A Triumph of Ideological Hairdressing? Intellectual Life in the Brezhnev Era Reconsidered

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It is true that the Brezhnev years were lost years for many of our people. But people in the West are mistaken in thinking that life in Soviet Union was so suppressed during the two decades before Gorbachev that nobody with good brains, a strong spirit and a good conscience could exist. It’s just not true. In very reserved and disguised ways, you could express almost everything, if you were skilful enough. There may have been peace and quiet in the press, but some intellectuals and even ordinary people found useful ways to say what had to be said. Even a few leaders raised the real questions that faced the country in their speeches and memoranda.¹

Introduction

On the surface, the contrast appears stark. Perestroika: an era of vibrant change, startling revelations and stalled revolutions, popular protest and dethroned rulers. The Brezhnev era: grey suits, stasis, decay and crushing, stifling conformity. But what lies beneath? During the 1970s and early 1980s the intellectual life of the Brezhnev years tended to be viewed as an era dominated by the orthodox platitudes of the official ideology, of paeans of praise to the achievements of the Soviet state, of the heroism of its milkmaids and miners. The only ripples on this stagnant pond appeared to come from the dissident movement, lone voices critical of the regime, its values and practices. Perestroika (and after) has begun to change these perceptions. Scholars searching for the roots of the ideas and thinking that inspired perestroika are increasingly turning their attention to the Brezhnev years, an approach exemplified by John Gooding’s contribution to this volume. The publication of memoirs and interviews with the leading protagonists has thrown new light on intellectual life under Brezhnev.

This chapter will highlight some of this ‘new light’, and piece together a picture of intellectual life under Brezhnev which is one of heterogeneity,
struggle, conflict and creativity. The recollections and memoirs of some of the key figures in the intellectual establishment under Gorbachev will provide the basis for the analysis that follows. This material provides more than a reconsideration of intellectual life, though. First, in recreating the narrative of their life-histories from the fall of Khrushchev, it provides a portrait of the evolution of the Brezhnev regime, its oscillations in policy, its political struggles and the overall rhythms of reform, retrenchment, reaction and stability. This reveals a complex picture of cross-currents and conflicting perspectives.

Second, as the ‘architects’ of perestroika, this group of intellectuals, journalists and party figures were instrumental in constructing the conceptualisations of Brezhnev and his era in the period after 1985. Unveiling their ‘story’ allows us to understand how these experiences contributed to the construction of an interpretation of the Brezhnev era as one of stagnation and neo-Stalinist reaction. While John Gooding’s Chapter 9 in this volume deals with the ideas and debates of the ‘Alternative tradition’ and the origins of perestroika, this chapter examines their recollections of how they lived and worked under Brezhnev, before coming to prominence under Gorbachev. This provides wider contextual information in understanding the intellectual origins of perestroika. At the moment, the voices and ideas of the reformist intellectuals are somehow disembodied from their own history.

**The nature and structure of the post-Stalin intelligentsia**

Mainstream intellectual life in the post-Stalin era has been relatively poorly-studied in the West. There are a number of good reasons for this. First, the party’s control of intellectual life through the various forms of domination it exercised – ideology (via Marxism–Leninism), censorship and personnel (controlling employment, promotion, etc.) – gave the impression of a sector with little autonomy or life of its own. It appeared to be dull, grey, and conformist on the whole. Secondly, attention was focused upon the visible signs of life that emerged in the mid-1960s: the dissidents. Given that there seemed to be little signs of life or creative thinking in the official intellectual sector, this was understandable, but it reinforced even further the perceptions of the ‘official’ intellectual sector. But did this focus on the dissident phenomenon obscure the shifts and developments within the main body of the Soviet intelligentsia? Has the scholarly community in general overestimated the impact of the dissidents and consequently neglected to study the way in which within-system opposition was expressed? As John Gooding has pointed out, the whole perestroika project began with a rapprochement between the reformist leadership and the ‘best of the intelligentsia’. The role played by the creative intelligentsia – artists, poets, musicians, writers, playwrights, filmmakers, satirists – is being examined anew. The search for the origins of perestroika has led scholars away from the high-profile dissidents, attending