Leonid Brezhnev stood at the helm of the Soviet Union when that country was at the peak of its power. The summits where Brezhnev negotiated with US presidents and other Western leaders were milestones of world diplomacy. Yet when Brezhnev died in November 1982 at the age of 75, there was not a comprehensive biography of the man. And so it has remained since. Simply put, Brezhnev’s personality has failed to attract historians. Russian historian Dmitry Volkogonov in his essay on Brezhnev portrayed him as the blandest and most one-dimensional of all Soviet leaders, to whom he attributed ‘the psychology of a middle-rank party bureaucrat – vainglorious, cautious, conservative personality’. A few ripples of revisionism have perturbed the quiet pond of historiography about his years: historians began to argue that ‘early’ Brezhnev was an energetic and effective leader, promoted a set of strategic policies in domestic and foreign affairs, and deserves more than a footnote in the study of Soviet leadership. Still, even though the Brezhnev years are better researched, the personality is not.¹

In 2011 the news came that the Russian archives had declassified the ‘working notes’ that Brezhnev regularly took from 1937 until his death. This generated some excitement among researchers, yet the notes turned out to be much less than a personal diary. Only a few determined scholars surmised that those notes could offer a good insight into Brezhnev’s personality, inner thoughts and beliefs. Overall, historians of all stripes – from Russian nationalists to Western liberals – continue to treat Brezhnev as a disappointing figure.

Meanwhile, 20 years after his death Leonid Brezhnev became surprisingly popular among common Russians. Political sociologists explain this phenomenon by the contrast between the 1970s, marked by stability and modest but predictable living standards, and the 1990s – with the disappearance of old social certainties and disastrous collapse of median incomes. Brezhnev’s conservative and paternalistic style, his governing principles – disparaged by historians – remained much closer to the masses in Russia than Gorbachev’s and Yeltsin’s political liberalization and reformism. Russian
sociologist Yuri Levada attributed Brezhnev’s popularity to the widespread phenomenon of ‘Soviet person’ or *Homo Sovieticus* – the persistent mindset typical of millions of Soviet citizens. This ‘Soviet person’ above all is not a liberal subject. He or she denies individual responsibility in favour of state paternalism, order and predictability. He or she not only accepts all benefits that trickle down from above as given, but also obeys and adapts to coercive mechanisms, while remaining indifferent to the concept of civic and political freedoms. This mindset, Levada discovered, remained remarkably persistent and even resurgent in the post-Soviet years, despite radical changes in economic and social conditions, freedom of emigration and access to information.2

In my earlier writings, I argued that Brezhnev’s personal beliefs and commitments contributed much more to the formation of Soviet foreign policy than contemporaries and political scientists previously surmised. In this chapter I want to approach Brezhnev’s personal beliefs more conceptually. Levada’s concept of ‘Soviet person’ appears to be a good starting point for exploration of Brezhnev’s mental map.

‘Soviet Person’ Analysed

Brezhnev was born in 1906 in the Russian empire. He came from a family of industrial workers, former peasants from the Kursk region who moved in search of jobs to the southern region of the Russian empire, so-called ‘New Russia’ (now Ukraine). In his early documents Brezhnev put himself down as ‘Ukrainian’, but later, after he moved to Moscow he changed his identity to ‘Russian’. This was natural for people with a loose ‘Russian’ identity, but it was also a prudent choice: in the 1920s ‘Ukrainians’ enjoyed preferences in the Bolshevik national taxonomy, while after the 1930s the balance became reversed in favour of ‘Russians’. The territory of ‘New Russia’ (*Novorossiia*) that became part of Soviet Ukraine was Brezhnev’s small homeland; his contemporaries viewed his character as stereotypically ‘southern Russian’ – cheerful and gregarious. Also culturally, Brezhnev never fully separated himself from Russian peasantry. He cared about peasants and preserved peasant family values.

His education was grossly insufficient: a few classes of high school, a few years at the land–water technical school and night classes at the agricultural machine-building college. Yet every time he dropped his studies. As a result, his transformation into ‘Soviet person’ happened through the Komsomol, the communist youth association he joined at the age of 17. In the 1920s the Komsomol activists participated in all Soviet experiments. Young Brezhnev went to endless political meetings, read revolutionary poetry in an amateur theatre studio (‘Blue Blouse’) and probably helped to disrupt religious services and denounce ‘class enemies’. He was vivacious and artistic, and probably a party career prevented him from making a career on ‘the cultural front’.