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APPROVED FOR RELEASE
DATE: JUN 2007



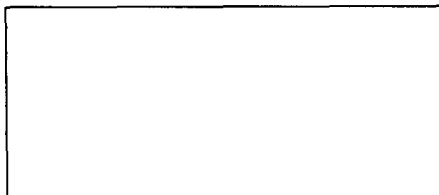
DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence Report

POLITICS IN THE SOVIET POLITBURO
AND THE CZECH CRISIS

(Reference Title: CAESAR XXXIII)

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28 October 1968

RSS No. 0032/68



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POLICY DIFFERENCES IN THE SOVIET POLITBURO
AND THE CZECH CRISIS

MEMORANDUM TO RECIPIENTS

This is a speculative essay on differences over policies and priorities in the Soviet Politburo as they emerged prior to and during the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. The essay focuses primarily on the conflicting policy tendencies within the Soviet leadership as symbolized by Kosygin and by Brezhnev. Other personalities, of course, are involved and in the long run may prove equally or more important. However, in recent and current policy debates in the Soviet Union the tendency toward orthodoxy, dogmatism, and conservatism as represented by Brezhnev and the more moderate stance in foreign and domestic policy as represented by Kosygin appear to be the main lines along which differences and disputes among the Soviet leaders take shape. The somewhat controversial thesis of this essay is that the Czech crisis did not precipitate differences among the Soviet leaders but rather that the crisis was part of a continuing dispute among Soviet leaders over the "soft" versus the "hard" line issue in domestic, bloc and international affairs.

The essay was written by Carl Linden, an SRS consultant, and reflects information available through mid-September.

John Kerry King
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POLICY DIFFERENCES IN THE SOVIET POLITBURO
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The post-Khrushchev Soviet leadership reached a turning point when it launched the invasion of Czechoslovakia on August 20th. By all normal expectations it should by now have irrevocably passed that point. Yet in the immediate aftermath of the invasion the Soviet "collective leadership" tarried, hesitating to carry the military action to its logical conclusion, namely, the total destruction of the Dubcek liberal Communist regime. In the face of the unity of the initial Czechoslovak resistance the Kremlin backtracked for the time being. The Dubcek regime won a reprieve and the Soviets at least temporarily eschewed the imposition of direct military rule. In effect, the Kremlin returned to the pre-invasion strategy of trying to bend the Czechoslovak leadership to its will with the massive added advantage of the leverage provided by the occupation army.

The seesawing in Soviet tactics has almost certainly been tied to shifts in Politburo alignments as well as to the Czechoslovak resistance. The failure of the effort at Cierna to curb the Czechoslovak liberalization evidently was exploited by the promoters of direct intervention to demand a go-ahead with invasion plans. Yet the embarrassing failure of the venture to produce immediate results in the form of a compliant collaborationist government in Prague gave some breathing space to counsels of restraint in the Politburo. After the invasion, the Soviet toleration, for the moment, of the reelection by the Czechoslovak party of an overwhelmingly liberal leadership headed by Dubcek with only a thin sprinkling of conservatives clearly suggested that a moderating, temporizing influence was still at work within the Soviet leadership. In the ensuing weeks, the clash of alternately menacing and conciliatory notes in the Soviet press and in Soviet dealings with the Czechs seemed more like tell-tales of disarray within the Soviet ruling group than the

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masterful execution of a carrot and stick policy. It was not until early October that Brezhnev was able to bring to bear upon Dubcek sufficiently harsh pressures to bring major Czechoslovak concessions in the direction desired by the invasion's sponsors.

The stop-and-go pattern of Soviet policy, the evidence suggests, has been a mirror of the unstable balance of forces that has existed in the Politburo "collective" since Khrushchev's fall. From this standpoint the invasion came as a culminating move in a growing conflict among those forces.

The Czech crisis brought to a head an underlying conflict in the Soviet "collective leadership" between moderates who wanted to follow broadly the path of reform at home and accommodation abroad and conservatives bent on erasing the legacy of Khrushchevism and restoring ideological and political orthodoxy to Soviet policy. Before the invasion a senior Yugoslav editor dramatized but did not exaggerate the stakes in the Czech crisis when he said: "We feel strongly about Czechoslovakia because theirs is our fight, too. If they lose, then we and other Communist parties could also lose our struggle against our own dogmatic forces and we would all go back to a kind of Stalinism." The comment is by no means irrelevant to the Soviet leadership although the factional balance in the Soviet party over the past several years had tended to favor the conservatives, which is the reverse of what the situation has been in Yugoslavia and recently in Czechoslovakia.

The Kremlin decision to invade Czechoslovakia must be counted a severe, if not culminating, defeat for the more moderate Soviet leaders. All those projects in Soviet policy holding out the prospect of limited detente with the United States and the Western powers have now fallen under a cloud. President Johnson's postponement of talks with Kosygin on nuclear arms limitation underscored the downturn in the fortunes of the moderates. Ironically, Kosygin had completed arrangements with Washington on the talks the day before Soviet troops crossed the Czechoslovak borders. Yet the unexpected results of the invasion for Soviet policy-makers and their subsequent hesitation to

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crush the Dubcek regime outright after the failure of the first attempt to do so leaves room for doubt as to the ultimate outcome of the invasion on the internal politics of the Soviet leadership. Of course, the very momentum of the resort to main force in Czechoslovakia weighs heavily against a reversal in policy and places the more moderate wing of the Soviet top echelon at a disadvantage in the internal political struggle.

In the period since Khrushchev's fall, conservative forces in the Soviet party have held the edge in inner-party politics and a turn toward ideological and political orthodoxy increasingly showed in the cards. The pressure from such forces gained in strength and despite vigorous and steady resistance the moderate wing of the leading group has been forced into a slow but steady retreat on a whole spectrum of issues ranging from the Stalin question to defense spending. However, the sudden and total downfall of the orthodox Novotny regime and the unexpectedly rapid liberalization under Dubcek posed a threat to what had been a gradual restoration of orthodoxy in Soviet politics. The danger that the Czech liberalization, if permitted to survive, would in time infect Soviet politics was undoubtedly considered acute by Soviet conservatives. They saw in it a deep menace to the gains they had made in political struggle within the Soviet leadership since Khrushchev's fall. As a result the issues that had already been producing divisions within the "collective leadership" were aggravated.

Two developments, in particular, since early spring this year registered the aggravation of the conflict in the leading group. In February and March there were signs of a sharpening of the clash between Brezhnev and Kosygin whose positions over time have mirrored respectively the divisions between the conservative and moderate wings of the leading group. Secondly, the confrontation between Brezhnev and Kosygin was followed by an increasingly noticeable divergence in the lines of movement in Soviet policy. As summer came, Soviet policy alternately turned its face in opposing directions.

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On the one side, there were the series of moves which culminated at the end of June in the signing of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty and the Politburo decision to enter high-level talks with the United States on nuclear arms limitation. These initiatives and the justifications offered on their behalf by Soviet spokesmen were in close accord with positions Kosygin had previously taken. On the other hand, there was the steady expansion, under Brezhnev's evident personal guidance, of the drive against the Czechoslovak liberalization and the associated propaganda campaign playing on the theme of an intensifying ideological and class struggle between the Soviet and Western camps. As the crisis with the Czechoslovaks grew the counter-pulls within the Soviet leadership between conflict and accommodation abroad with the United States and the West, between rigidity and relaxation inside the Soviet and East European orbit became more manifest. All the major issues dividing the dogmatic-orthodox from the moderate-reformist wings of the leadership in the post-Khrushchev period tended to converge.

The altercation between Brezhnev and Kosygin--revealed in their respective speeches to local party organizations in February and March--touched on a secondary issue but nonetheless an issue clearly tied to the deeper difference of outlook that has been manifested between the two Soviet executives since early in their incumbency. In his speech on March 28, Brezhnev took a cut at Kosygin for the latter's praise the month before of Western science and technology, in general, and of American achievements in production organization, in particular. Kosygin had warned that it would be "shortsighted" not to utilize foreign accomplishments in these spheres. In a riposte, Brezhnev berated "some workers" for overrating capitalist and depreciating Soviet achievements. Brezhnev complained that Soviet spokesmen should be "paying more attention" to showing the flaws of capitalism and the "upheaval" it is undergoing--a theme which the party leader has increasingly played upon as the basis for Soviet leadership of the class struggle against imperialism.

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The exchange pointed to the more fundamental issue of how the Western world should be viewed and, by implication, the broad policy line that should be pursued toward that world. The difference over Western achievements was also in tune with other specific differences between the two men. For example, where Brezhnev has stressed the prospect of protracted struggle with the West, Kosygin has stressed the possibilities of developing good economic relations with the West; where Brezhnev has promoted a high rate of military spending, Kosygin has argued for holding the line in favor of the civilian economy. In brief, Brezhnev's specific policy positions have been generally consistent with his over-all conservative viewpoint which, while eschewing Chinese-style militancy, stresses the need to maintain a sharp line of demarcation between the Communist and "imperialist" camps. Kosygin's have accorded with his generally moderate stance opening the prospect of accommodations with the West over the long term and profitable relations with it for the sake of Soviet internal growth and development.

The same Brezhnev speech in March also contained signs of strain in the relationship between the party apparatchiki on the one hand and the economic managers under Kosygin on the other. Brezhnev aimed a thrust at the latter, warning of punishments if executives abused the greater autonomy they were enjoying. Brezhnev's stress on control from the center and an unusually emphatic reassertion of party supremacy in all spheres of national development obviously constricted any notion of a special or quasi-independent preserve of policy for Kosygin and his managers. Brezhnev's focus on the theme of party supremacy was also to become a dominant element in the subsequent development of the Soviet attack on Czechoslovak internal reforms. In the March speech Brezhnev stressed the principle of party supremacy by repeating the refrain, "Only the party can..." He said:

Only the party, armed with frontline theory, with Marxism-Leninism, can find the correct solution to these problems [i.e., building communism at home and promoting socialism abroad] and can determine the principal, most

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urgent directions of the country's economic and social development. Only the party.... can impart to all work in the construction of communism a purposeful, scientifically based, and planned character. Only the party can unite the forces of the people --the working class, the peasants and the intelligentsia--for the successful solution of both economic and political problems.

One of the points hidden in Brezhnev's emphasis on party primacy was bared in a Kommunist article in early May. It charged that "some economic leaders" took a narrow "administrative-managerial" view of their activity without regard for political considerations and disdained general interests. The article was alluding to disregard among managers of the prerogatives of party organs at various levels and was touching the same sore point Brezhnev exposed in his warning against indiscipline and disregard of state interests. The article's complaints about the ideological failings of the managers harmonized with Brezhnev's argument at a party conference in February that the "ruble"--a reference to the emphasis on the "profit" motive in Kosygin's economic reform--was not the only incentive, but that it needed to be combined with ideological stimuli and Communist consciousness.

In any case, the intensity of the clash between the two top leaders was indicated by the relative openness of Brezhnev's criticism of Kosygin on the score of underrating Soviet accomplishments. While the differences between the two had been apparent before in differing emphases and divergent formulations in their speeches, as well as recurring signs of personal friction behind the scenes, rarely had either pointed a finger at the other so unmistakably in a public utterance.

In March President Johnson's limitation of the bombing of North Vietnam opening the way to the Paris talks, on the one side, and the rapidly widening scope of the Czechoslovak liberalization on the other evidently produced discordant movements in the Politburo. President Johnson's actions apparently gave Kosygin a handle for

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moving debate on the question of negotiating with the United States on nuclear arms limitation toward a resolution. At the same time, the pace of the Czech developments evidently prompted Brezhnev to accelerate efforts --undoubtedly urged on by alarms sounded by conservative elements in the leading group--to develop a strategy of counter-action against the Czechoslovak liberalization. At the April plenum of the Central Committee he unveiled plans for an "offensive" against "imperialist" ideological and political subversion at home and abroad. As events have turned out the Czech liberal communist regime was the ultimate target of the offensive. In brief, the nuclear arms and the Czechoslovak issues became counterpoints in a broader leadership conflict.

The Politburo's decision--announced in late June--to enter talks with the United States on nuclear arms limitation including the ABM issue came against a background bearing all the signs of long and involved controversy within the leading group. The eighteen-month Soviet delay in accepting the idea of talks indicate that the decision was hard to come by. There had been immediate and specific evidence of controversy after the initial U.S. proposal to discuss missile limitation in January 1967. For example, in February a Pravda article (inaccurately paraphrasing a Kosygin statement) indicated that the Soviet Union was willing to discuss the question, but the article was subsequently discredited by a Soviet spokesman. In March 1967 the President revealed that he had received a letter from Kosygin affirming Soviet willingness to discuss the issue, but the letter was never confirmed by the Soviets.

The advocates of entering talks must have advanced hard-headed and persuasive arguments in order to tip the balance in the Politburo in their favor. While the prospect of a settlement of the Vietnam war undoubtedly affected the debate, the U.S. decision in June to go ahead with the Sentinel ABM probably helped clinch arguments in favor of talks. The argument probably played on the fear the USSR might prove the loser in a full-scale nuclear race and on the hope that a tactical advantage might be won if the U.S. were to delay ABM development

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during talks. Perhaps very important was the spectre of severe disruption of the Soviet economy such a race could produce. However, the decision to enter talks as well as the concurrent decisions to sign the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, continue cultural exchanges and open air links with New York were not so important in themselves but rather in the broader implications they raised for general policy.

Brezhnev for one made it clear that he placed a restrictive interpretation on the scope and purposes of the decisions on the treaty and nuclear talks. At the April plenum Brezhnev had already tied Soviet agreement to the non-proliferation treaty strictly to the military-strategic benefits it secured for the USSR without suggesting that it enhanced coexistence with the West. A Pravda commentator echoed this attitude in a 6 July interview with a Japanese newsman, rejecting the idea of any connection between "U.S.-Soviet coexistence" and the non-proliferation treaty or nuclear disarmament talks. Further, in his 8 July speech to the military graduates, Brezhnev implied that the non-proliferation treaty was a concession wrung unwillingly from the imperialist powers by the militant struggle of "peace-loving" forces.

In comparison, Gromyko's report at the Supreme Soviet announcing Soviet readiness to enter nuclear arms limitation talks placed the decision in a broad and optimistic political perspective. That perspective, in short, stood in contrast to the darker prospect of danger and conflict set out in the conservative line that had been dominant in other major regime statements. Gromyko, a dutiful and deferential official, was undoubtedly the mouthpiece for views emanating from the highest level. On major points his Supreme Soviet report accorded with positions Kosygin had previously taken but almost necessarily must have represented more than the latter's views alone. The most likely assumption is that the report was not given without prior consultation in the Politburo and reflected the view of at least a temporary majority of that body.

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The Gromyko report was keyed to a characterization of the present "stage" of international developments that contrasted with the pessimistic view Brezhnev had consistently asserted. Despite the "motley character" and "complexity" of contemporary events, the "main" conclusion to be drawn regarding the present "stage," Gromyko stated, was that the rate of collapse of the system of imperialism--with its attendant phenomena of aggressive wars and "unbridled" arms races, etc.--was developing rapidly. The Brezhnev formulation--which has been a standard line in most party documents--offers a less reassuring prospect. The present "stage", in this view, involves a protracted, dangerous conflict with imperialism characterized by sharpened international tensions and "complications." The underlying cause of the condition, according to this analysis, is the development of the "general crisis of capitalism" which produces increasing "imperialist" aggressiveness in world affairs. The Gromyko formulation suggested a long-term trend of declining danger of serious conflict in international affairs.

Similar cleavage between Brezhnev and Kosygin on world prospects had emerged as far back as mid-1966. Brezhnev had warned in a speech that despite the gradual change of the balance of forces in favor of socialism, "this general tendency in world development must not hide from us the danger with which the present international situation is fraught." Shortly thereafter, Kosygin had challenged the Brezhnev view by simply turning the coin around. He warned, in turn, against "shutting oneself up in present-day events" when making policy. Rather, present tensions, he argued, must be kept in the perspective of the broad trend favoring the forces of peace and security.

In support of the brighter view of affairs, the Gromyko report pictured a steady decline in the influence of traditional military strength in world politics--a trend which, he said, was the "essence" of the "new" phenomena of the present stage. Ironically Gromyko cited Brezhnev's report last November on the 50th anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution to support the latter point. Nonetheless, Gromyko's argument hardly squared with Brezhnev's resounding reaffirmation soon after in an 8 July

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speech of the central importance of military power. "As long as imperialism exists and threatens the use of force," Brezhnev argued, the imperative to face "great material expenditures" in increasing military strength remains. Though the Soviet Union would, he added, continue to support limitation of the arms race, it must keep its powder dry in readiness for "any serious turn in events." The tone and thrust of Brezhnev's argument ran counter to Gromyko's, and his warning of a serious turn was confirmed by the subsequent Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. Gromyko had declared that the military power of imperialism is already successfully "contained" by Soviet might. This assertion was a complement of a Kosygin statement earlier in the year that the imperialists are "convinced" that the USSR was not vulnerable to military pressure as part of an explanation of why imperialism is allegedly stepping up "ideological" sabotage in the Soviet world.

In connection with the theme of the lessing of the influence of military power in world politics, Gromyko depreciated the importance of large U.S. military budgets. To measure a nation's strength in world affairs by the "quantitative" yardstick was faulty, Gromyko asserted, since by its measure American influence should have increased rather than declined. Brezhnev on 8 July, however, reasserted the importance of the yardstick. He voiced extreme alarm at the size of the upcoming U.S. military budget--which he exaggerated by citing a preliminary estimate--and professed to see a design in high Washington circles to work for strategic superiority over the USSR and to pursue a more aggressive policy. Brezhnev's expression of concern contrasted with Gromyko's reassuring assessment that Soviet might "is by no means lesser than" that of imperialism (read United States). Kosygin was also visibly upset by the size of the U.S. arms budget in his talk with British labor leader Grosland on 6 June, but his main concern, as in previous years, evidently was the impact of an arms race on the Soviet economy and on the Soviet allocation of resources, not the danger of the U.S. gaining strategic superiority. Further, Brezhnev's warning against "shutting our eyes" to the fact that the "hawks" maintain their positions in Washington (despite public opposition to U.S. war policies)

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was a counterpoint to statements in the Gromyko report. Gromyko said that top American political figures like Rockefeller and George Ball were recognizing the limits of the influence of American military power in world affairs. Similarly, Kosygin had in the past pointed to the presence of moderate political forces in Washington.

The general theses of the Gromyko report were closely tied to its justifications for the pursuit of a disarmament policy, and, specifically, the decision to engage in talks on nuclear arms limitation with the United States. The report was cast in distinctly argumentative terms and answered specific objections against following a pro-disarmament policy--another indication that the report was drafted against a background of sharp debate. The report contained an attack on unidentified "bourgeois leaders" who saw a "tragic contradiction in the epoch" and who concluded that the arms race is a "fatal inevitability." Such a view describes the orthodox Communist thesis equally well and Gromyko confirmed this by denouncing Communist "theoreticians" who call the idea of disarmament an "illusion." While such attacks obviously apply, but are not necessarily limited, to the Chinese and others outside the USSR, Gromyko at this point phrased his case on the value of talks in a manner which suggested that he was mirroring an argument addressed to doubters in the Soviet leadership itself. On the one hand, he agreed, "experience" shows the "impossibility" of counting on capitalist powers agreeing to solutions of pressing international problems, especially disarmament, without constant exposure of militarist policies. On the other, he added, "experience also shows" that consistent and persistent pursuit of a disarmament policy made it possible to achieve "certain results" even if it did not lead "all at once to concrete agreements." The latter point fits in well with Kosygin's theme of steady progress in the disarmament field step-by-step at the signing of the non-proliferation treaty.

Kosygin's brief remarks at the signing of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty shortly after the Supreme Soviet session reinforced the Gromyko report's defense of an active disarmament policy. Kosygin pictured a

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steady step-by-step progress in the disarmament field reaching back to the Khrushchev era. He cited the test-ban treaty, the culmination of Khrushchev's detente efforts after the Cuban crisis, as the starting point of the record of progress. He spoke optimistically of the prospects of reducing international tension and saw in the non-proliferation treaty a confirmation of the capacity of states to find "mutually acceptable solutions" to the "complicated" international problems of the day. Kosygin even continued to preserve his accent on the positive as the crisis over Czechoslovakia escalated in mid-July. In Sweden on 12 July he went well beyond the call of diplomatic duty in developing the idea that the world is becoming a single entity in the spheres of trade, economics, science and technology. While noting that the "imperialists" still engage in attempts to aggravate tensions--attempts which "naturally" will be rebuffed, Kosygin asserted that an "objective appraisal" of the world situation made it "impossible not to note the positive processes." The "positive" trend, according to the Soviet Premier, was that all states both East and West, were interdependent and could not develop individually without "extensive" economic, scientific and technological collaboration. Kosygin's "one-world" theme clashed with the rapid intensification at that juncture of Moscow's hard-line propaganda against the Czechoslovak liberalization and the insistence on Stalin's rigid "two-camp" depiction of the world. Kosygin's theme uneasily co-existed with Brezhnev's picture of a world riven by crises and class war.

Brezhnev's political maneuvers following on the heels of the signature of the non-proliferation treaty and the decision to enter nuclear talks bore all the markings of a concentrated effort to head off the alternative line of general policy that had broken the surface in the Gromyko and Kosygin statements. His speeches in early July--some of the specific points of which have already been cited--squashed any idea that the way was being opened toward a more peaceful relationship with the Western powers and the United States in particular. These speeches were distinguished by unusually harsh anti-Western vituperation and were replete with the coldest of cold-war themes. His leading role in escalating the

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attack against the liberal Dubcek regime in Czechoslovakia to at least the point of direct intervention in July and August had the obvious advantage of putting massive pressure on moderates in the leading group to acquiesce in the hardline he had pushed with increasing vigor since the early spring.

At the same time, aware of the dangers of failure in the Czech venture, Brezhnev engaged in a feverish effort to lessen his personal vulnerability. He not only obtained the formal and public sanction of the Central Committee but of the Politburo itself for his actions. If he fails, any failures of the policy could be treated as "collective" responsibility; any successes Brezhnev could claim for himself as an initiator and leader of the venture. Brezhnev's difficulty in gaining genuine unity behind his leadership in the very heat of the Czech crisis was indicated in a Pravda article a week and a half before the invasion. The article (9 August) by Rodionov--a figure with a history of involvement in high-level intrigues--stressed the inviolability of "democratic centralism" in party politics and warned of the dangers of factionalism. His general comments on the pernicious effects on the execution of the official party line if some "pull" in one direction and others in another seemed as immediately applicable to the Soviet leadership as to other parties in the Communist world in the recent period. Rodionov pointedly recommended Brezhnev's speech of 28 March as a sound directive on the principles of party solidarity. It was this speech--cited earlier--which contained a conspicuous thrust at Kosygin's views and set forth many of the basic lines Brezhnev has since relentlessly advanced.

On the whole, it seems unlikely that the Politburo majority that backed the decision on arms talks represented the same alignment of forces that pushed through the decision to invade Czechoslovakia. Both actions, the evidence suggests, were the products of shifts in the balance within the leading group: in the first, a moderate grouping winning an advantage; in the second, a hard-line faction gaining the upper hand. Obviously there must have been "swing votes" in both cases. Kosygin and Brezhnev have

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mirrored in their statements and actions the clash of the opposing tendencies. It has been Kosygin who most consistently among the leaders kept alive an alternative to the creeping conservative tide in party politics since Khrushchev's fall. Brezhnev, on the other, has striven to weld a conservatively-oriented coalition as the base of support for his leadership. He has sought to avoid alienating party conservatives and strong elements in the Soviet military as Khrushchev had done.

Brezhnev, nonetheless, has had to fight on two fronts in the leadership struggle. Brezhnev has so far contained but has not been able to drive from the field powerful potential challengers from both the militant-conservative and moderate groupings. (The outcome of the Czechoslovak affair will most likely decide this matter in one way or another.)

On the one side he has treated Kosygin, a leader without a personal base of power in the party apparatus, as a serious rival evidently because the latter has actual or potential allies with bases in the party. To suggest one possibility, it is worth recalling in this connection that Brezhnev's first major battle was with Podgorny who shared with him the status of co-heir apparent in the Secretariat in Khrushchev's last year. Shortly after Khrushchev's fall Podgorny associated himself with a moderate political line seemingly in tandem with Kosygin who was sponsoring a military budget cut and a policy of "mutual example" with the United States. With support from conservatives, most likely including Suslov, Brezhnev defeated Podgorny and in the process sent Mikoyan--a consistent supporter of reform under Khrushchev--into retirement. He nudged Podgorny out of the Secretariat and into the prestigious but less politically potent Presidency of the Supreme Soviet, replacing Mikoyan. Brezhnev's success reduced but did not destroy the threat from Podgorny. Despite the seemingly close relations between the two since 1966, Brezhnev cannot be sure of Podgorny's unwavering support in a leadership showdown.

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On the second front, Brezhnev has been menaced by a militant faction dissatisfied with his leadership which says, in effect, that a new leader is needed to carry through a hard-line with greater determination and less circumspection. In 1965 Shelepin sought to lead this grouping and mounted an abortive challenge to Brezhnev's position. And last year Brezhnev once more had to cope with another challenge from the militants which was initiated by the then Moscow party chief, Yegorychev, and was apparently based on a complaint against the party secretary's caution in handling the Middle East crisis. While there seems to be little reason to doubt that Brezhnev has been the main author of the broad aggressive strategy pursued against the Czechoslovak liberalization during the past summer, he is perhaps vulnerable once more to the charge of ineffective leadership in a crisis from party militants. Not only, their argument probably goes, did the decision to invade remain a cliff-hanger for month-after-month despite all the sound and fury and the build-up of political-military pressure, but the invasion when it did come was not carried through to its logical conclusion quickly and efficiently and exposed Soviet policy to greater difficulties and embarrassment than was necessary.

From the moderates, on the other hand, comes the alternative argument that the invasion of Czechoslovakia has damaged rather than aided Soviet interests and that restraint would have been the better policy and remains the better policy in handling the Czechoslovaks even after the invasion. Such opposing pressures probably explain in part Moscow's alternately conciliatory and menacing gestures since the invasion.

In sum, each wing of the Soviet ruling group so far had tended to inhibit the consistent implementation of the designs of the other. Brezhnev has sought to be the spokesman for the conservative trend in the party since Khrushchev's fall but, buffeted by the cross-currents, has so far been unable to win the day decisively for his own leadership. The invasion of Czechoslovakia and its aftermath--whether Brezhnev had been a direct advocate of that action, or, as one report has it, had resisted but then yielded to militant demands to invade--is inevitably aggravating the long-existing strains within the Soviet ruling group and is likely eventually to produce a change in the political complexion of the Politburo.

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