

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A28

THE WASHINGTON POST
19 September 1981

Moscow Behind Closed Doors

Kremlin Allows 'Pressa-Pool' to Join Britons in Seeing Brezhnev

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Manchester Guardian

MOSCOW—"How many of them are there?" the elderly man asked, as he stood stiffly with his slightly puffy face toward the open door. "Two of them plus an assistant," replied Boris Ponomarev, candidate-member of the Soviet Politburo in the rather loud, deliberate voice that people use when they are talking to the hard of hearing.

"What are we waiting for now?" asked the senior man a moment later, with the punctiliousness born of an army background. Thus did President Leonid Brezhnev prepare to greet a slightly late Michael Foot and Denis Healey of the British Labor Party in the Kremlin Thursday.

It was the first time in 6½ years that the Soviet leader had received a British politician. For the waiting Britons it was a rare chance to step inside the suite of offices where the Politburo takes its decisions.

In Washington, the media tramp in and out of the Oval Office about twice a day for White House "photo opportunities." The big desk with the American flag at one end of the room and the fireplace with the wingback chairs at the other are known to millions of viewers of "All the President's Men" and "Washington Behind Closed Doors."

Brezhnev's working environment is hardly ever seen. It turns

out to be less romantic and less imperial than the White House, which combines the grace of a 19th century country house with armed Marines outside the president's door.

Journalists with Foot were given a red pass with letters saying *pressa-pool*, an example of the way "Rusglish" is infiltrating the Russian language. Carrying this simple card and our passports we were waved through a gate in the Kremlin wall. There was no body search or security check. The solitary policeman did not match faces with passport photos.

Inside a building marked Council of Ministers an elderly woman hung up our coats. We walked up three flights of stairs, turned down a long corridor with a dull carpet and several closed doors, and were ushered into an anteroom with two television sets, several phones, and a few armchairs. There were no uniformed police, no secretaries, no officials pacing.

If we were about to enter some inner sanctum, it certainly did not feel like it. The door from the anteroom was wide open and we marched straight through to a larger room with a table long enough for the Politburo. The room must be behind Lenin's mausoleum on Red Square but the Kremlin wall blocks the view.

In the room stood Brezhnev and Ponomarev and an interpreter. Next to the president on a table stood a three-foot-high por-

celain vase decorated with his portrait. Another table had neatly folded, perhaps never unfolded, copies of Pravda and the rest of the Soviet press and some group photographs of Brezhnev and other Soviet officials.

When Foot entered, Brezhnev greeted him with a broad smile and a rather formal pumping handshake. If there were any CIA health experts hiding on our side, they would have had to pronounce the 74-year-old Soviet president trim and fit. KGB analysts on the other side might have thought Foot looked older and less sure of himself than their own man. Foot had discarded his walking stick but his glasses had a special plastic piece on the side suggesting there may be continuing trouble in his left eye. Was this a future prime minister, the Soviet experts presumably were asking.

After Brezhnev had steered Foot, Healey and Foot's press spokesman to the conference table, the president asked, "What do you people in England drink, tea or coffee?" "Coffee please," said Foot.

There was an awkward pause, which Foot proceeded to fill. "We had some of your vodka last night. It was very good," he volunteered. In a firm no-nonsense tone, Brezhnev put the trivialities down. "This is not the place for vodka now." Healey's eyebrows went up and down like an elevator. The press was ushered out.