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The Soviets

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Changing the Guard

After Brezhnev's 18-year rule, the U.S.S.R. gets an enigmatic new leader

The first hint came at 7:15 p.m. Moscow time on Wednesday. Nikolai Shchelokov, the Minister for Public Order, had just delivered a brief television address to celebrate Militia Day, and millions of Soviet viewers were awaiting the live pop concert that was supposed to follow. Instead, without explanation, a film about Lenin was broadcast. Then, at 9, came *Vremya* (Time), the nightly news. The announcers, who usually dress informally, wore dark jackets or dresses. "I ran to my neighbors to find out if they knew what was going on," a Moscow secretary said. "Everyone was excited. We all thought somebody had died, but nobody guessed it was Brezhnev. We had all seen him on television three days before, reviewing the military parade, and he looked all right."

The initial speculation centered on Politburo Member Andrei Kirilenko, 76, who was rumored to be ailing and who was absent from the traditional Kremlin lineup at the Nov. 7 ceremonies marking the 65th anniversary of the October Revolution. After the news, the nationwide first channel aired an unscheduled program of war reminiscences. On the second channel, an ice hockey game was abruptly replaced by Tchaikovsky's mournful *"Pathétique" Symphony*.

Only the next morning, at exactly 11, did Soviet radio and TV simultaneously broadcast the formal announcement: "The Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the Presidium of the U.S.S.R. Supreme Soviet and the Council of Ministers of the U.S.S.R. inform with deep sorrow the party and the entire Soviet people that Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev, General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party Central Committee and President of the Presidium of the U.S.S.R. Supreme Soviet, died a sudden death at 8:30 a.m. on Nov. 10, 1982."

Brezhnev, 75, who had held the most powerful post in the Soviet Union for 18 years, and who had been ill for nearly a decade, had died from complications of atherosclerosis affecting his heart and major vessels. He had actually died 26½ hours before the

A new era was beginning, one that would affect the destiny not just of the Soviet Union's 270 million citizens but of the entire world. As Brezhnev's surviving colleagues moved swiftly to fill the leadership void, they were eager to convey the impression of a smooth transition and lay to rest speculation about a power struggle.

Late Friday morning, black limousines began to converge on the Kremlin, bringing the nearly 300 bureaucrats, generals, diplomats, scientists, academicians and workers who make up the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Even before they entered the yellow-and-white Council of Ministers building, they knew what they were there to do. They would ratify the choice already made by the Politburo, that of Yuri Andropov, 68, to be Brezhnev's successor as party chief. The post has been held by only five men since the Bolshevik Revolution: Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin, Georgi Malenkov, Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev. Shortly after noon Friday, Andropov, the son of a railroad worker from the northern Caucasus, became the sixth.

Andropov was, to Western experts, by far the most controversial of the contenders. Stern and serious behind his thick spectacles, he was the Ambassador to Budapest during the Soviet army's efficient repression of the Hungarian uprising in 1956. As head of the Committee for State Security (KGB) from 1967 to May 1982, he had also overseen the suppression of internal dissent. But at the same time, Andropov developed a reputation for pragmatism and sophistication, at least by Soviet standards.

As chairman of the committee designated to organize Brezhnev's funeral, Andropov gave a brief oration extolling the dead leader, who lay in state less than a quarter-mile away in the House of Trade Unions' Hall of Columns, a handsome neoclassical building that was once a club for the Russian aristocracy. "A most outstanding political leader of our times, our comrade and friend, a man with a big soul and heart, sympathetic and well-wishing, responsive and profoundly humane, is no more," Andropov intoned. After calling for a minute of silence, he continued: fairs of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the entire Soviet country. And that was really so."

Konstantin Chernenko, 71, the silver-haired party chief administrator, then rose. As every Soviet citizen knew, Chernenko had been Andropov's main competitor for the succession. Now, in a deft and effective political gesture, the rival was moving to nominate the winner, thus symbolizing the need to close ranks. "Dear Comrades, all of us are obviously aware that it is extremely difficult to repair the loss inflicted on us by the death of Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev," Chernenko said. "It is now twice, three times as important to conduct matters in the party collectively." Chernenko, a close protégé of Brezhnev's, then proceeded to nominate Andropov, whom he described as "a selfless Communist" and, perhaps with some reticence, as Brezhnev's "closest associate." The delegates approved the choice unanimously. By 1 p.m. the meeting was over, and the entire Central Committee went to the Hall of Columns to open the period of national mourning, during which Brezhnev's corpse would lie in state.

As an orchestra played Tchaikovsky, the committee members lined up in front of the catafalque where Brezhnev lay amid wreaths and flowers, with row upon row of medals pinned to cushions below his feet. After a brief formal tribute, Andropov led the Politburo members toward the dead man's family. He bent over and kissed Brezhnev's widow Victoria, 75, through her veil. She lifted a hand to her cheek to wipe away tears. Andropov bent to kiss her again, then kissed Brezhnev's daughter Galina. Kirilenko, a leading contender for the succession until sidelined in the past year, burst into tears as he spoke to Brezhnev's widow.

World leaders sent messages of condolence to the Kremlin that varied in tone. President Reagan, who had been awakened at 3:35 a.m. Thursday by National Security Adviser William P. Clark with the news of Brezhnev's death, sent a respectful two-paragraph message calling Brezhnev "one of the world's most impor-

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