The Brezhnev Era (1964–1982)

Next to Stalin, Leonid Brezhnev ruled the Soviet Union longer than any other leader. Brezhnev and his supporters stressed the ties with the Stalinist era by focusing on his good points and ignoring his crimes. Brezhnev strengthened the Soviet bureaucracy as well as the KGB (Committee of State Security)—formed in 1954; its mission was to defend the Soviet government from its enemies at home and abroad. The KGB suppressed dissidents who spoke out against the government at home and in the satellite countries. The Soviets also invested in a large military buildup and were determined to never again suffer a humiliating defeat, as happened in the Cuban Missile Crisis. Yet Brezhnev proceeded cautiously in the mid-1960s and sought to avoid confrontation with the West. He was determined, however, to protect Soviet interests.

Brezhnev Doctrine (1968)

In 1968, Alexander Dubček (1921–1992) became head of the Czechoslovakia Communist Party and began a series of reforms known as the Prague Spring reforms, which sought to make communism more humanistic. He lifted censorship, permitted non-communists to form political groups, and wanted to trade with the West, but still remain true to communist ideals. Brezhnev viewed these reforms as a capitalistic threat to the socialist ideologies of communism and, in August of 1968, sent over 500,000 Soviet and Eastern European troops to occupy Czechoslovakia. In the Brezhnev Doctrine, he defended the Soviet military invasion of Czechoslovakia, saying in effect, that antisocialist elements in a single socialist country can compromise the entire socialist system, and thus other socialist countries have the right to intervene militarily if they see the need to do so.

The Brezhnev Doctrine was seriously tested in Poland. Throughout the 1970s, Poland had suffered economic hardship and Polish workers had rioted in 1970 and 1976 against increased food prices. In 1980, scattered strikes spread across Poland to protest the rise in meat prices. Lech Walesa (b. 1943), an electrician at the Gdansk shipyards, organized Solidarity, an independent trade union that called for political, industrial, and economic changes. Solidarity had the support of millions of workers, intellectuals, and the Catholic Church. In 1978, Karol Wojtyla, (1920–2005) the former archbishop of Krakow, Poland, was elected Pope John Paul II, the first Polish pope. He supported the struggle for the rights of people across the world, especially in his native country. Solidarity created concern in the Soviet Union, as well as in other Soviet Bloc nations. However, still facing criticism from its invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the Soviets played a waiting game. When Solidarity began to lose its cohesiveness, the Polish Communist leadership declared martial law and arrested Walesa and other

1. What is the KGB? What was its purpose? (list 2)
2. What was the Prague Spring?
3. How did Brezhnev react to the Prague Spring?
4. Who was Lech Walesa?
5. Why did Solidarity concern Brezhnev?
leaders. Solidarity went underground and fought with great popular support, paving the way for greater changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe during the latter half of the 1980s.

6. Was Solidarity successful? Why or why not?

7. What does détente mean?

8. What is SALT I?

9. How was SALT I an example of détente?

10. What brought détente to an end in 1979?

Détente

During the 1970s, a spirit of détente developed in the Cold War. Détente means a progressive relaxation of tension, and involved the following events:

■ 1972: President Richard Nixon visited Moscow. The United States and the Soviet Union signed significant accords on space flights, health, and trading agreements. These accords included an agreement on joint space flight, cooperation in medical, science, and public health, and the end of the prohibition of shipping of American goods to the Soviet Union. They also signed the SALT I Accord (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks), which was designed to limit the spread of nuclear weapons. Limits were set on both long-range missiles (intercontinental ballistics missiles) and defensive missiles.

■ 1973: Brezhnev visited the United States and spoke to the American people via television.

■ 1975: The United States, Canada, and 33 European nations met at Helsinki, Finland to sign the Helsinki Pact. The European countries formally agreed to recognize Soviet territorial gains in Europe, the division of Germany into two nations, and Soviet domination of Eastern Europe. The Soviet Union, the United States, and the other European nations also agreed to further the cause of human rights.

The spirit of détente came to an end with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. The Soviets invaded Afghanistan in order to keep Afghanistan’s Communist government in power, again using the Brezhnev Doctrine to justify the invasion. Many in the West were convinced that the Soviets were violating the spirit of détente. The United States backed the anticommunist Muslim guerrillas. The Afghanistan invasion drained the Soviet economy and morale at home. Soviet troops remained in Afghanistan until 1989.

By the time of Brezhnev’s death in 1982, the Soviet Union faced many serious problems. The centralized economy was still inefficient and unable to produce enough food to feed the people, so the Soviet Union had to import grain from the capitalist nations. The Soviet bureaucracy had little understanding of how the centralized economy had failed the people. Within the next few years, sweeping changes dramatically altered the future of Communism in the Soviet Union.