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Kremlin watchers have one problem: too little to watch

By Norman Kempster
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WASHINGTON — With Soviet President Konstantin U. Chernenko in frail health and Moscow apparently bracing for a renewed leadership contest, attention again has focused on the small band of American governmental and academic experts who make a career of trying to penetrate the Kremlin's cult of secrecy.

Known as Kremlinologists, these specialists handicap the obscure Soviet power race much the way a horse player tries to pick winners at the track.

It is a dicey job at best, and even its practitioners acknowledge that there are wide gaps in their knowledge. One academic expert on the Soviet Union dismisses the whole process: "Anyone who pretends to know the full views of the Soviet elite is practicing voodoo science."

Nevertheless, it is an important job. Even leaders who hold power for a short time can have a profound influence on Soviet policy and Washington-Moscow relations. So it is clear why U.S. policymakers consider it vital to know as early as possible just who is up and who is down in the Kremlin.

"I think the Sovietologists are asked by the press and policymakers to perform miracles of prediction that would not be demanded of them if they were analyzing American politics," said Thane Gustafson, director of the Soviet project of Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies. "Pundits hedge their bets on changes in [U.S.] congressional committee chairmanships, but Sovietologists are criticized when they guess wrong."

The Kremlinologist's task is almost unbelievably difficult. There are no more closely held secrets in the Soviet Union than those involving the inner politics at the top levels of the Communist Party.

"Basically the technique is three yards and a cloud of dust," Gustafson said. "It involves painstaking examination of the minute differences in the way the Soviet press covers the activities of the leadership. Watch to see who is in the pictures in the newspaper. Keep track of television

coverage."

Pure Kremlinology is a specialized segment of the larger study of the Soviet Union. Most academic experts on university campuses and at think tanks insist they are not, in the strict sense of the word, Kremlinologists because they do not have the time or the patience to do the tedious work that is required. Most Kremlinologists work for the U.S. government, primarily the CIA and the State Department's Intelligence and Research Bureau.

The main sources of information are Soviet newspapers and the transcripts of radio and television broadcasts, along with the speeches of party leaders. Very little information of interest to the Kremlinologist is classified.

Harry Gelman, a former CIA analyst who is now on the staff of the Center for the Study of Soviet International Behavior at the Rand-University of California, Los Angeles, said much Soviet press coverage is pure propaganda.

But, he said, "when you get a speech by one leader asserting that certain circles have a mistaken view, that's very informative, and it isn't the kind of thing they say for people outside. It is indicative that a real argument is going on. Sometimes people disagree on the significance of these things, but this is the sort of thing we look for."

"The Soviet society is divided into neat compartments," said Dimitri K. Simes, a Soviet defector who is on the staff of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "The compartment that is particularly closed to outsiders is the party apparatus."

"In the 40 years since World War II, there have been lots of defectors and emigres — some quite close to power — but they were journalists, academics and intelligence officers — but not a single party apparatchik."

Malcolm Toon, former U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union who served three diplomatic tours in Moscow, recalled the confusion that accompanied the ouster of Nikita S. Khrushchev as Communist Party leader in 1964.

"The next day there was supposed to be a big celebration in Red

Square," he said. "The embassy had political officers stationed around the city to watch for the portraits going up. About 6 p.m., our man in Red Square saw a big portrait of Khrushchev going up. About an hour later he saw it coming down. Even sitting in Moscow, reading the press and watching television, you could not be sure."

"The White House was annoyed because we did not predict the change, but I said: 'If Khrushchev himself did not know, how could an American official know?'"

The big question today among Kremlinologists is who will succeed Chernenko, 73, should the Communist Party leader die or be forced to step down because of ill health. The two leading candidates are thought to be Mikhail S. Gorbachov, 53, and Grigory V. Romanov, 60, both members of the Politburo.

Toon does not think it matters very much.

"You can be sure that there will not be much of a change no matter who takes over," he said. "I think it's a mistake to get too excited about Gorbachov taking over. Whether it's Gorbachov or a man a little bit older like Romanov, you are talking about people who have been identified with the collective leadership for six years. Unless you have a radical change in the composition of the Politburo and a radical change in the Central Committee, I don't think you will see a major change in policy."

Helmut Sonnenfeldt, former counselor at the State Department and before that chief of the department's Office of Research on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, said: "Western analysts seem to attach themselves to an individual Soviet leader as the person to watch in the future. This now seems to be Gorbachov."

But Sonnenfeldt, a guest scholar at the Brookings Institution in Washington, said the opinions of Western analysts often reinforce each other, sometimes masking signs that point in the other way.

"It's a very occult business," he said.

American Kremlinologists try to divide candidates for Soviet leadership along policy lines. Current thinking classifies Gorbachov as a reformer and Romanov as a conservative.

But Simes, the Soviet defector, said he thinks such classification often misses the point. Personality often has more impact than policy, he said, and distribution of other party jobs may be more important yet.

"Just like on Capitol Hill, it's mostly personality and patronage," he said.