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**Invisible Man***More rumors on Brezhnev*

**T**he statement from the Foreign Ministry in Moscow was brief and to the point: "Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev is currently on his routine winter vacation." Never mind that the cold, crisp days of the Russian winter had passed and that the capricious spring weather and thawing snow hardly made for a pleasant vacation. For Kremlin watchers around the world, the announcement provided the first official acknowledgment that the Soviet leader had indeed dropped out of sight. But if it was intended to allay suspicions about his whereabouts, it only increased the questions concerning Brezhnev's disappearance from public view three weeks ago.

The 75-year-old Soviet leader was last seen in Tashkent as he was about to board a plane that would take him back to Moscow after a four-day visit to Soviet Central Asia. Given the hectic schedule Brezhnev had set for himself, his dazed, almost blank look as he inattentively followed the departure ceremonies did not strike Soviets watching the evening news as unusual. During almost a decade of precarious health, Brezhnev had had such bad days before.

According to some accounts, Brezhnev collapsed moments later while still in the Tashkent airport. Other versions tell of a sudden mild stroke during the four-hour flight back to Moscow. The evidence: no film footage or newspaper photographs show his return to Moscow, a curious lapse from the ironclad rules of Kremlin protocol.

The various reports disagree on what happened to Brezhnev after his arrival in Moscow. Some put him in the Kremlin clinic on Granovsky Street and cite stories that police cordoned off entrances to the health center. Other versions have him convalescing at his suburban Moscow dacha, which is believed to have the latest in medical equipment. When quizzed about

the hospitalization rumors, the laconic Foreign Ministry spokesman stopped just short of a denial, noting that he had "no information."

There were reports that a U.S. intelligence document had described the Soviet leader's illness as a "very serious" stroke and speculated that he would probably step down at a meeting of the Central Committee in May, but high-level U.S. intelligence officials say they have never seen such a document, and have no reason to think Brezhnev has had a serious setback. Saying that he had "no confirmation" that the Soviet leader was ill, President Reagan invited Brezhnev to meet with him in New York City in June. Soviet officials were caught off guard by the ill-timed offer, though they later said that Brezhnev might accept it.

**W**estern governments were just as puzzled over who was in charge during Brezhnev's absence. Speculation that Andrei Kirilenko, 75, a longtime favorite for the succession, had lost a power struggle to Brezhnev Protégé Konstantin Chernenko, 70, was strengthened last week when Kirilenko's name was missing from an obituary for a World War II tank commander signed by other Kremlin leaders. A senior West German official gave Brezhnev "a few more months," but then warned: "When I read our information, I am always amazed at how little we know for certain about the inner workings of the leadership of the world's second most important power."

Whatever the speculation abroad, the Kremlin was clearly intent on creating the impression that—his vacation notwithstanding—Brezhnev was still in command. The front page of the Communist Party daily *Pravda* dutifully printed, under Brezhnev's signature, messages to several world leaders. In a birthday note to Vietnamese Party Leader Le Duan, also 75, Brezhnev hoped that his comrade might enjoy "good health, years of long life and new successes in your vigorous activity." He might very well have wished himself the same. ■