

Russia's new politics

The management of a postcommunist society

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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK <http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA <http://www.cup.org>
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

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First published 2000

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Plantin 10/12 pt [cE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Russia's new politics : the management of a postcommunist society /
Stephen White.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0 521 58319 5 (hard). – ISBN 0 521 58737 9 (pbk.)

1. Russia (Federation) – Politics and government – 1991–
2. Russia (Federation) – Social conditions – 1991–
3. Post-communism – Russia (Federation) I. Title.

JN6695.W48 2000

320.947'09'49 – dc21 99–31474 CIP

ISBN 0 521 58319 5 hardback

ISBN 0 521 58737 9 paperback

Contents

<i>List of plates</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>List of figures</i>	ix
<i>List of tables</i>	x
<i>Preface</i>	xi
1 From Brezhnev to Yeltsin	1
A changing policy agenda	10
The Gorbachev leadership	16
The August coup and the end of party rule	28
2 Parties, voters, and government	34
Parties and party politics	36
Patterns of electoral behaviour	50
Elections and government	62
3 Presidential government	70
The emergence of presidential government	72
The Russian presidency	77
Yeltsin and the Russian presidency	87
The 1996 election and the problems of presidential power	95
4 Reforming the economy	107
The crisis of Soviet planning	109
The Gorbachev strategy	114
From plan to market	117
From socialism to capitalism	122
Western assistance	130
Economic reform: a balance sheet	133
Russia and the market	140
5 A divided society	144
Rich and poor in postcommunist Russia	145
Crime and punishment	158
Gender, politics, and society	171

6	Changing times, changing values	182
	Public opinion and its study	184
	The flow of political communication	194
	The life hereafter	203
7	Russia and the wider world	213
	The Gorbachev revolution in foreign policy	215
	Yeltsin and the West	220
	The CIS and the East	239
	Continuity and change in Russian foreign policy	250
8	Russia, transition, democracy	255
	The end of Soviet rule	257
	The Russian 'transition'	262
	A democratic culture?	269
	An incomplete democracy	275
	Human rights in postcommunist Russia	282
	The cultural limits of transition	288
	<i>Notes</i>	293
	<i>Index</i>	380

Plates

1.1	Statues of Leonid Brezhnev in the Tret'yakov Gallery sculpture park, Moscow	page 4
1.2	Com-mu-nism (<i>Soviet Weekly</i> , August 1991)	15
1.3	'Never again!' (an anti-Stalinist poster, 1990)	23
1.4	Felix Dzerzhinsky (originally in Lubyanka Square opposite the KGB headquarters, but moved in August 1991 and now in the Tret'yakov Gallery sculpture park, Moscow)	31
2.1	Three ballot boxes in search of a voter (<i>Izvestiya</i> , August 1995)	47
2.2	The voters decide . . . (<i>Izvestiya</i> , November 1995)	61
2.3	The State Duma in session (Novosti)	67
3.1	The Gorbachevs during their official visit to India, 1986 (Novosti)	75
3.2	'Muscovites have made their choice' (Boris Yeltsin and Yuri Luzhkov, a 1996 election poster)	89
4.1	A liquor queue in the mid-1980s	120
4.2	A 'privatisation cheque' or voucher	126
4.3	'The factory needs workers who don't need to be paid' (<i>Novoe vremya</i> , June 1996)	136
5.1	'First say the magic word!' 'Dollar!' (<i>Izvestiya</i> , July 1997)	152
5.2	Old and homeless (Novosti)	157
5.3	'Look, I've bought myself a pistol with a silencer' (<i>Izvestiya</i> , July 1996)	165
5.4	The last inhabitants of a village in the Yaroslavl' region (Novosti)	174
6.1	'Your attitude to opinion polls?' (<i>Izvestiya</i> , January 1994)	185
6.2	In the <i>Pravda</i> correspondence department in the 1980s (Novosti)	196
6.3	Vespers in the Theological Academy at Zagorsk, Moscow region (Novosti)	205
7.1	Marx and Engels: a 1986 statue in what is still Marx and Engels Square in East Berlin	217

viii List of plates

7.2	At the Soviet war memorial, Treptow Park, East Berlin	225
7.3	Yevgenii Primakov, pictured as foreign minister in 1996 (Novosti)	236
8.1	Boris Yeltsin in front of the Russian parliament in August 1991 (Novosti)	264
8.2	Reading <i>Pravda</i> on the noticeboard (Novosti)	281

Figures

2.1	The Russian Federal Assembly	<i>page</i> 39
2.2	The distribution of the party-list vote, 1993–5	54
6.1	Attitudes to the market, 1991–6	189
8.1	The worst and best features of communist rule	273
8.2	Attitudes to democracy in the 1990s	276

Tables

2.1	Elections to the State Duma, December 1993	<i>page</i> 40
2.2	The Russian political spectrum in the 1990s	41
2.3	Elections to the State Duma, December 1995	52
2.4	The correlates of voting, 1996	55
2.5	The motivations of party voters, 1995	57
3.1	The Russian presidential election, 12 June 1991	78
3.2	The first round of the Russian presidential election, 16 June 1996	98
3.3	The second round of the Russian presidential election, 3 July 1996	98
4.1	Soviet and Russian economic performance, 1951–85	112
4.2	Soviet and Russian economic performance, 1986–91	118
4.3	Russian economic performance, 1991–8	133
5.1	Living standards in the 1990s	148
5.2	Recorded crime, 1990–7	160
6.1	Public concerns, 1991–8	188
6.2	The ‘most characteristic’ features of communist and postcommunist rule	193
6.3	The main religious communities, 1997	208
6.4	Levels of religiosity in the 1990s	209
8.1	Trust in institutions, 1993–8	270
8.2	The Freedom House classification of the USSR and its successor states	286

1 From Brezhnev to Yeltsin

In early 1982 Leonid Brezhnev was apparently at the height of his powers. General secretary of the ruling Communist Party since October 1964 and, since 1977, chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet or head of state, he had presided over a steady rise in living standards at home and an expansion of Soviet influence throughout the wider world. Under Brezhnev's leadership gross national product had doubled between 1960 and 1970 and more than trebled by 1980. Industrial production had more than quadrupled. Agricultural production had increased more modestly (in 1981 and 1982 the harvests were so poor that the figures were simply suppressed), but the real incomes of ordinary citizens had more than doubled over the two decades and the wages paid to collective farmers had increased more than four times. Nor was this simply statistics. By the end of Brezhnev's administration three times as many Soviet citizens had acquired a higher education; there were more hospital beds, more cars, and many more colour televisions. And despite the disappointments in agriculture, for which climatic conditions were at least partly responsible, there had been considerable improvements in the Soviet diet. The consumption of meat, fish, and fruit per head of population was up by about half, while the consumption of potatoes and bread, the staples of earlier years, had fallen back considerably.¹

By the early 1980s, in parallel with these domestic changes, the USSR had begun to acquire an international influence that accorded rather more closely with the country's enormous territory, population, and natural resources. Forced to back down in humiliating circumstances in the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, the USSR had since acquired a strategic capability that gave it an approximate parity with the USA by the end of the decade. The Soviet Union had one of the world's largest armies and one of its largest navies, and it dominated the Warsaw Treaty Organisation, which was one of the world's most important military alliances. It was the centre of one of the world's largest trading blocs, the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, and was a founding member

of the United Nations, where it occupied a permanent seat in the Security Council. The USSR's status as a superpower had been confirmed by a series of agreements with its capitalist rival, the United States, particularly SALT I in 1972 and its unratified successor, SALT II, in 1979. And it was represented much more widely in international affairs: the USSR had diplomatic relations with 144 foreign states by the early 1970s, twice as many as in the early 1960s; it took part in the work of over 400 international organisations, and was a signatory to more than 7,000 international treaties or conventions.² The Soviet Union was 'one of the greatest world powers', the official history of Soviet foreign policy could boast by the early 1980s, 'without whose participation not a single international problem can be resolved'.³ This was an exaggeration, but a pardonable one.

Leonid Brezhnev, the symbol of this developing military and politico-economic might, had increasingly become the central element in the political system that underpinned it. Originally, in 1964, a 'collective leadership', it had become a leadership 'headed by comrade L. I. Brezhnev' by the early 1970s. In 1973, in a further sign of his increasing dominance, Brezhnev's name was listed first among the members of the Politburo even though KGB chairman Yuri Andropov had joined and should, on alphabetical principles, have displaced him. The general secretary made his own contribution to these developments, complaining whenever he thought he was being neglected by the newspapers (it was 'as if I don't exist', he told *Pravda* in 1975),⁴ and taking 'organisational measures' to ensure that his public addresses were welcomed with sufficient enthusiasm.⁵ By 1976, at its 25th Congress, Brezhnev had become the party's 'universally acclaimed leader' and *vozhd'* (chief), a term previously used to describe Stalin; there was 'stormy, prolonged applause' when it was announced that he had been re-elected to the Central Committee, and a standing ovation when Brezhnev himself announced that he had once again been elected general secretary.⁶ He became a Marshal of the Soviet Union later the same year, and a bronze bust was unveiled in his birthplace;⁷ an official biography, published in December, declared the general secretary an 'inspiring example of selfless service to the socialist motherland [and] to the ideals of scientific communism'.⁸

In 1977 Brezhnev consolidated his position by adding the largely ceremonial chairmanship of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet, or collective presidency, at the same time as the dominant position of the Communist Party was itself being acknowledged in Article 6 of the new constitution. He took receipt of the Gold Medal of Karl Marx, the highest award of the Academy of Sciences, for his

‘outstanding contribution to the development of Marxist-Leninist theory’;⁹ in 1978 he added the Order of Victory for his ‘great contribution’ to the success of the Soviet people and their armed forces in the Great Patriotic War,¹⁰ and then in 1979 the Lenin Prize for Literature for memoirs that had been written for him by an assistant who himself received the Order of Lenin a few days later.¹¹ At the 26th Party Congress in 1981 Brezhnev was hailed as an ‘outstanding political leader and statesman’, a ‘true continuer of Lenin’s great cause’, and an ‘ardent fighter for peace and communism’;¹² his speech was punctuated seventy-eight times by ‘applause’, forty times by ‘prolonged applause’, and eight times by ‘stormy, prolonged applause’,¹³ and there were shouts of ‘hurrah’ when it was announced that he had unanimously been re-elected to the Central Committee.¹⁴ Unprecedentedly, the whole Politburo and Secretariat, Brezhnev included, were re-elected without change; Brezhnev’s son Yuri, a first deputy minister of foreign trade, became a candidate member of the Central Committee at the same time, and so too did his son-in-law Yuri Churbanov, a first deputy minister of internal affairs.

Brezhnev’s seventy-fifth birthday, in December 1981, brought these tributes to a new pitch of intensity. Seven of *Pravda*’s eight pages on 19 December were wholly or partly devoted to the event, and tributes continued to appear in the central press throughout the following week. Brezhnev himself attended a ceremony in the Kremlin where he was invested with a series of distinctions by the leaders of the East European communist states, who had come to Moscow for the occasion. The Soviet awards, which he had himself to authorise as head of state, included a seventh Order of Lenin and a fourth Hero of the Soviet Union citation. Mikhail Suslov, a few years his senior, remarked at the conferment of these distinctions that seventy-five was regarded in the Soviet Union as no more than the ‘beginning of middle age’.¹⁵ Brezhnev’s life was turned into a film, *Story of a Communist*; his wartime exploits in the Caucasus, little noted at the time, were presented as all but the decisive turning point in the struggle against the Nazis; his memoirs became the subject of a play, a popular song, and a full-scale oratorio. He had already accumulated more state awards than all previous Soviet leaders taken together, and more military distinctions than Marshal Zhukov, who had saved Leningrad and liberated Berlin;¹⁶ when he died, more than 200 decorations followed his coffin to the grave.¹⁷ Even a modest poem, ‘To the German Komsomol’, written when he was seventeen, received front-page treatment when it appeared in *Pravda* in May 1982.

Brezhnev’s personal and political powers, nonetheless, were clearly

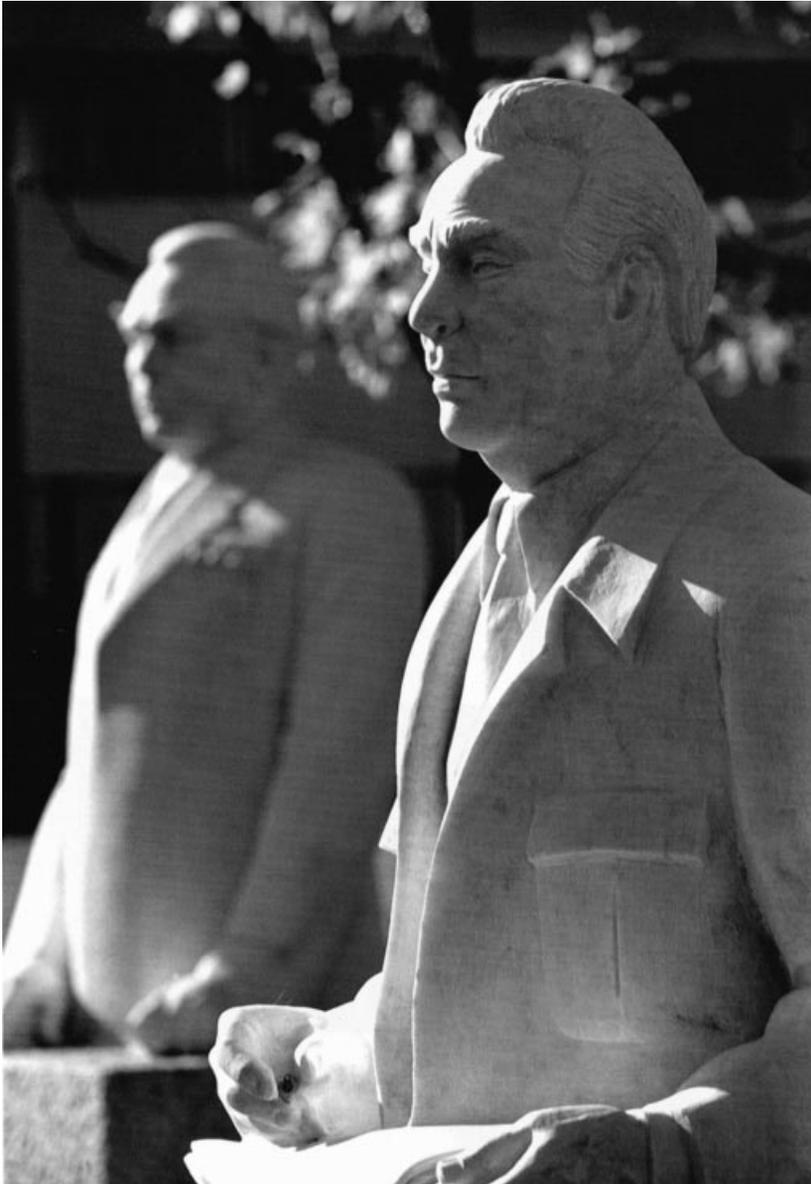


Plate 1.1 Statues of Leonid Brezhnev in the Tret'yakov Gallery sculpture park, Moscow

failing. According to subsequent accounts, he began to suffer serious ill-health at the end of the 1960s and in January 1976 was clinically dead for a short time following a stroke.¹⁸ For two months he was unable to work, as his speech and writing had been impaired, and thereafter he was constantly surrounded by doctors, with a fully equipped ambulance following his car on trips abroad. His speech became slurred, his breathing laboured, his concentration limited; visiting Baku in one of his last public appearances, he startled his audience by referring repeatedly to 'Afghanistan' instead of 'Azerbaijan' (he had been reading the wrong speech); visiting Prague, he read out some pages twice and asked for a translation when the Czech party leader ended his welcoming address with a passage in Russian (there was a 'deathly silence in the hall').¹⁹ Newspapers did what they could to conceal Brezhnev's physical decline by using a much earlier photograph, adding new medals as they were awarded.²⁰ But there was no disguising his condition from immediate colleagues, to whom, indeed, he had twice suggested resignation;²¹ Politburo meetings, which used to take several hours, dwindled to fifteen or twenty minutes,²² and public occasions, however formal, left a 'pitiful impression'.²³ Among the wider public unkind anecdotes were already circulating: his eyebrows, in one of these, were 'Stalin's moustache at a higher level'; in yet another, he was to have an operation to enlarge his chest to accommodate the medals he had been awarded (even his son-in-law had to concede that this fondness for decorations was one of the general secretary's weaknesses²⁴).

Perhaps most serious of all, Brezhnev's grip on affairs of state became increasingly infirm. The death of Suslov, in January 1982, seems in retrospect to have been crucial. One of the Politburo's oldest and longest-serving members with acknowledged authority in both ideology and foreign affairs, Suslov had served as kingmaker in 1964, declining the general secretaryship for himself and backing Brezhnev for the position, and then becoming the 'second person in the party' towards the end of his period of rule.²⁵ With Suslov gone, the Brezhnev leadership began to disintegrate rapidly. At the end of the same month the death was reported of Semen Tsvigun, first deputy chairman of the KGB and the husband of the younger sister of Brezhnev's wife; rumour suggested it was a case of suicide precipitated by his impending arrest on corruption charges.²⁶ At the beginning of March 1982 came the arrest of 'Boris the gypsy' and other figures from the world of circus entertainment on charges of bribery and currency speculation; all were close friends of Brezhnev's daughter Galina and their arrest showed that the general secretary's authority was no longer sufficient to protect them.²⁷ Later the same month the head of the trade union organisation, Alexei

Shibaev, was replaced amid reports that he had diverted union funds to build dachas for his relatives and friends, and led a disreputable private life; in April, the procurator general announced that a former fisheries minister had been executed for a caviare fraud.²⁸

Still more significantly, in May 1982 a plenary session of the CPSU Central Committee took place at which Brezhnev was unable to secure the election of his 'faithful Sancho Panza',²⁹ Konstantin Chernenko, to the powerful position of Central Committee secretary with responsibility for ideology that had become vacant with the death of Suslov. In a development widely seen as significant both at home and abroad it was the head of the KGB, Yuri Andropov, who was successful, apparently with the support of the armed forces lobby. Another Brezhnev associate lost his position when in July 1982 the Krasnodar first secretary, Sergei Medunov, was summarily dismissed (he had extracted bribes on a massive scale but deflected all criticism by entertaining investigators to a variety of forms of hospitality including a 'rest home' where they were provided with sexual services); later still came the arrest of the manager of Moscow's most famous food store and his wife, both of whom were close associates of Brezhnev's daughter.³⁰ All of this suggested that Brezhnev's political authority as well as physical health were in decline, and reports circulating in the West suggested that it had already been decided he would retain the largely ceremonial state presidency, allowing another figure to be elected to the more demanding post of party leader. Brezhnev, in the event, anticipated any changes of this kind by dying suddenly on the morning of 10 November 1982, his health undermined by a two-hour stint in the reviewing box at the anniversary parade in Red Square three days earlier. *Pravda's* obituary mourned the passing of a 'continuer of the cause of Lenin, a fervent patriot, an outstanding revolutionary and struggler for peace and communism, [and] an outstanding political and government leader of the contemporary era'.³¹

It had widely been expected that a decent interval would elapse before a successor was named as general secretary, and indeed that a prolonged succession struggle might ensue. On 11 November, however, it was announced that Andropov was to chair the committee making arrangements for Brezhnev's funeral, and the following day it was announced that an emergency meeting of the Central Committee had elected him to the vacant general secretaryship. Andropov's main rival for the succession, Konstantin Chernenko, had the task of proposing his candidacy to the Central Committee, where it was accepted unanimously. Brezhnev was buried on 15 November, Andropov making the funeral oration, and a week later the new general secretary made his first speech as party leader to the Central Committee, a brief but effective review of

Soviet foreign and domestic policy.³² In May 1983 it became known that Andropov had succeeded Brezhnev as chairman of the Defence Council, which had ultimate authority in military and security matters, and in June he was elected to the chairmanship of the Supreme Soviet Presidium, thus concentrating in his hands after only seven months the same combination of posts that Brezhnev had taken almost thirteen years to accumulate. A series of changes in the membership of the Politburo and Secretariat, and at lower levels of the party and state, had meanwhile begun to put in place a coalition of reform-minded technocrats who might be expected to support both the new general secretary and the policies he intended to promote.

Andropov's own health, however, was far from certain. He was an elderly man (already sixty-eight when he assumed the party leadership) with a history of heart trouble, and there were rumours of incapacity from almost the outset of his period of office. The 'Brezhnev mafia' continued to lose influence, but Andropov's rival for the general secretaryship, Konstantin Chernenko, remained prominent, making the opening speech at the June 1983 Central Committee plenum and chairing the Politburo in his absence. Andropov's effective authority in fact lasted for only a few months: he was last seen in public in August 1983 and then failed to attend the anniversary parade in Red Square on 7 November and the Central Committee and Supreme Soviet meetings that took place a few weeks later. It became known that he was receiving kidney dialysis treatment at the Central Committee hospital near Moscow and that Mikhail Gorbachev, the youngest member of the Politburo and apparently the one most closely attuned to the general secretary's own thinking, was maintaining links between him and other members of the leadership.³³ A series of 'interviews', and an address that was circulated to the Central Committee plenum he was unable to attend, suggested that Andropov's intellectual powers were largely unimpaired; and further changes in the Politburo and Secretariat at the December 1983 plenum indicated that his control over the most important of all the powers of a party leader, that of patronage, was scarcely diminished. Nonetheless, explanations in terms of 'colds' began to wear thin, and it was not entirely unexpected when on 11 February 1984 the central press reported that the general secretary had died two days earlier after a 'long illness'.³⁴ Once again the party leadership was plunged into the search for a successor.

As before, there were two principal contenders: Chernenko, whose political fortunes had revived with Andropov's illness, and Gorbachev, who was evidently Andropov's own favoured candidate for the succession.³⁵ Chernenko was named on 10 February to head the funeral

committee, which appeared to suggest he was all but certain to secure the nomination; but the formal choice took some time to arrange because of the divisions within the leadership that it reflected, with a 'Brezhnevite' faction supporting Chernenko and composed for the most part of long-serving members of the leadership like Prime Minister Nikolai Tikhonov, Kazakh party leader Dinmukhamed Kunaev, and Moscow party secretary Viktor Grishin, and an 'Andropovite' faction consisting of the younger, more reform-minded members who had joined or advanced within the leadership under the late general secretary, including Vitalii Vorotnikov, who headed the government of the Russian republic, the Azerbaijani first secretary Geidar Aliev, and Gorbachev himself.³⁶ The choice fell finally on Chernenko, partly, it appears, because of his seniority and experience, and partly because a Gorbachev leadership would have been likely to last rather a long time: Gorbachev was just fifty-two and had been a full member of the Politburo for less than four years.

At all events, on 13 February 1984, four days after Andropov had died, another extraordinary meeting of the Central Committee took place at which Chernenko, proposed by Tikhonov, was elected unanimously to the vacant general secretaryship.³⁷ It emerged subsequently that Gorbachev had also addressed the plenum,³⁸ and unofficial reports suggested that he had been installed as a *de facto* second secretary with a power of veto, on behalf of the younger 'Andropovite' faction, over leadership decisions.³⁹ Gorbachev's greater prominence was apparent in, for example, his more advanced placing in the line-up of leaders beside Andropov's coffin, in the ranking he received in pre-election speeches and on other formal party and state occasions. In turn it indicated that the Chernenko leadership was a relatively evenly balanced coalition, containing both supporters of the late party leader's reforming policies and those who believed they had been pressed too far. These sharp internal divisions were sufficient in themselves to slow down the momentum of reform, quite apart from what the new general secretary might have wished, and they persisted throughout his period of office as neither side could allow the other to gain a decisive advantage by adding to their supporters in the Politburo or Secretariat.

The chairmanship of the Supreme Soviet Presidium and of the Defence Council, as well as the party leadership, had become vacant on Andropov's death. It became known later in February 1984 that Chernenko had also assumed the chairmanship of the Defence Council, and in April 1984, on Gorbachev's nomination, the first session of the newly elected Supreme Soviet elected him to the chairmanship of its Presidium, which made him the *de facto* head of state.⁴⁰ Chernenko was

nevertheless, at seventy-two, the oldest general secretary ever to have assumed office, and he had a history of lung disease that caused difficulty in breathing. Perhaps inevitably, it was regarded as a transitional general secretaryship from the outset. Two regular Central Committee plenums were held during Chernenko's period of office: the first, in April 1984, was devoted to the work of the soviets and educational reform, and the second dealt with land improvement. Neither made any change in the membership of the Politburo or Secretariat or even in the membership of the Central Committee itself, and neither could be said to have initiated any major departure in public policy (the educational reforms, which were of some importance, had been launched the previous year). There was equally little success when efforts were made to develop the significance of Chernenko's service in the border guards in the early 1930s ('there could be no personality cult', it has been pointed out, 'in the absence of a personality'); nor could much be made of his undistinguished war record.⁴¹ A series of missed engagements suggested that Chernenko's health was already deteriorating, and official spokesmen had to admit that the recently elected general secretary was suffering from a serious cold, or perhaps worse.

Chernenko was last seen in public at the end of December 1984. He failed to meet the Greek prime minister Papandreou on his visit to Moscow in February 1985, and failed to deliver the customary eve-of-poll address to the Soviet people in the republican and local elections later the same month. Although he was shown voting on television on 24 February and was pictured in the central press receiving his deputy's credentials a week later,⁴² rumours of the general secretary's physical incapacity were strengthened rather than dispelled by his evident ill-health. Finally, on the evening of 10 March 1985, he died, the medical bulletin recording that he had expired as a result of heart failure following a deterioration in the working of his lungs and liver.⁴³ The next day, with unprecedented speed, an extraordinary session of the Central Committee elected Mikhail Gorbachev as its third general secretary in three and a half years; he was proposed by the veteran foreign minister Andrei Gromyko in an eloquent speech that had the support of the Andropovite faction within the leadership and of the regional first secretaries, who were 'increasingly determined not to let the Politburo manoeuvre another old, sick, or weak person into the top position again'.⁴⁴ Gorbachev, who had just celebrated his fifty-fourth birthday, was still the youngest member of the Politburo and apparently in robust good health, which was in itself a considerable change. As one of the earliest jokes put it: 'What support does Gorbachev have in the Kremlin?' Answer: 'None – he walks unaided.'⁴⁵

A changing policy agenda

Gorbachev began his acceptance speech by paying tribute to Chernenko as a 'true Leninist and outstanding figure of the CPSU and the Soviet state'.⁴⁶ Although he was later concerned to emphasise the decisive break that had occurred with his election and still more with the April 1985 Central Committee plenum at which his programme was first set out, there was in fact a good deal of continuity between the policy agenda that had been established by Andropov and Chernenko and the agenda that Gorbachev came to promote over the years that followed. The decisive break had arguably taken place under Andropov, whose security background tended to obscure his earlier exposure to the East European reform experience while Soviet ambassador to Hungary in the mid-1950s and a penetrating, somewhat puritanical intellect that was completely at odds with the complacency and corruption of the later Brezhnev era.⁴⁷ Even Chernenko, despite his background in propaganda and party administration and his career links with Brezhnev, had a number of special priorities that associated him with broadly 'liberal' opinion in the leadership context of the time, among them an interest in letters from the public, an emphasis upon the consumer sector of the economy, and a commitment to *détente*.⁴⁸ There were, in fact, a number of elements in common throughout the reorientation of policy that took place between the death of Andropov and the accession of Gorbachev, although the reformist impetus undoubtedly slackened under Chernenko and acquired a new scope and impetus under Gorbachev.

One element in that reorientation of policy was leadership renewal, which had already begun in the last months of Brezhnev's term of office but which was now pursued with especial urgency. At the November 1982 meeting of the Central Committee, just ten days after Andropov's election as general secretary, Nikolai Ryzhkov, an experienced manager who had been working in the state planning office, joined the leadership as a member of the Secretariat.⁴⁹ Further changes took place in June 1983 when the Leningrad party leader Grigorii Romanov moved to Moscow to become another new member of the Secretariat, and Vitalii Vorotnikov, who had been banished to Cuba as Soviet ambassador by Brezhnev, became a candidate member of the Politburo (and shortly afterwards prime minister of the Russian Republic).⁵⁰ The December 1983 Central Committee plenum, the last under Andropov's leadership, saw Vorotnikov consolidate his rapid advance by becoming a full member of the Politburo, and Yegor Ligachev, who had been first secretary in Tomsk, became a Central Committee secretary with respon-

sibility for appointments and the supervision of lower-level party bodies.⁵¹ There were no changes in the party's leading bodies under Chernenko's rather shorter general secretaryship, apart from the loss that inevitably occurred with the death of Defence Minister Ustinov;⁵² the change that had occurred since the death of Brezhnev, however, was already a far-reaching one. In the Politburo that had been elected in March 1981 all but three of its fourteen full members had been born before the revolution, and the average age was over seventy. Arvid Pel'she, born in 1899, had joined the Communist Party during the First World War and had taken part himself in the October revolution. In the Politburo that Gorbachev inherited in March 1985, by contrast, just five of its ten full members were of prerevolutionary origin, and four (including Gorbachev himself) were in their fifties or early sixties, alarmingly young by recent Soviet standards. At least as notable, it had become a leadership of much greater technical and managerial competence. Vorotnikov, for instance, was a qualified aviation engineer who had spent the early part of his career in a Kuibyshev factory; Ryzhkov, before coming to Gosplan, had been the successful director of the Uralmash engineering works in Sverdlovsk; Ligachev was an engineering graduate; and the new KGB head, Viktor Chebrikov, also an engineer, had a background in industrial management as well as party work in Ukraine.⁵³

A further priority, associated particularly with Andropov, was social discipline. In part this meant a firm and sustained campaign against the bribery and corruption that had increasingly disfigured the later Brezhnev years. The late general secretary's family and friends were among the first to feel the effects of the new policy. In December 1982, just a month after Andropov's accession, Interior Minister Nikolai Shchelokov was dismissed from his position:⁵⁴ a close associate of Brezhnev's from Dnepropetrovsk days, he had enjoyed considerable opportunities for enrichment as head of Soviet law enforcement, acquiring a fleet of foreign cars, a photographer, a cook, and a 'masseur' as well as rare books from public library collections.⁵⁵ Shchelokov was replaced as interior minister by Vitalii Fedorchuk, an experienced KGB career officer and a trusted Andropov associate, and in June Shchelokov and another Brezhnev crony, the former Krasnodar first secretary Medunov, were dismissed from the Central Committee for 'mistakes in their work'.⁵⁶ Although his family reportedly celebrated Chernenko's election with an all-night party, Shchelokov continued to lose favour, suffering the humiliation of expulsion from the party and losing his military rank in November 1984 for 'abuse of position for personal gain and conduct discrediting the military title of General of the Soviet

Union';⁵⁷ his wife had already committed suicide, his son – who had speculated in foreign cars – was dismissed from the bureau of the Komsomol, and he took his own life early the following year.⁵⁸

Brezhnev's own family was also affected. His daughter Galina and her husband Churbanov were banished to Murmansk; Churbanov lost his post as first deputy interior minister in December 1984 and then his position on the Central Committee,⁵⁹ and in December 1988 he was given twelve years' imprisonment for bribe-taking on a large scale and stripped of his state honours.⁶⁰ Brezhnev's son Yuri also lost his ministerial post and his Central Committee membership, and his secretary was sentenced to nine years' imprisonment for bribe-taking;⁶¹ Brezhnev's books – nearly 3 million copies – were withdrawn from public sale,⁶² and his widow was forced to return his decorations to public custody (his Order of Victory had meanwhile been rescinded).⁶³ The city of Brezhnev, formerly Naberezhnye Chelny, reverted to its original name in 1988; so too did Brezhnev Square in Moscow, and the Brezhnev – formerly Cherry Tree – district in the capital (unkind humorists suggested that the Brezhnevs would soon become 'Cherry tree family').⁶⁴ Brezhnev, according to opinion polls, was already more unpopular than Stalin; the very name, his grandson told a Moscow weekly, had 'become a curse'.⁶⁵ The campaign against corruption may have owed something to Andropov's own asceticism: he lived modestly and refrained from any attempts to promote the careers of his own children, although his son Igor became a prominent member of the diplomatic service. More important, perhaps, was the concern of both Andropov and his successor that corruption, if allowed to go unchecked, might reduce the effectiveness of party control and ultimately compromise the regime itself, as had clearly happened in Poland in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The other side of the post-Brezhnev leadership's campaign of social discipline, which also continued under Chernenko, was an attempt to strengthen discipline in the workplace and law and order in the wider society. One of the first clear signs of this new direction in official policy was the series of raids that the police began to make in early 1983 on shops, public baths, and even underground stations in order to find out which of those present had taken time off work without permission. There was certainly some room for improvement. An official report in late 1982 found that of every 100 workers surveyed, an average of 30 were absent 'for personal reasons' at any given moment, in most cases to go shopping or visit the doctor. Another investigation in 800 Moscow enterprises found that in some cases no more than 10 per cent of the workforce were still at their places during the last hour of the shift.⁶⁶ A

further series of decrees on 'socialist labour discipline' sought to reduce poor-quality workmanship, alcoholism, and absenteeism at the workplace,⁶⁷ and the positive example of Alexei Stakhanov was again held up for emulation, nearly fifty years after his record-breaking exploits in the Donbass coalmines⁶⁸ (rather later, in 1988, it was revealed that the champion miner had been transferred to office work, turned to drink, and died a lonely and disillusioned man⁶⁹).

In terms of politics the Andropov period saw no liberalisation, despite early and perhaps inspired reports that the new general secretary spoke English, and liked jazz and modern Western literature. There was an open attack, for instance, upon 'alien' and 'decadent' trends in the arts, particularly at the Central Committee meeting in June 1983 that was devoted to this subject, and there were sharply worded attacks upon the Soviet film industry (which had begun to explore some contemporary social issues) and upon the independent-minded literary journal *Novyi mir*.⁷⁰ Direct dialling facilities with the outside world were ended, apparently at Andropov's behest, in September 1982,⁷¹ and postal and customs regulations became more stringent.⁷² Steps were also taken against a number of prominent dissidents. The writer Georgii Vladimov, author of *Faithful Ruslan*, a novel about a guard-dog at a prison camp, was compelled to emigrate in early 1983 and deprived of his Soviet citizenship, and the historian Roy Medvedev, untouched for many years, was called to the procurator general's office and warned that if he did not give up his 'anti-Soviet activities' he would face criminal proceedings.⁷³ The theatre director Yuri Lyubimov and the historian Mikhail Geller, both resident abroad, also lost their citizenship,⁷⁴ and the number of Jews allowed to emigrate, another normally reliable barometer of liberalism, fell sharply from up to 50,000 a year in the late 1970s to 2,700 in 1982, 1,300 in 1983, and only 896 in 1984.⁷⁵

The immediate post-Brezhnev period, however, saw no reversion to hard-line Stalinism. Dissidents and oppositionists, certainly, were harshly treated, but for those who were content to advance their objectives within the system there was a greater emphasis than before upon consultation and accountability. For the first time in modern Soviet history, for instance, reports began to appear in *Pravda* of the subjects that had been discussed at the weekly meetings of the Politburo.⁷⁶ Attempts were also made to revive the Khrushchevian practice of meeting members of the public face to face at home or in their workplace. Andropov made a symbolic gesture of some importance by visiting the Ordzhonikidze machine tool factory at the end of January 1983 for an extended and frankly worded exchange with its workforce; Chernenko made a less remarkable visit to the 'Hammer and Sickle'

metallurgical plant in April 1984.⁷⁷ The rights of ordinary workers at their workplace were also strengthened, at least on paper, by a law on labour collectives, adopted in June 1983 after an extended public discussion, which gave workforce meetings greater rights in relation to management and the appointment of leading personnel, but which also required them to take more responsibility for poor workmanship and shirking.⁷⁸ The annual plan and budget, for the first time ever, were submitted to the All-Union Council of Trade Unions for its consideration in late 1984.⁷⁹

In public life more generally there was a greater emphasis upon openness and publicity, or what soon became widely known as *glasnost*. One indication of this rather different approach was the decision, at the June 1983 Central Committee plenum, to establish a national public opinion centre;⁸⁰ another was the revival of the Khrushchevian practice of publishing the full proceedings of Central Committee meetings, at least in this instance.⁸¹ And there was a continuing emphasis, throughout the period, upon the need to take account of the concerns of ordinary citizens, particularly in the form of letters to party and state bodies and to the press. The harsher penalties that were imposed upon bribery and corruption were reported to have been prompted by communications of this kind, and the strengthening of law and order was similarly presented as a response to pressure from citizens in Gorky, who had complained that they were afraid to walk the city streets at night.⁸² Difficult though it was to assess such matters precisely, these new emphases in public policy appeared to have been well received by the Soviet public: according to an unpublished opinion poll that was reported in the Western press, fully 87 per cent of those who were asked took a 'positive' view of the first three months of the new regime and by implication of post-Brezhnev changes more generally.⁸³

Still more fundamentally, there was a reconsideration in the Andropov and Chernenko periods of the official ideology from which the regime still claimed to derive its right to rule. One of the most important contributions was Andropov's article on 'The teaching of Karl Marx and some questions of socialist construction in the USSR', which appeared in the party theoretical journal *Kommunist*. Its sober and realistic tone marked off the post-Brezhnev era from the optimism of Khrushchev, and equally from Brezhnev's somewhat complacent notion of 'developed socialism'; it was, in effect, the 'first public criticism by a ruling leader of the party's general line'.⁸⁴ There was a need, Andropov insisted, to understand the stage of development that had been reached in the USSR, and to avoid setting targets that would be impossible to achieve. The Soviet Union, he emphasised, was only at the beginning of the long



Plate 1.2 Com-mu-nism (*Soviet Weekly*, August 1991)

historical stage of developed socialism; there should be no exaggeration of their closeness to the ultimate goal of full communism, and there should be a proper acknowledgement of the difficulties that lay ahead.⁸⁵ Andropov's speech at the June 1983 Central Committee plenum, which dealt extensively with the revisions that would be required in the Party Programme, noted similarly that there were elements of 'isolation from reality' in the existing text, adopted in 1961, and which had notoriously promised that a communist society would 'in the main' be established by 1980. It was vital, Andropov had already insisted, to take proper account of the situation that actually existed, and to avoid 'ready-made solutions'.⁸⁶

Chernenko, who became chairman of the commission preparing a new Programme at the same time as he became party leader, took the same practical and unheroic approach. Addressing the commission in April 1984, he reminded the participants that developed socialism would be a 'historically protracted' period and urged them to concentrate their attention upon the complicated tasks that still remained rather than upon what Lenin had called the 'distant, beautiful, and rosy future'.⁸⁷ These emphases in turn became the basis for a developing specialist literature which acknowledged, more openly than ever before, that socialism had not necessarily resolved complex issues such as

environmental conservation, the nationality question, or gender inequalities. Still more provocatively, it was suggested that Soviet-type societies contained 'contradictions' based upon the different interests of the various groups of which they were composed, and that these could lead to 'serious collisions' of the kind that had occurred in Poland in the early 1980s unless far-reaching democratic reforms were instituted.⁸⁸ The debate was suspended in 1984 but two years later it was one of those to which Gorbachev devoted particular attention in his report to the 27th Party Congress.⁸⁹

The Gorbachev leadership

The advent of a new general secretary had normally meant a significant change in the direction of Soviet public policy, although any change took some time to establish itself as the new leader gradually marginalised his opponents and coopted his supporters on to the Politburo and Secretariat. At the outset of his administration Gorbachev's objectives, and indeed his personal background, were still fairly obscure even at leading levels of the party. Gorbachev, unlike his two main rivals Grigorii Romanov and Viktor Grishin, had not addressed a party congress; he had still no published collection of writings to his name; and he had made only a couple of official visits abroad, to Canada in 1983 and to the United Kingdom in late 1984, on both occasions as the head of a delegation of Soviet parliamentarians. Andrei Gromyko, proposing Gorbachev's candidacy to the Central Committee, explained what had convinced him personally that Gorbachev would be a suitable general secretary: Gorbachev, he indicated, had chaired meetings of the Politburo in Chernenko's absence and had done so 'brilliantly, without any exaggeration'.⁹⁰ Gorbachev himself told the Politburo that agreed to nominate him there was 'no need to change their policies',⁹¹ and in his acceptance speech he paid tribute to the late general secretary and promised to continue the policy of his two predecessors, which he defined as 'acceleration of socioeconomic development and the perfection of all aspects of social life'.⁹² At the same time there were some elements in the new general secretary's biography which suggested that this new administration would be more than a continuation of the ones that had immediately preceded it.

One of those elements was Gorbachev's own background, particularly his education and age group, which placed him among the reform-minded '1960ers' who had been inspired by the 20th Party Congress in 1956 and by the process of destalinisation that followed it, rather than the Brezhnev generation, whose formative experience had been their

military service during the Second World War and who had in turn been led to believe that the Soviet system rested on popular support and that it was capable of supreme achievement.⁹³ Gorbachev himself, born on 2 March 1931 to a peasant family in the north Caucasus, was too young to have taken a direct part in the hostilities, although he had vivid memories of the German occupation of his native village and of the destruction that had taken place in other parts of the country.⁹⁴ His father was wounded in the conflict and he was brought up mainly by his maternal grandparents, who were poor peasants of Ukrainian origin.⁹⁵ He worked first as a mechanic at a machine-tractor station and then in 1950, with the help of his local party organisation, enrolled in the Law Faculty at Moscow State University. Gorbachev was a Komsomol activist while at university, and joined the CPSU itself in 1952. He graduated in 1955, the first Soviet leader since Lenin to receive a legal training and the first to complete his education at the country's premier university, although it was an institution in which the Stalinist *Short Course* still held pride of place and in which the 'slightest deviation from the official line . . . was fraught with consequences'.⁹⁶

The Czech communist and later dissident Zdenek Mlynar, who was Gorbachev's friend and classmate at this time, recalled him as an open-minded student who had particularly liked Hegel's dictum that the truth was 'always concrete' and who was prepared, even before the death of Stalin, to take issue with the purges (Lenin, he pointed out, had at least allowed his Menshevik opponents to emigrate).⁹⁷ Gorbachev himself remembered objecting when one of his instructors insisted on reading out Stalin's newly published *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR* page by page (there was an immediate investigation); one of his fellow students, indeed, recalled him as 'all but a "dissident" at this time'.⁹⁸ But he graduated without incident – there had even been a possibility that he might take up a career in the KGB – and returned to Stavropol', where he worked in the Komsomol and party apparatus and later completed a correspondence course at the local agricultural institute. In 1966 he became first secretary of the city party committee, in 1970 he was appointed to head the territorial party organisation, and the following year he joined the Central Committee as a full member. In 1978 Gorbachev replaced his mentor Fedor Kulakov in the Central Committee Secretariat, taking responsibility for agriculture. In 1979, in addition, he became a candidate and then in 1980 a full member of the ruling Politburo; this made him, in his late forties, one of the very few 'super secretaries' who were represented on both of the party's leading bodies and who formed the most obvious pool of candidates for the succession.⁹⁹

Gorbachev met his wife Raisa, a philosophy graduate, while they were both at Moscow University (they met during a class in ballroom dancing¹⁰⁰). Born in the town of Rubtsovsk in Siberia in 1932, Raisa Maksimovna was the eldest daughter of a Ukrainian railway engineer. Like Gorbachev's, her family had suffered during the Stalin years: Gorbachev's grandfather had been released after torture had failed to extract a confession; Raisa's own father had been arrested, and her grandfather had been shot for 'counter-revolutionary agitation' (it was not until 1988 that the family received a formal certificate of rehabilitation).¹⁰¹ The Gorbachevs married in 1953 and then moved to Stavropol' two years later, after their graduation; Raisa was able to pursue research into the nature of social relations in the nearby countryside and was awarded a candidate of science degree (roughly equivalent to a Western doctorate) in 1967. In the 1970s she lectured for some years at Moscow University.¹⁰² Previous party leaders' wives had played a very discreet role in Soviet public life: it was not even known that Andropov's wife was still alive until she appeared at his funeral in 1984. Mrs Gorbachev, however, swiftly assumed a prominent position in domestic and international affairs, acting as a Soviet 'First Lady' when the general secretary travelled abroad on official occasions. Her views, equally, had a strong influence upon him: they discussed 'everything' at home in the evenings, Gorbachev told an NBC interviewer in late 1987 in remarks that were censored for Soviet domestic consumption; others, including his bodyguard, thought he was even 'subordinate to her'.¹⁰³

It was not customary for a Soviet leader to discuss his personal affairs with the mass media, but Gorbachev did venture some information on this subject when he was interviewed by the Italian communist paper *L'Unità* in May 1987. His main weakness, Gorbachev believed, was that he had too many interests. He had enrolled in the law faculty at university, but had originally intended to study physics. He liked mathematics, but also history and literature. In later years he had turned more and more to the study of economics, while remaining interested in philosophy.¹⁰⁴ This was not, to put it mildly, the intellectual background of his immediate predecessor. Interest in the general secretary's personal life was hardly satisfied by such revelations and there were further queries in the spring of 1989. Did Mikhail Sergeevich, for instance, like fishing? And why did *glasnost'* not apply to the person who had invented it?¹⁰⁵ Gorbachev obliged with some further information in an interview in a Central Committee journal later the same year. He earned 1,200 rubles a month, he explained, the same as other members of the Politburo. He had a considerable additional income from royalties and other sources (his book *Perestroika* alone had appeared in more than 100

countries), but he had donated any earnings of this kind to the party budget and charitable causes. Literature, theatre, music, and cinema remained his hobbies, although he had less and less time to devote to them.¹⁰⁶ The general secretary, it also emerged, had been baptised; though not himself a believer, he supported the constitutional provision by which citizens were free to practise their faith if they wished to do so, and his mother was known to be an active worshipper.¹⁰⁷

As well as his personal characteristics, there were also clues in Gorbachev's speeches before his assumption of the general secretaryship as to the direction of policy he was likely to pursue. Perhaps the clearest indication of this kind was a speech Gorbachev delivered to an all-union conference on ideology in December 1984. The speech contained positive references to self-management, which Lenin had 'never counterposed to Soviet state power', and drew attention to the various interests of different social groups and to the need for a greater measure of social justice (which had become a coded form of attack upon the Brezhnev legacy). There was enormous scope, Gorbachev went on, for the further development of the Soviet political system, and of socialist democracy. This was partly a matter of developing all aspects of the work of the elected soviets, and of involving workers more fully in the affairs of their own workplace. It was also a matter of securing a greater degree of *glasnost* or openness in party and state life. As well as tributes to Chernenko, there were clear and positive allusions to Andropov in his remarks about the 'two previous years' and the need to avoid 'ready-made solutions'.¹⁰⁸ Gorbachev's electoral address of 20 February 1985, made at a time when Chernenko's serious illness was widely known, repeated many of these themes, combining almost populist references to Soviet power as a form of rule 'of the toilers and for the toilers' with more abrasive remarks about the need for self-sufficiency in enterprise management and better discipline on the shopfloor.¹⁰⁹

The direction of reform became still clearer at the April 1985 Central Committee plenum, the first that Gorbachev addressed as party leader and the one from which it became conventional to date the start of *perestroika*. There had been significant achievements in all spheres of Soviet life, Gorbachev told the plenum. The USSR had a powerful, developed economy, a highly skilled workforce, and an advanced scientific base. Everyone had the right to work, to social security, to cultural resources of all kinds, and to participation in the administration of state affairs. But further changes were needed in order to achieve a 'qualitatively new state of society', including modernisation of the economy and the extension of popular self-government. The key issue was the acceleration of economic growth. This was quite feasible if the 'human

factor' was called more fully into play, and if the reserves that existed throughout the economy were properly utilised. This in turn required a greater degree of decentralisation of economic management, including cost accounting at enterprise level and a closer connection between the work people did and the rewards that they received.¹¹⁰ The months and years that followed saw the gradual assembly of a leadership team to direct these changes and the further extension of what was already a challenging reform agenda.

The formation of a new leadership was the easier of these two tasks and the one that advanced more rapidly. The April 1985 Central Committee plenum itself made a start with the appointment of Yegor Ligachev and Nikolai Ryzhkov, both Andropov appointees, to full membership of the Politburo without passing through the customary candidate or nonvoting stage. There had been no promotions of this kind for at least twenty years and it was an early demonstration of Gorbachev's control over the vital power of appointment.¹¹¹ There were further changes in July 1985: Grigorii Romanov, Gorbachev's principal rival for the leadership, retired from both Politburo and Secretariat 'on grounds of ill-health' (he was just over sixty and a rumoured weakness for women and alcohol hardly suggested infirmity), and two new Central Committee secretaries were elected, one of them Boris Yeltsin, who had been party first secretary in Sverdlovsk.¹¹² At the Supreme Soviet session that took place the following day Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, rather than Gorbachev himself, was elected to the vacant chairmanship of the Presidium, and the Georgian party leader Edward Shevardnadze became foreign minister in his place (he had no diplomatic experience but was committed, like Gorbachev, to a change in Soviet relations with the outside world);¹¹³ and then in September Ryzhkov replaced the veteran Brezhnevite, Nikolai Tikhonov, as prime minister.¹¹⁴ A still more extensive restructuring took place at the 27th Party Congress in March 1986, including the appointment of five new Central Committee secretaries: one of them was Alexander Yakovlev, a close Gorbachev associate who had previously served as ambassador to Canada and as director of one of the institutes of the Academy of Sciences; another was Alexandra Biryukova, a former secretary of the All-Union Council of Trade Unions and the first woman member of the leadership since the early 1960s. Remarkably, nearly half the members of this newly elected Politburo and Secretariat were people who had not served in either body before Gorbachev's election to the general secretaryship the previous year.¹¹⁵

There were further changes in the leadership in the months that followed, all of which tended to strengthen Gorbachev's position still