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Ignorance to the Importance of Innovation: How Brezhnev Allowed the Soviet Union to Stagnate

When Leonid Brezhnev succeeded Nikita Khrushchev as the leader of the Soviet Union in 1964, he inherited a state that had attempted diplomacy and promoted cultural developments, as well as a party that encouraged discussion on the party's actions and policies. Along with the evolved nature of the Soviet Union, Brezhnev also inherited the problems Khrushchev's erratic rule had failed to prevent, most notably the economic failures in the agricultural and industrial sectors and reduced influential power over the state. Upon his ascension to power, Brezhnev laid out his strategy to return the Soviet Union to the traditional structures and rules of Stalin's reign, while focusing on conservative goals for the state. **The policies Brezhnev enacted led to a period of stability and comfort for the citizens of the Soviet Union in the early years of the Brezhnev era, however, by the mid 1970s, economic growth had begun to stagnate, highlighting the systemic faults and weaknesses of the government.**

In his time in power, Khrushchev attempted the decentralization of industrial ministries, focusing on agriculture, providing educational reform, and shifting resources to consumer goods' production. Khrushchev's additional focus on culture and spread of ideas allowed for forums to discuss government policies, spreading the potential for dissent and discontent with the government. Upon Brezhnev's assumption of power, he maintained the agricultural focus, cultivating economic growth, encouraging a rise in investment, land reclamations, incentives for peasantry, rises in output, improving the standards of living (McAuley, 76). In the early 1970s, life in the Soviet Union was at its most prosperous, but by the mid 1970s, Brezhnev's government was struggling to gain a return on their investments. Agricultural programs used too many resources, the state budget was overextended, subsidizing consumer goods for low prices, infrastructure needs were neglected, and resources were further drained building up military defenses. By that time, ordinary citizens were faced with the consequences of the lack of momentum in economic and social growth, problems arising in healthcare, education, housing, rising crime and alcoholism, and more prominent and widespread corruption and cynicism (McAuley, 78). Although the

economy had been growing, providing better stability in quality of life for most citizens, the Soviet Union had reached a state of stagnation due to Brezhnev's insistence on maintaining traditional government rules, recanting the state's previous emphasis on culture and ideas. This avoidance of innovation hindered technological advancements and discoveries, allowing systemic problems to continue.

Each Soviet leader tried various means of establishing their legitimacy, some successful and others not. For Lenin, his legitimacy originated in the revolution and the way he played to the fears and emotions of the public while promoting himself as a politician. For Stalin, his legitimacy came from fear and ignorance (McAuley, 44). Through his purges, Stalin scared people into following, given the option was to follow him or face imprisonment or death, and by restricting international news, citizens came to believe that their life was a paradise, creating a dependency on his government. Following Stalin, Krushchev's fostered his legitimacy as he worked to improve living standards, increase agricultural production, and repair the fear Stalin instilled, releasing political prisoners, and encouraging art and scientific advancements. When Brezhnev took power, Krushchev's policies and behavior had turned opinion against him, allowing the improving standards of living in the early years of Brezhnev's government to establish his legitimacy as people felt safer. The Soviet Union felt comfortable returning to a government like the one they trusted under Stalin, however, the quick downturn in economic growth damaged his government's legitimacy, allowing the state to stagnate.

Although the improvements to living standards makes the Brezhnev era seem like a period of stability and growth, it is clear in examining the effects of his policies over the full span of his rule, the Brezhnev era was greater marred by stagnation as the state failed to continue its technological and cultural advancements. Brezhnev's legitimacy encouraged the stability in the beginning, but as his government lost legitimacy in concurrence with the state's loss in momentum, it became clear the Soviet Union did not have the resources or capabilities to survive in its current form.

McAuley, Mary. *Soviet Politics 1917–1991*. Oxford University Press, 1992.