process. Alymov focuses in his analysis on the development among professional scholars during the Brezhnev era of new models of economic activity, and on the intensive debate around areas such as incentivisation and market stimulation. He traces the conflicts between a ‘liberal’ wing in the scholarly and political establishment (a central figure in which was Alexander Yakovlev, later to be an architect of perestroika) and groupings that saw market economics as a survival of capitalism. As is widely recognised, practices of consumption and entrepreneurial activity that often lay at or beyond the borders of what was strictly permitted in law, became widespread in the Brezhnev era (see e.g.: [Nielsen 1987; Chernyshova 2013; Kushkova 2017; Ivanova 2018]). Most Soviet citizens were aware of such informal ‘market economics’, which were regularly evoked in journalism and in literature and the cinema also. While this is familiar territory to Soviet specialists, the accommodation of shifting market relations and of economic reforms by normative discussions of ‘the Soviet person’ and academic discussions of Soviet society has had relatively little attention, and it is often assumed that new economic thinking was entirely a product of Gorbachev’s perestroika. As Alymov shows, however, many of the ideas that lay behind perestroika and the ‘shock therapy’ of the 1990s were already widely discussed two and more decades earlier; ‘neoliberalism’ was not simply imposed on Soviet society through external agency (the financial advice of the early 1990s), but widely attested in practice significantly earlier. The particular contribution of this article, as well as its in-depth examination of a corpus of discursive texts that has mainly escaped the attention of historians, is the exploration of the social networks and intellectual affinities of the key actors in the process, which were often of a paradoxical kind: thus, figures of radically different views might occupy neighbouring offices on the same corridor of the same institute of the Academy of Sciences, and it was not unknown for senior figures to protect from official sanctions colleagues who held radically different views from their own.

The third article, by Alfrid Bustanov, examines ideological contradictions of a different order, in this case the attempt by Islamic thinkers to mediate between official Soviet norms and the inherited traditions of their faith. In the Soviet period itself, atheist propaganda uniformly represented religious belief as ‘backward’ and hopelessly out of touch with the modern world [Smolkin 2018]. However, representatives of the religious confessions present on Soviet territory could not avoid reacting to the social changes surrounding them, and Bustanov provides an instructive example with the case of the Islamic scholar Mutygulla Sungatullin, who presented his translation of the Qur’an as a method of promoting atheism, a way of combatting ‘bourgeois’ distortions of the Islamic original that turned it into a weapon of ‘religious deception’. An equally contradictory approach was adopted by another interpreter of Islam, Fatkhekadyr Babich, who held that ‘Islam does not contradict communist ideology or progressive science, but, on the contrary, is the foundation of an ideal social order.’ A third scholar, ‘Abd al-Bari Isaev, alluded to Soviet advances in space exploration (usually employed as an argument against the existence of the metaphysical, as in Yuri Gagarin’s famous reported comment, ‘I didn’t see God up there’) in order to argue for the cosmological convergence of modern astrophysics and the Qur’an. While writings of this kind met predictable opposition from the Soviet political establishment and the apologists for the Qur’an did not manage to address a broad public with their arguments, the very existence of these arguments attests the shifts of perception afoot even in the most conservative sectors of Soviet society at this period.

While each article in the cluster has a different focus — the contribution of grassroots organisations to war memory, academic debates on Soviet identity in its relation to economic forces, the efforts by religious activists to accommodate scientific thinking and to legitimate their sacred texts as contributions to ‘Communist education’ — they are united by their subtle and sophisticated attention to the social location of the discourses and practices that they address, to the ways in which these reflected questions of agency and worldview, and to the complexity of the relations between different social actors that shaped them. Instead of a straightforward gulf between ‘state’ and ‘population’, or ‘Party’ and ‘intelligentsia’ (or ‘people’), they point to a diverse, divided, and in many ways plural late Soviet world that in significant ways resembled the industrialised societies of Europe and America at this period. In this perspective, the USSR under Brezhnev emerges as neither ‘stagnant’ nor ‘stable’, but as undergoing processes of significant change that presented those who experienced them with important challenges. The articles collected here contribute to the process of understanding that moment in yesterday’s history.

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