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# Tracking Public Opinion Under Authoritarianism

## *The Case of the Soviet Union During the Brezhnev Era*

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### Abstract

Can autocracies obtain accurate information on popular opinion? This article approaches this question by focusing on the Soviet Union during the Brezhnev period. Based on Soviet archival materials (primarily Fond 89, the Volkogonov papers, and the Rubinov collection), the article argues that the Soviet regime relied on three main channels to track popular preferences: the KGB, opinion polling, and the analysis of citizen complaint letters. Each of these channels provided a different type of information: the KGB tracked levels of political dissent; opinion polling assessed general levels of satisfaction with the regime; and citizen complaints produced detailed information on the redistributive preferences of the population. Individually, none of these channels provided sufficient information on public opinion. However, when taken as a whole, they supplied the leadership with surprisingly nuanced information on popular preferences.

### Keywords

information flows – Brezhnev – public opinion – KGB – surveys – citizen complaints – letters to the editor

One of the fundamental challenges of governance in dictatorships is the difficulty of obtaining reliable information about the public mood. This problem was first identified in the classic literature on dictatorship, which posited that autocrats operate in an information vacuum, since they have “no way of ascertaining the common man’s views.”<sup>1</sup> Subsequent work has built on these

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1 Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (New York: Praeger, 1965), 135.

foundational ideas, arguing that repression exacerbates the information problem, because citizens in dictatorships are unwilling to reveal their true level of support for the regime due to fear that criticism will be met with reprisals.<sup>2</sup> Instead of showing their opposition to the regime, therefore, individuals engage in preference falsification, which manifests itself as reluctant participation in ritualistic acts of public dissimulation (“as if” compliance),<sup>3</sup> such as compulsory mass rallies, manifestations, and elections. Preference falsification makes dictators fundamentally insecure, since they cannot know their true level of support and thus face the risk of being deposed through revolution or a coup.<sup>4</sup> The remarkable longevity of communist dictatorships and the relative infrequency of coups in them suggest, however, that these regimes were actively searching for strategies that would allow them to obtain accurate information about the public mood.

This article argues that communist dictatorships address information scarcity through a number of institutional innovations that aim to improve the breadth and accuracy of information gathering. In particular, they create special bureaucracies tasked with compiling and analyzing information about popular attitudes towards the regime. Broadly speaking, information is gathered either *involuntarily* or *voluntarily*. In a communist country, the agency that is mainly responsible for the involuntary collection of information is the secret police (state security). Through its full-time staff and its network of informers, the secret police prepares regular reports on the “public mood.”<sup>5</sup> These reports focus on dissent in society and are used to target repression more precisely. Because the expression of dissent is always limited to a segment of the population, state security cannot supply accurate information about the opinion of the broad masses. In a democracy, opinion polling can serve as a valuable source of such information. In communist autocracies, the validity and reliability of polls is compromised by the use of leading questions

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2 Ronald Wintrobe, *The Political Economy of Dictatorship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

3 Timur Kuran, *Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); and Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

4 Timur Kuran “Now Out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989,” *World Politics* 44, no. 1 (1991): 7–48; Susanne Lohmann, “The Dynamics of Informational Cascades: The Monday Demonstrations in Leipzig, East Germany, 1989–91,” *World Politics* 47, no. 1 (1994): 42–101.

5 On such reports (*svodki*) in the Soviet Union, see Leslie Rimmer, “*Svodki* and Popular Opinion in Stalinist Leningrad,” *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 40, nos. 1–2 (January–June 1999): 217–234.

and the tendency of respondents to engage in norm-seeking responses by providing artificial responses and the “correct” answers.<sup>6</sup> The leadership therefore needs to foster other channels for obtaining information about the preferences of larger segments of the population.

Communist regimes value highly information that is provided voluntarily. The main avenue for voluntary information transfer is citizen complaints. Although citizen complaints exist in non-communist autocracies like Mexico under the PRI, Taiwan under the KMT, and Putin’s Russia (where, scholars have argued, that also inhibit party development),<sup>7</sup> they never become the main channel for assessing popular support, because non-communist authoritarian regimes can gauge mass support through other avenues, such as semi-competitive elections.<sup>8</sup> This is not the case in communist regimes, where elections transmit information about citizen preferences only indirectly.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, reports on the volume and nature of citizen complaints are read closely on a regular basis by the top leadership. In earlier periods of the development of communist regimes, such as in the Soviet Union during high Stalinism, there could be no certainty that these reports presented the true state of public opinion, as citizens might feel compelled to denounce other citizens and to write letters expressing their personal loyalty to the regime.<sup>10</sup>

6 William A. Welsh, “Introduction: An Overview of the Status of Survey Research in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union” in *Survey Research and Public Attitudes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, ed. William A. Welsh (New York: Pergamon Press, 1981), 1–12, esp. 9–11.

7 Danielle N. Lussier, “Contacting and Complaining: Political Participation and the Failure of Democracy in Russia,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 27, no. 3 (2011): 289–325. More generally, see Henry E. Hale, *Why Not Parties in Russia? Democracy, Federalism, and the State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

8 On complaints in Mexico, see María del Carmen Nava Nava, ed., *Los abajo firmantes: Cartas a los presidentes* (The Undersigned: Letters to the Presidents) (México: Editorial Patria, 1994). On Taiwan, see *Renmin chengqing anjian zhi fenxi yanjiu* (Research on Citizen Petitions) (Taipei: Xingzhengyuan yanjiu fazhan kaohe weiyuanhui, 1981). On Russia, see “Informatsionno-statisticheskii obzor rassmotrennykh v 2010 godu obrashchenii grazhdan, organizatsii i obshchestvennykh ob’edinenii, adresovannykh Prezidentu Rossiiskoi Federatsii, a takzhe rezul’tatov rassmotreniia i priniatykh mer” (Moscow: Upravlenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii po rabote s obrashcheniiami grazhdan i organizatsii, 2011).

9 Victor Zaslavsky and Robert J. Brym, “The Functions of Elections in the USSR,” *Soviet Studies* 30:3 (July 1978), 362–371.

10 Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Tear Off the Masks!: Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

But such letters become less typical in mature post-Stalinist communist regimes. Thus, the regime perceives citizen complaints as less likely to suffer from preference falsification than other forms of gauging public opinion, such as opinion polls. Consequently, communist regimes look for ways to incentivize citizens to lodge more complaints in order to increase their access to information. Although the government may find such information useful, it cannot efficiently extract it from the citizenry by force. This raises the question of how a dictatorship can induce ordinary citizens to provide information voluntarily.

This article argues that citizens will supply information to the government voluntarily if the government is seen as responsive to their complaints. Ordinarily, citizens complain when they have been denied services like housing, jobs, and healthcare, or when their legal rights have been violated. Responsiveness can be examined either at the level of the individual or of the group. At the individual level, sometimes simply taking the complaint seriously and explaining to the petitioner why it cannot be satisfied may be sufficient. Of course, a positive resolution of the complaint would be a more preferable outcome from the perspective of an individual petitioner. Another type of responsiveness would be relevant to broader groups of the population. Here a change in legislation may address the concerns of vast segments of the population, for example when the workweek is reduced or pensions are increased. The complaints system is stable so long as people continue to complain and so long as the government responds to their complaints.

The empirical focus of this article is on the strategies that were used in the Soviet Union under Brezhnev to track public opinion. The Brezhnev era is both remarkable and unexceptional. It is remarkable because new channels for the study of public opinion were created, such as opinion polling. It is unexceptional because Communist regimes at similar stages of development in places as geographically distinct as the GDR, Bulgaria, Poland, and post-Mao China also create similar institutions for the study of public opinion and face similar problems of satisfying public opinion once they ascertain its scope and nature.<sup>11</sup> This suggests that one avenue for future inquiry would be to compare governance in mature communist regimes, for example the Soviet Union after the death of Stalin and China after the death of Mao.

The article is based on archival sources (Fond 89; the Volkogonov Papers; and the Rubinov Collection) and on secondary material in Russian and English. It is organized in two main parts. The first examines the channels for

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11 Martin K. Dimitrov, *Dictatorship and Information: Autocratic Regime Resilience in Communist Europe and China* (manuscript in progress).

the involuntary collection of information during the Brezhnev era, focusing primarily on the KGB and on opinion polling. It argues that both of these channels had limitations. The KGB focused exclusively on political dissent, whereas opinion polling could not by and large overcome the problem of preference falsification. The second part examines citizen complaints under Brezhnev, focusing on unpublished letters to the press (mostly to *Literaturnaia gazeta*) and on letters to the Party and to state agencies. These letters did not suffer from preference falsification, as citizens had to make honest requests for the provision of goods and services. Therefore, they served as an important source of information to the regime regarding the consumption and redistributive preferences of the public. This part of the article also analyzes regime attempts to respond to citizen complaints both at the individual and the group level. The last part concludes.

### The Involuntary Extraction of Information Under Brezhnev

Under Brezhnev, the involuntary extraction of information about the public mood was conducted through two primary channels: state security and opinion polling. Soviet leaders before Brezhnev had similarly relied on the state security apparatus to supply them with information.<sup>12</sup> Opinion polling, however, was a new channel that only began to be used in the 1960s. Both channels aimed to assess the level of political dissent in the country, with the KGB focusing on overt expressions of political dissent and opinion polling tracking latent opposition to the regime.

#### *The KGB and Public Opinion*

Thomas Fingar, former Chairman of the National Intelligence Council, has noted that the fundamental purpose of intelligence in the U.S. is to reduce the uncertainty of decision-makers by providing them with timely (even if sometimes incomplete and inaccurate) information.<sup>13</sup> The role of the KGB in the Soviet Union was no different. Relying on a large external intelligence and domestic counterintelligence network, the KGB compiled regular reports that provided information to top decision-makers and aimed to reduce their uncertainty. This section describes what information was included in these reports

12 Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda, and Dissent, 1934–1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

13 Thomas Fingar, *Reducing Uncertainty: Intelligence Analysis and National Security* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

and assesses what aspects of public opinion it reflected. Apart from relevant files in Fond 89, the section relies primarily on eight annual KGB reports (for 1967, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1980, 1981, and 1982), on seven KGB annual reports on the circulation of anti-Soviet materials (for 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1981, and 1982), and on a 1978 report on counter-terrorist activities. Previous scholarship has analyzed Fond 89 materials (including the 1967 KGB report, which is contained in both Fond 89 and in the Volkogonov Papers) but not the other sources reviewed here, which are part of the Volkogonov Papers.

The Brezhnev era is notable for a concerted effort to give more weight to the domestic counterintelligence work of the KGB, which was overshadowed after WWII by its external intelligence work. A decision to that effect had been issued in the immediate aftermath of the Novocherkassk meat riots in 1962. KGB Chairman Semichastnyi instructed his staff to increase their efforts to identify

...anti-social elements, who under the influence of hostile propaganda, outwardly adopt anti-Soviet positions, level malicious slander at the policies of the party and the Soviet state, distribute various provocative rumors with the goal of undermining the trust of the people in the party and the state, and under certain conditions, try to use the temporary difficulties arising in the course of communist construction for their own criminal goals, thus inciting politically unstable people to [participate in] mass disturbances.<sup>14</sup>

This document identifies the scope of public opinion that was of interest to the KGB in the years immediately preceding Brezhnev's ascent to power: state security wanted to locate and neutralize anti-Soviet political dissent. However, despite Semichastnyi's order, "mass disturbances" continued to take place during Brezhnev's first few years in office, erupting in Tula, as well as in cities in the non-Russian union republics: Yerevan (Armenia), Chimkent (Kazakhstan), Frunze (Kyrgyzstan), Tiraspol (Moldavia), Stepanakert (Nagorno-Karabakh), Batumi (Georgia), and in Abkhazia (Georgia).<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, following the Sinyavsky and Daniel trials, even Moscow experienced smaller-scale protests

14 KGB Order 00175 "On Strengthening the Struggle of the Organs of State Security Against Hostile Displays by Anti-Soviet Elements," July 28, 1962, reproduced in *Libianka: Organy VChK-OGPU-NKVD-NKGB-MGB-MVD-KGB*, A. I. Kokurin and N. V. Petrov (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi Fond "Demokratiia," 2003), 703–708, at 704.

15 V. A. Kozlov, *Massovye besporiadki v SSSR pri Khrushcheve i Brezhneve (1953 – nachalo 1980-kh gg.)* (Novosibirsk: Sibirskii Khronograf, 1999), 401–405.

in Pushkin Square in December 1965, throughout 1966, and again in January 1967.<sup>16</sup>

In light of the continuing anti-Soviet mass disturbances and protests, shortly after Andropov's elevation to the position of KGB Chairman, a decision was made in July 1967 to establish a special directorate charged with organizing counterintelligence activities against "ideological sabotage by the enemy" (*ideologicheskaiia diversiia protivnika*). The Fifth Directorate enjoyed a very broad mandate in terms of tracking public opinion. Apart from monitoring foreign visitors (students, journalists, scientists, and trade union representatives) and subverting the work of foreign "centers of ideological sabotage," the Fifth Directorate focused on tracking political dissent among Soviet students, professors, artists, writers, sports players, and religious minorities. The employees of the Fifth Directorate were charged with identifying the authors of anti-Soviet anonymous publications and leaflets. Their purview also included preventing the emergence of mass disturbances. Following an assassination attempt against Brezhnev in 1969, the Fifth Directorate assumed responsibility for counterterrorism as well. Between 1967 and 1982, when the directorate also began to keep track of countercultural youth groups, its central-level staff doubled from 201 to 424.<sup>17</sup> In addition to these central-level staff, the Fifth Directorate had representation within the KGB as far down as the city and *rayon* level.

The KGB annual reports and the more specialized reports on the circulation of anti-Soviet materials provide us with a rare glimpse into the levels of dissent in Soviet society under Brezhnev. They present a surprising picture: after 1967, there was a gradual *increase* in anti-Soviet activity accompanied by a gradual *decrease* in harsh punishments for such activity. For example, the number of anonymous anti-Soviet materials (leaflets, letters, and graffiti) discovered by the KGB doubled between 1967 and 1981, from 11,856 to 23,106.<sup>18</sup> However, whereas 10 percent of the identified authors of anti-Soviet materials were charged with committing crimes against the state in 1967, in 1981 only 3 percent of the identified authors of such materials were charged.<sup>19</sup> There was a similar reduction in the rates of criminal prosecution for other state crimes,

16 V. A. Kozlov, S. V. Mironenko, O. V. Edelman, E. I. U. Zavadskaiia, *Kramola: Inakomyслиe v SSSR pri Khrushcheve i Brezhneve, 1953–1982 gg.: Rassekrechenye dokumenty Verkhovnogo suda i Prokuratury SSSR* (Moscow: Materik, 2005), 379–384.

17 *Lubianka*, 165–168.

18 See 1967 KGB Annual Report, l. 7 and 1981 Report on the Search for Authors of Anonymous Anti-Soviet Materials, l. 1, *Volkogonov Papers*, Box 28. The 1981 document suggests that the increase reflects a higher volume of anti-Soviet activity, not increased KGB investigative activity.

19 *Ibid.*, l. 8 (1967 report) and l. 3 (1981 report).

such as illegal border crossing. Also, fewer persons were being indicted for the most serious crimes against the state, such as treason, espionage, and revealing state secrets.

As the KGB gradually turned away from harshly repressive measures like mass incarceration, a softer type of repression emerged as the dominant response to political dissent.<sup>20</sup> This was prophylaxis (*profilaktika*), which involved summoning individuals for a “chat” (*beseda*) with KGB personnel and representatives of social organizations. Another prophylactic measure was public criticism by a comrades’ court. Confinement to psychiatric hospitals was also used, but this was not the typical form of prophylaxis, being implemented in 10–20 percent of the cases.<sup>21</sup> A 1975 top-secret statistical memorandum prepared by Andropov for Brezhnev attests to the overwhelming dominance of prophylaxis over incarceration. The report indicates that in 1967–1974 there was a 1:96 ratio between those charged for committing especially serious state crimes (such as anti-Soviet propaganda and agitation) and those subject to prophylactic measures.<sup>22</sup>

The emphasis on prophylaxis reflected a new sense in the KGB that it could account for the reasons why individuals engage in anti-state crimes and use penal measures only against those who did so because of hostile beliefs (*vrazhdebnye ubezhdeniia*) or nationalist attitudes (*natsionalisticheskie nastroyeniia*). According to the KGB’s own classification, anti-state crimes might also arise due to susceptibility to enemy ideological sabotage (when listening to foreign broadcasts); political immaturity; psychiatric illness; hooliganism; shortages of goods and personal financial difficulties; as well as being subject to personal insults or the illegal acts of officials. However, when individuals committed crimes due to these non-hostile reasons, they were subject only to prophylaxis.<sup>23</sup> This was even true for terrorist activities, which, in the KGB’s evaluation, were only occasionally the result of hostile beliefs and nationalist attitudes. For example, the KGB investigated 116 individuals who made terrorist threats in 1977, but determined that only 5 of them did so because of hostile anti-Soviet intent and should therefore be subject to criminal punishment.<sup>24</sup>

20 Moshe Lewin, *The Soviet Century* (London: Verso, 2005), 191–201.

21 KGB reports for 1967, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1980, 1981, and 1982, *Volkogonov Papers*, Box 28.

22 “O nekotorykh itogakh predupreditel’no-profilakticheskoi raboty organov gosbezopasnosti,” October 31, 1975, *Volkogonov Papers*, Box 28.

23 See, for example, 1975 Report on Authors of Anonymous Anti-Soviet Materials, l. 4 in *Volkogonov Papers*, Box 28.

24 “O rezul’tatakh raboty organov KGB po bor’be s terroristicheskimi proiavleniiami,” March 27, 1978, l. 1 in *Volkogonov Papers*, Box 28.

The KGB reports produced after the Fifth Directorate was created in 1967 present political dissent as a phenomenon that was both rare and manageable. During the 1967–1982 period, 5,000–10,000 individuals would engage in crimes against the state on a yearly basis.<sup>25</sup> However, since only a fraction of them would commit crimes due to hostile intentions or as a result of nationalist convictions, criminal charges were brought in about 1 percent of the cases, with the rest being resolved through prophylaxis. The reports suggested that the KGB through its network of full-time employees and agents (*agenty*) and trusted persons (*doverennye litsa*) maintained full and centralized control over the levels of dissent in society. The KGB also performed “sociological studies” (*sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia*) that aimed to ascertain the party membership, age, and socio-economic background of dissenters, producing a composite portrait that did not markedly differ from that of Soviet society overall.<sup>26</sup> In sum, the information that the KGB provided to the top leadership created an impression that the root cause of political dissent was not hostility to the Soviet Union and that dissent could be managed through prophylaxis and selective criminal punishment.

An important question is whether the KGB willfully misrepresented the level of political dissent. In answering this question, we need to take into account that the KGB focused on overt manifestations of dissent, rather than on latent opposition to the regime. Surprisingly, behaviors that might reveal latent opposition to the regime (listening to foreign radio stations and distribution of anti-Soviet jokes and rumors) were not actively prosecuted during the Brezhnev era.<sup>27</sup> When thinking about the accuracy of the information supplied to the leadership, we should also take into account that there were bottlenecks in the information transmission system: in 1977, for example, Brezhnev shared with the Politburo that republican party committees would sometimes try to prevent KGB information from being sent to the Central Committee.<sup>28</sup> With these caveats, the KGB probably tracked most instances of overt dissent that fell within its legal purview, which extended to treason, espionage,

25 Another 5,000–10,000 would commit economic crimes within the purview of state security, such as smuggling, currency violation, and large-scale embezzlement. Economic crimes were 3–4 times more likely to result in a criminal indictment than political crimes.

26 See, for examples, “O rezul'tatakh raboty organov KGB po bor'be s terroristicheskimi proiavleniami,” March 27, 1978, l. 1 in *Volkogonov Papers*, Box 28.

27 For a theoretical treatment of the political importance of subversive speech acts during the Brezhnev period, see Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

28 *Tsentr Khraneniia Sovremennoi Dokumentatsii (TsKhsD)*, f. 89, per. 42, d. 71, l. 2.

revealing state secrets, illegal border crossing, and anti-Soviet propaganda and agitation. That said, KGB assessments of the motives of individual citizens for engaging in acts of dissent should be taken with caution. Knowing that those who were found to be hostile to the regime face almost certain imprisonment, participants in anti-state activities had strong incentives to engage in preference falsification and misrepresent their true motivations by claiming that they did not have anti-Soviet beliefs. Therefore, even though the KGB presented the leadership with relatively accurate information on the level of overt dissent, there was a substantial possibility of error when it evaluated the motivations for dissent.

Overall, although the information supplied by the KGB about public attitudes met Thomas Finigar's test of reducing uncertainty, it could not serve as the only channel through which the regime obtained assessments of popular attitudes. Another important channel was opinion polling, which targeted larger segments of the populace and thus supplemented the KGB's efforts to involuntary extract information.

### *Tracking Popular Preferences Through Opinion Polling*

The Brezhnev era witnessed the creation of a specialized sociological research institute within the Soviet Academy of Sciences. The institute had a long gestation. In the early 1960s, a number of small research institutes had been established with the purpose of conducting opinion research. One was the public opinion institute at *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, which was founded by sociologist Boris Grushin in 1960. Despite having a staff of only seven, it conducted twenty-seven opinion polls prior to its dissolution in 1967.<sup>29</sup> Sociological research centers were also established at Leningrad State University, in Novosibirsk, within the Central Committee of the Comsomol, and at the Central Committee Academy of Social Sciences.<sup>30</sup> In addition, the Institute of Philosophy of the Soviet Academy of Sciences established a Department of Concrete Sociological Research. The party kept the operation of these research institutes and centers under close watch. Acknowledging their value, in 1965 the Ideological Commission of the Central Committee discussed the idea of creating a central sociological research institute within the Academy of Sciences. In 1968, such an institute was established following a top-secret

29 B. A. Grushin, "Institut obshchestvennogo mneniia – otdel *Komsomol'skoi pravdy*," in *Pressa v obshchestve: Otsenki zhurnalistov i sotsiologov. Dokumenty*, ed. A. I. Volkov, M. G. Pugacheva, and S. F. Iarmoliuk (Moscow: Institut sotsiologii RAN, 2000), 46–64.

30 [www.isras.ru](http://www.isras.ru) (accessed October 5, 2011).

decision by the Politburo.<sup>31</sup> It was called the Institute for Concrete Social Research (IKSI) and replaced the Department of Concrete Sociological Research at the Institute of Philosophy.

Having received the highest possible level of political support, IKSI was allocated a staff of 250 and was given the broad mandate of “studying public opinion on the most important questions of the domestic and international politics of the Soviet state and other social problems that have importance for communist construction.”<sup>32</sup> The research findings of the institute were to be presented in secret bulletins with restricted circulation. According to one scholar with insider knowledge, the institute also had a special “department for secret studies” that conducted research for the KGB on issues like the attitudes of Estonians to foreign television broadcasts.<sup>33</sup> But most research at the institute was conducted by the open sections, which polled citizens on less sensitive matters, such as the use of their free time or their views on the work of civil servants. The institute received generous financial support that allowed it to conduct multi-year studies like the one in Saratov (1967–1974) and various union-wide studies of public opinion.<sup>34</sup>

Remarkably, though IKSI was established with backing by the Politburo, it fell into disfavor in the 1970s. This phenomenon was not limited to IKSI but affected all Soviet institutes that engaged in public opinion polling. Although the party did not close down these institutes, their research was no longer of interest to the top leadership. The main reason was that the Politburo did not trust their findings regarding levels of latent opposition to the regime. Most sociological research in the Soviet Union touched upon regime support only obliquely, for example by showing reader apathy to political content in newspapers,<sup>35</sup> by demonstrating discrepancies between the positive tone of

31 *Tsentr Khraneniia Sovremennoi Dokumentatsii (TsKhsD)*, f. 4, op. 20, d. 356, ll. 17–18, “Postanovlenie Politbiuro TsK KPSS ‘Ob organizatsii Instituta konkretnykh sotsial’nykh issledovaniia Akademii nauk SSSR’” (May 22, 1968).

32 *Tsentr Khraneniia Sovremennoi Dokumentatsii (TsKhsD)*, f. 4, op. 20, d. 467, ll. 36–38, “Postanovlenie Sekretariata TsK KPSS ‘Ob osnovnykh napravleniakh raboty Instituta konkretnykh sotsial’nykh issledovaniia AN SSSR’” (December 10, 1968).

33 Vladimir Shlapentokh, *The Politics of Sociology in the Soviet Union* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 126–127.

34 On the Saratov project, see B. A. Grushin, L. A. Onikov, eds., *Massovaia informatsiia v sovetskom promyshlennom gorode* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1980).

35 Boris Grushin, *Chetyre zhizni Rossii v zerkale oprosov obshchestvennogo mneniia: Ocherki massovogo soznaniia rossiian vremen Khrushcheva, Brezhneva, Gorbacheva i El'tsina v 4-kh knigakh (Kniga 2-ia: Epokha Brezhneva – Chast' 1)* (Moscow: Progress-Traditsiia, 2003), 425–426.

newspaper coverage on daily life issues and the negative tenor of readers' letters to the media;<sup>36</sup> or by indicating that citizens did not believe that executive organs of power take public opinion into account when making decisions.<sup>37</sup> However, it is doubtful whether these polls could accurately measure the actual state of public opinion.

One source of inaccuracy was technical. To begin with, most surveys were local rather than nationally representative. Though scholars would argue that Kuibyshev, Taganrog, or Kalininskaia oblast were not different from the rest of the Soviet Union and were thus representative of the country as a whole, this could not have seemed credible to the top leadership.<sup>38</sup> With regard to sampling, Soviet surveys did not employ random sampling. Instead, respondents were chosen through poorly implemented stratified quota sampling.<sup>39</sup> Sometimes, researchers did not even try to use quota sampling, but polled individuals who had already written a letter to the newspaper.<sup>40</sup> Questionnaires were so poorly designed that the only answers that were of interest were the ones to open-ended questions, because they were not amenable to statistical manipulation.<sup>41</sup> In terms of data analysis, the techniques used were rudimentary: scholars reported percentage averages and did not employ modern quantitative methods. Even more alarming was the practice of pooling responses to questionnaires administered through one-on-one interviews and questionnaires sent through the mail.<sup>42</sup> These technical challenges greatly impacted the validity of Soviet surveys.

Another challenge to the validity and reliability of opinion polling was preference falsification.<sup>43</sup> Opinion poll participants did not trust that their anonymity would be protected. One problem was that although in the 1960s questionnaires contained explicit assurances that anonymity would be

36 Grushin and Onikov, eds., *Massovaia informatsiia*, 414.

37 R. A. Safarov, *Obshchestvennoe mnenie i gosudarstvennoe upravlenie* (Moscow: Iuridicheskaia literatura, 1975), 121.

38 Grushin, *Chetyre zhizni*, 178–179 (Kuibyshev); Grushin and Onikov, eds., *Massovaia informatsiia* (on Taganrog); Safarov, *Obshchestvennoe mnenie*, 22–23 (on Kalininskaia oblast).

39 Jeffrey W. Hahn, "Public Opinion Research in the Soviet Union: Problems and Possibilities," in *Public Opinion and Regime Change: The New Politics of Post-Soviet Societies*, ed. Arthur H. Miller, William M. Reissinger, and Vicki L. Hesli (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), 37–47, at 40–41.

40 Grushin, *Chetyre zhizni*, 177–182.

41 Shlapentokh, *The Politics of Sociology*, 216–218, 230–231 (n. 6).

42 Grushin, *Chetyre zhizni*, 180–182.

43 For details on how preference falsification operated, see Kuran 1991.

protected, in the 1970s these assurances were no longer included and respondents were simply exhorted to “sincerely answer the questions posed [to them].”<sup>44</sup> Although respondents might be willing to provide honest answers to some non-sensitive questions even when they do not trust that their answers would be confidential, it is unrealistic to expect that they would do so when the questions touched upon sensitive matters that could be used to assess levels of latent opposition to the regime. One example is instructive: in a survey where every respondent had previously written a letter to the newspaper, respondents were asked twice (in differently worded questions) whether they had contacted the media to express opinions, questions, complaints, or suggestions; when asked a general question, 92 percent said they had contacted the media – but when later asked a second question listing specific types of contacts that might indicate even mild dissatisfaction with the regime, only 69.3 percent gave a positive response.<sup>45</sup> This suggests that the degree of distrust of opinion polling in the Soviet Union was very high. Individuals had nothing to gain and potentially a lot to lose by giving honest answers to politically sensitive questions probing their levels of dissatisfaction with the regime. Opinion polls were understood by respondents as a test of loyalty, not as an opportunity to express honest opinions.

The limited utility of opinion polling as a channel for assessing public opinion helps us understand why the East German leadership decided to close down the Central Committee opinion research institute in 1979.<sup>46</sup> Another problem with opinion polling was that citizens could not expect to receive individualized benefits in exchange for providing accurate information to the regime. Because of this incentive problem, opinion polling could not serve as a reliable channel for ascertaining citizen preferences under Brezhnev. Finally, and perhaps most important, although participation in opinion polls is voluntary in the West, in the Soviet Union participation was not voluntary: we do not have any evidence that consent forms were used when surveys were administered. Being made unwilling participants in survey research diminished the willingness of Soviet citizens to divulge honest information about their beliefs.

44 Shlapentokh, *The Politics of Sociology*, 224.

45 Grushin, *Chetyre zhizni Rossii*, 214.

46 The Youth Research Institute in Leipzig was preserved. On the closing down of the Central Committee *Meinungsforschungsinstitut*, see Walter Friedrich, “Geschichte des Zentralinstituts für Jugendforschung,” in *Das Zentralinstitut für Jugendforschung Leipzig 1966–1990: Geschichte, Methoden, Erkenntnisse*, ed. Walter Friedrich, Peter Förster, and Kurt Starke (Berlin: Edition Ost, 1999), 13–69, at 32.

## The Voluntary Provision of Information Through Citizen Complaints

A third channel through which the Brezhnev regime tracked popular preferences was the analysis of citizen complaints. In the Soviet Union, citizen complaints could be directed to the party, to the government, or to the media. Complaints were typically delivered in the form of a letter, although citizens might also visit party and government offices to complain in person. In contrast to other channels for tracking public opinion, complaints involved the voluntary transfer of information by individuals to the regime. Citizens complained about a variety of daily life issues that could be subsumed within the socialist social contract: shortages, job assignment problems, poor living conditions, and violation of legal rights.<sup>47</sup> The leadership valued this information, because it could be used to identify issues of concern to citizens and to address them before they had been transformed into sources of mass discontent. After the 1962 Novocherkassk meat riots, the regime understandably wanted to prevent large-scale unrest.

Though communist regimes may want to receive complaints, they cannot assume that citizens would be willing to voluntarily provide information to them through the complaints system. This article argues that citizens transfer information when two conditions are present. First, citizens should estimate the probability of retribution as reasonably low. Complaining could be a dangerous activity for individual citizens, since their complaints sometimes provide evidence for the abuse of power by officials. For example, when a family of five is forced to live in a single room in a communal apartment, the head of the household might write a letter to the media exposing cases where apartments are distributed on the basis of nepotism rather than demonstrated need.<sup>48</sup> The author of such a letter might fear retribution from the individuals he has exposed. Thus, to ensure a steady flow of complaints, the regime has to implement policies that protect complainants from retribution. Second, citizens should estimate the probability of responsiveness as reasonably high. Counterintuitively, a *drop* in complaints does not mean that citizens are satisfied with the regime. Rather it means that either the probability of retaliation is high or that responsiveness is low.

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47 On the social contract, see Linda J. Cook, *The Soviet Social Contract and Why It Failed: Welfare Policy and Workers' Politics from Brezhnev to Yeltsin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

48 Over a thousand letters to *Literaturnaia gazeta* containing shocking details of housing difficulties in the early 1980s can be found in the *Rubinov Collection*, boxes 39–41.

This section aims to assess the operation of the system of citizen complaints during the Brezhnev era by answering three questions. First, what institutions existed for handling citizen complaints? Second, what did citizens complain about? And third, how responsive was the regime to citizen complaints? In answering these questions, this article makes use of the Rubinov Collection, which is currently deposited at the Library of Congress. The collection consists of readers' letters to Anatolii Rubinov, the head of the department on social and daily life problems at *Literaturnaia gazeta* from 1966 to 1997. Rubinov estimates that he received about 500,000 letters during this period, usually in response to one of his publications.<sup>49</sup> Although most of these letters were destroyed after being answered, about 100,000 survived and were donated by Rubinov to the Library of Congress in 2000. The collection presents an unusual resource for the study of citizen complaints under Brezhnev. It contains original letters (including the envelopes with the names and addresses of letter writers); bulletins on trends in readers' letters composed by *Literaturnaia gazeta* staff; and responses by the authorities to letters forwarded to them by *Literaturnaia gazeta*. When supplemented with other available sources, the Rubinov Collection provides new evidence on regime responsiveness to citizen complaints under Brezhnev.

### *Institutions for Handling Citizen Complaints Under Brezhnev*

The Soviet regime was interested in soliciting citizen complaints from its very beginnings. Lenin, for example, stressed the importance of allowing citizens to complain and of tracking the volume of complaints.<sup>50</sup> In an often-cited 1922 letter to the editor of *Bednota*, Lenin asked for a biweekly report on the number of peasant complaints to the newspaper, their mood, and the burning questions of the day (*zloby dnia*) they raised.<sup>51</sup> According to Lenin, complaints were important because they provided the government with information about popular discontent and allowed for the "involvement of the wide masses in the work of the soviets."<sup>52</sup> Under Stalin, citizens were also encouraged to complain, even if their complaints involved the denunciations of others (this was, after all, the era of Pavlik Morozov). Sheila Fitzpatrick's path-breaking

49 Anatolii Rubinov letter to James Billington (undated, hand carried from Moscow to Washington on March 18, 1999).

50 Vladimir I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 54 (Fifth Edition) (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1970), 143–144.

51 Vladimir I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 50 (Fifth edition) (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1969), 227, 323.

52 Vladimir I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 38 (Fifth Edition) (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1969), 169.

work has documented the multiplicity of complaints under Stalin and the high frequency of denunciations, instead of the more politically innocuous requests for the provision of benefits or suggestions for improvements in governance.<sup>53</sup> By now, we have a rich literature on complaints prior to Stalin,<sup>54</sup> under Stalin,<sup>55</sup> and even under Khrushchev.<sup>56</sup> Given this attention to the pre-Brezhnev era, the paucity of research on complaints under Brezhnev is striking. Some studies based on published letters to newspapers exist,<sup>57</sup> but published letters are not representative of the overall volume of letters received by the media and, furthermore, they do not allow us to assess regime responsiveness to complaints.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, we need to supplement the existing studies with new research based on archival sources.

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- 53 Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Suplicants and Citizens: Public Letter Writing in Soviet Russia in the 1930s," *Slavic Review* 55, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 78–105; Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Signals from Below: Soviet Letters of Denunciation of the 1930s," *The Journal of Modern History*, 68, no. 4 (December 1996): 831–866; and Fitzpatrick, *Tear Off the Masks!*
- 54 A. IA. Livshin and I. B. Orlov, *Pis'ma vo vlast', 1917–1927: zaiavleniia, zhaloby, donosy, pis'ma v gosudarstvennye struktury i bol'shevistkim vozhdiam* (Moscow: Rosspen, 1998); Marjorie Hilton, "The Customer Is Always Wrong: Consumer Complaint in Late-NEP Russia," *The Russian Review* 68, no. 1 (2009): 1–25.
- 55 A. IA. Livshin, I. B. Orlov, and O. V. Khlevniuk, *Pis'ma vo vlast', 1928–1940: zaiavleniia, zhaloby, donosy, pis'ma v gosudarstvennye struktury i sovetskim vozhdiam* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2002); Alex Inkeles and Kent Geiger, "Critical Letters to the Editors of the Soviet Press: Areas and Modes of Complaint," *American Sociological Review* 17, no. 6 (December 1952): 694–703; Alex Inkeles and Kent Geiger, "Critical Letters to the Editors of the Soviet Press: Social Characteristics and Interrelations of Critics and the Criticized," *American Sociological Review*, 18, no. 1 (February 1953): 12–22; Merle Fainsod, *Smolensk Under Soviet Rule* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 378–408; Vladimir A. Kozlov, "Denunciation and Its Functions in Soviet Governance: A Study of Denunciations and Their Bureaucratic Handling from Soviet Police Archives, 1944–1953," *The Journal of Modern History*, 68, no. 4 (December 1996): 867–898.
- 56 Denis Kozlov, *The Readers of Novyi Mir: Coming to Terms with the Stalinist Past* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). Edward D. Cohn, "Disciplining the Party: The Expulsion and Censure of Communist in the Post-War Soviet Union, 1945–1961," Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of History, University of Chicago, 2007.
- 57 Jan S. Adams, "Critical Letters to the Soviet Press: An Increasingly Important Public Forum" in *Political Participation in Communist Systems*, ed. Donald E. Schulz and Jan S. Adams (New York: Pergamon Press, 1981), 108–136; Nicholas Lampert, *Whistleblowing in the Soviet Union: Complaints and Abuses under State Socialism* (London: Macmillan, 1985); Stephen White, "Political Communications in the USSR: Letters to the Party, State, and Press," *Political Studies*, vol. XXXI (1983): 43–60.
- 58 Soviet scholars have shown that there is a marked difference between letters published by newspapers and the letters they actually receive. For example, newspapers printed few

Important changes to the institutions for handling citizen complaints were made during the Brezhnev era. Most notable are the improvements in the legal protection of complainants. In 1968, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet issued a decree entitled "Procedures for Examining the Suggestions, Petitions, and Complaints of Citizens."<sup>59</sup> This document aimed to clarify the rules for handling and responding to complaints. It also stipulated that forwarding complaints to the individuals against who citizens were complaining was forbidden.<sup>60</sup> Although such forwarding of letters inevitably occurred, these legal provisions signaled the importance that the regime attached to encouraging citizen complaints and implied that the leadership was committed to lowering the probability of retaliation. Another important change was the constitutional protection of the right to complaint.<sup>61</sup> Following the 1977 constitutional amendments, the Soviet Union joined the ranks of other communist regimes like Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and China, which had already provided constitutional guarantees for the right to complain.

In addition to these legal protections, the regime engaged in active propaganda efforts aimed at increasing awareness of the right to complain. *Literaturnaia gazeta*, despite its name, began to publish citizen complaints on daily life issues in the mid-1960s; other newspapers, like *Pravda*, which had previously published citizen complaints, continued to do so during the Brezhnev era. Television shows based on citizen letters appeared, with Iurii Zhukov's show on international affairs and Lev Voznesenskii's show on domestic politics being the most popular. Numerous books aimed at the mass reader clarified how to write a complaint (*zhaloba*) and what to expect in terms of a resolution.<sup>62</sup> Finally, Brezhnev spoke about the importance of citizen complaints both at the XXV CPSU Congress in 1976 and at the XXVI Congress in

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letters (21 percent) dealing with transportation, retail trade, public services, public order, healthcare, and housing, even though those letters accounted for the bulk of the letters they received (67 percent). Furthermore, newspapers tended to print positive letters, whereas most letters they received were negative. See Grushin and Onikov, *Massovaia informatsiia*, 410, 414.

59 See "O poriadke rassmotreniia predlozheniia, zaiavleniia i zhalob grazhdan," *Vedomosti Verkhovnogo Soveta SSSR*, 1968 (no. 17), 144; see also the amended version in *Vedomosti Verkhovnogo Soveta SSSR*, 1980 (no. 11), 192.

60 Viktor I. Remnev, *Pravo zhaloby v SSSR* (Moscow: Znanie, 1982), 16.

61 Two articles of the 1977 Constitution are relevant: Article 49 (which protects the right to make suggestions) and Article 58 (which protects the right to complain).

62 See, for example, V. Mal'kov, *Vuchrezhdenie postupila zhaloba* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1972) and Remnev, *Pravo zhaloby v SSSR*.

1981. As these speeches were televised and also printed in all major newspapers, they served to publicize the right to complain.

To assess whether these legal protections and mass propaganda positively impacted the willingness of individual citizens to complain, we need to measure the overall volume of complaints over time. This task is complicated, because there is no single source containing longitudinal statistics on the total number of complaints received by the party, by government agencies, and by the media. Instead, separate statistics on the volume of complaints handled by each of these institutional actors have to be compiled. Available statistics indicate that there was an upward trend in the volume of complaints handled by the Central Committee of the CPSU: whereas 350,000 letters were received in 1974, about 500,000 letters were received on average each year during the 1976–1981 period.<sup>63</sup> Statistics on complaints received by subnational party offices, by government ministries, and by the press during the Brezhnev era are not fine-grained enough to allow for comparisons over time. However, if we assume that the dynamics observed in Central Committee complaints also characterized the volume of complaints received by these other entities, then the overall volume of complaints would have gradually increased throughout the 1970s and early 1980s.

### *The Content of Complaints*

At the highest level of generality, we can assess the content of complaints by looking at reports prepared for the Politburo and the Secretariat of the Central Committee. Such reports were issued fairly frequently. For example, in the year prior to the XXV Party Congress, 20 reports were compiled and presented to the Politburo, while the Secretariat received 16 such reports.<sup>64</sup> As the General Department of the Central Committee headed by Chernenko was in charge of compiling information on citizen complaints, reports were typically issued in his name. One of these reports indicates that in 1974 complaints focused on daily life issues: housing problems; job assignment, labor disputes, and compensation; pensions; medical care, transportation, and communication; and official corruption (“shortcomings in the work of some leading cadres”).<sup>65</sup> A report from 1976 highlights a similar range of problems, also listing consumer goods shortages as an important concern raised in citizen

63 For 1974 statistics, see transcript of the December 31, 1974 Politburo meeting, l. 11 in *Volkogonov Papers*, Box 28; for the statistics for 1976–1981, see Remnev, *Pravo zhaloby v SSSR*, 4.

64 *Tsentr Khraneniia Sovremennoi Dokumentatsii (TsKhSD)*, f. 89, per. 26, d. 6, l. 7.

65 Transcript of the December 31, 1974 Politburo meeting, ll. 11–13, *Volkogonov Papers*, Box 28.

letters.<sup>66</sup> Sometimes, reports on complaints would focus on a single pressing issue, such as the shortages of table salt in several regions (the situation was alarming: riots tended to erupt whenever salt appeared in the stores and kindergartners would go from door to door begging for a pinch of salt),<sup>67</sup> the shortages of bread (one key reason for this was that citizens would buy bread to feed it to the animals they raised),<sup>68</sup> or the endemic shortages of meat. These reports suggest that the leadership received regular, if somewhat general, briefings on citizen complaints.

A more textured picture emerges from the original letters and the bulletins of representative letters contained in the Rubinov Collection. Many of these letters concerned consumption matters, such as apartment shortages and a long list of consumer goods shortages (spices, candy, bread, medicines, eyeglasses, automobile spare parts, and so on). The poor quality of services was also the subject of numerous letters. For example, citizens complained about transportation services (taxis, trains, Aeroflot); telephone and postal services; slow snow removal; poor dry cleaning; substandard hotels; unsatisfactory vacation and rest cure packages; and the onerous rules regarding accessing one's own bank deposits. Complaints also came in the form of suggestions, such as the suggestion to open a specialized store for clothes for elderly people.<sup>69</sup> Predictably, letters also focused on various manifestations of corruption: among medical personnel; among officials distributing apartments; and among retail trade personnel. Citizens also wrote to *Literaturnaia gazeta* seeking assistance with legal matters: a lawyer working for the newspaper's letters department personally intervened in court cases involving wrongful manslaughter convictions, various other criminal matters, and spousal abuse.<sup>70</sup> All of these issues were part of the socialist social contract, so it is not surprising that they turned up in letters to the media: citizens felt justified raising them. They are also broadly consistent with the types of letters that reached the Central Committee and were reported to the Politburo and to the Secretariat.

66 "O rabote s pis'mami trudiashchikhsia postupivshimi v period podgotovki v xxv s"ezdu KPSS," March 31, 1976, *Tsentr Khraneniia Sovremennoi Dokumentatsii (TsKhsD)*, f. 89, per. 26, d. 6, ll. 1–9.

67 *Tsentr Khraneniia Sovremennoi Dokumentatsii (TsKhsD)*, f. 89, per. 46, d. 84.

68 *Tsentr Khraneniia Sovremennoi Dokumentatsii (TsKhsD)*, f. 89, per. 43, d. 58.

69 See collective letters in response to the Jan. 25, 1978 *Literaturnaia gazeta* article "Magazin dlia babushek," *Rubinov Collection*, Box 18, Folder 34.

70 *Literaturnaia gazeta (Otdel pisem): Dela redaktsionnye*, Bulletin Nr. 1 (35), January 1973, ll. 43–45.

But *Literaturnaia gazeta* also received other letters. These focused on social problems, rather than on consumption. Some were on surprising topics, such as the difficulty of finding life partners in large cities;<sup>71</sup> marital problems;<sup>72</sup> and the poor health of Soviet men.<sup>73</sup> Letters also concerned issues like the increasing rate of homelessness and alcoholism.<sup>74</sup> Sometimes citizens complained about a shortage of an unusual kind: that of books. Of course, there was no general shortage of books in the Soviet Union. But the books that were available were not the ones people wanted to read. The collected works of Lenin or Stalin were not in demand; however, books by Esenin, Arthur Conan Doyle, Guy de Maupassant, Alexandre Dumas, Hans Christian Andersen, and Stefan Zweig were highly sought after and unavailable.<sup>75</sup> The difficulty of obtaining books produced angry letters from citizens. One complained that she was “forced to give a ring (*obzvanivat*)” to all Moscow bookstores in order to find out what books are in stock.<sup>76</sup> Another, who only gave her name as Shevchenko from Moscow, warned sternly: “Put an end to this cruel mockery (*izdevatel'stvo*). Crowds besiege bookstores, call, write complaint letters, and it is still impossible to obtain books.”<sup>77</sup> Although those who had “donated” 20 kilograms of paper for recycling were issued coupons that were supposed to give them preferential access to books in short supply, such coupons were often useless. Shevchenko’s letter provides further details:

One would find out that yesterday they were selling Zweig’s *Novellas* on Herzen Street, today Maupassant in Shchukino, and so on. People rush around with their coupons (*nosiatsia s talonam*) but they can’t buy anything. Books are only sold for an hour, no more. The queue consists of the bookstore staff and the acquaintances of those who stand in queues until they drop dead from morning to night. And what about those of us who have to go to work and cannot stand in line?<sup>78</sup>

*Literaturnaia gazeta* continued to pay close attention to this problem throughout the 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>79</sup> A letter to Comrade Zhegalina from Moscow

71 *Rubinov Collection*, Box 17, Folders 30D–F, 31A–B.

72 *Rubinov Collection*, Box 8, Folders 11A–D.

73 *Rubinov Collection*, Box 1, Folders 2A–D, 3A–D.

74 Bulletin Nr. 17 (129), 1979; Bulletin Nr. 9 (56), August 1974.

75 Bulletin Nr. 17 (81), December 1975.

76 *Ibid.*, l. 6.

77 *Ibid.*, l. 1.

78 *Ibid.*

79 See Bulletin Nr. 3 (84), February 1976.

tells us that the requirement of donating 20 kilograms of paper in order to be issued coupons for high-demand fiction was slated for elimination as of January 1, 1985.<sup>80</sup> However, book shortages persisted in one form or another until the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

To sum up, citizens complained about a wide array of issues, mostly centered on consumption problems and corruption. Complaints transmitted valuable information to the regime about specific areas of discontent among the general population. One question that emerges with regard to complaints is what type of responsiveness was provided to them by the regime.

### *Responsiveness to Citizen Complaints*

Responsiveness to citizen complaints can be difficult to assess. Sheila Fitzpatrick estimates that 15–30 percent of complaints received under Stalin provoked some type of bureaucratic response.<sup>81</sup> Under Brezhnev, the author of a complaint might receive an acknowledgment and a promise that something would be done. Receiving an acknowledgment did not mean that the complaint would be favorably resolved. Sometimes complaints were not simply acknowledged, but actually received a positive resolution. Another type of response was a general change in policy following a high volume of complaints about a certain issue.

During the Brezhnev era, it would have been highly atypical for a complainant not to receive an acknowledgment that her letter was received and steps were being taken to address the problem. The acknowledgment was typed on letterhead and contained a date, a number assigned to the citizen complaint, and a number assigned to the response to the complaint. This made it possible to reference the initial letter and the response in subsequent correspondence about the same matter. The acknowledgment letters contained the name, position, and signature of the official who was responsible for issuing the response. When these acknowledgments were written in response to a complaint initially directed to a newspaper, a copy of the response was sent to the newspaper. Though they tended to be short (usually taking only half a page) and formulaic, the acknowledgments found in the Rubinov Collection always listed the specific steps through which the problem would be addressed. For example, of the 38 acknowledgment letters from February 1982 concerning inadequate snow removal in Moscow and the provinces, 32 contain specific

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80 Letter from Gossnab SSSR dated August 3, 1984, *Rubinov Collection*, Box 54, Folder 136B.

81 Fitzpatrick, *Tear Off the Masks*, 177.

information that snow has been removed, with the rest promising to take the necessary steps in the future.<sup>82</sup>

The acknowledgments in the Rubinov Collection suggest that in some cases even a short note could constitute a sufficient response to a citizen complaint. However, in more complicated cases a longer formal letter was required in order to make citizens feel that the authorities were responsive to their concerns. For example, a letter from Comrade Tokareva regarding the loss of her fur coat at a dry cleaning shop necessitated a three-page response from the vice-director of the Public Service Department of the Moscow City Ispolkom.<sup>83</sup> In another case, Comrade Platonov suggested that unused bread should be accepted for re-processing by Moskhlebtorg as a way of alleviating the bread shortage that engulfed Moscow and the whole country. The director of Moskhlebtorg issued a two-page response letter explaining that unused bread develops mold, which can produce serious food poisoning. Therefore, director Belousova concluded, “moldy bread cannot be re-processed. It is not suitable for animal feed either. Rather, it should be destroyed. In light of this, your proposal for setting up a system for accepting unused bread for re-processing is unacceptable.”<sup>84</sup>

Apart from individual responses, complaints could lead to a general change in policy or sustained union-wide efforts to alleviate or resolve a problem that benefited large categories of people. Some examples of policies enacted during the Brezhnev era that were broadly consistent with popular preferences would include the adoption of a five-day workweek; the reduction of the length of the draft by one year; the distribution of 600 square-meter agricultural plots (“*shest' sotok*”); the legalization of small-scale repair work carried out by *shabashniki*; the legalization of personal auxiliary farms (*lichnye podsobnyye khoziaistva*); and the increase in pensions and the length of maternity leaves. Other popular measures included the designation of March 8 as a non-working day; the rapid increase in the volume of automobile production (*Zaporozhets*, *Moskvich*, *Zhiguli*);<sup>85</sup> the establishment of self-service supermarkets, specialized stores (e.g., *Okean* or stores for products from the Eastern Bloc: Dresden, Sofia, Budapest, Iadran, etc.) and of hard-currency *Berezka* stores, which were technically off-limits to Soviet citizens but where those who had procured currency vouchers were nonetheless allowed to shop and obtain desirable Western

82 *Rubinov Collection*, Box 54, Folder 132A.

83 Letter from V. I. Shkalikov dated June 11, 1982, *Rubinov Collection*, Box 54, Folder 132A.

84 Letter from E. V. Belousova, undated [1982?], *Rubinov Collection*, Box 55, Folder 144.

85 Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Cars for Comrades: The Life of the Soviet Automobile* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

goods. These items were part of Brezhnev's "little deal" and were essential for maintaining popular compliance or what scholars have called "the organized consensus."<sup>86</sup>

Over time, the ability of the regime to meet the consumption preferences of citizens demanded the introduction of unpopular price increases. Although the memory of the Novocherkassk riots ensured that staples like meat and bread were protected from such price increases, in July 1979 the prices of luxury items (gold, silver, carpets, cars, and imported furniture) were raised, as were the prices of services and of food served in cafes and restaurants.<sup>87</sup> The price of vodka was also raised several times during the Brezhnev era. Despite these price increases, demand for both luxury items and for staples could not be met fully. Meat shortages were endemic, as were shortages of grain. The Volkogonov Papers document that the regime allocated most of the proceeds from oil and gold exports in the 1970s to secure the importation of meat and grain, which were used not only to feed Soviet citizens but also to provide staples to politically unstable countries like Poland and Vietnam.<sup>88</sup> Over time, as oil prices declined, this model of meeting consumption needs would become costlier and less sustainable.<sup>89</sup> But for the duration of the Brezhnev era, the model continued to be implemented, with predictable results: citizens supplied information by complaining and the regime maintained responsiveness to their complaints by expending funds on redistribution.

### Conclusion: Channels for Tracking Public Opinion Under Brezhnev

This article has argued that the Soviet Union relied on several channels to track public opinion. The KGB and opinion polls were used to extract information about popular preferences involuntarily, whereas citizen complaints functioned as a channel for the voluntary transfer of information to the regime. On its own, none of the three channels could provide comprehensive information

86 See also James R. Millar, "The Little Deal: Brezhnev's Contribution to Acquisitive Socialism," *Slavic Review* 44, no. 4 (Winter 1985): 694–706. On the organized consensus, see Victor Zaslavsky, *The New Stalinist State: Class, Ethnicity, and Consensus in Soviet Society* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1982), esp. 130–164.

87 *Tsentr Khraneniia Sovremennoi Dokumentatsii (TsKhsD)*, f. 89, per. 32, d. 4.

88 "Materialy o zakupke prodovol'stīia v 1975–1978 gg." (Osobaia papka), *Volkogonov Papers*, Box 27, Folders 119–122.

89 Egor' Gaidar, *Gibel' imperii: Uroki dlia sovremennoi Rossii* (Collapse of an Empire: Lessons for Contemporary Russia), 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Moscow: Rosspen, 2007).

about public opinion. State security only tracked overt expressions of political dissent. Opinion polling focused on latent discontent; however, preference falsification made these estimates of latent discontent unreliable. Complaints provided information about the redistributive preferences of the population; responsiveness to complaints was important for preventing the escalation of individual dissatisfaction into mass disturbances. Because of the operation of a “two-level mentality,” complaints focused on everyday practical concerns rather than on overtly ideological matters;<sup>90</sup> they could not therefore serve as an indicator of the level of political dissent in society. In sum, each channel had limitations, yet taken together they provided a rich array of information to the leadership regarding citizen preferences under communism.

A question that deserves future research is how the three channels for information gathering change over time and how they interact during moments of regime crisis and regime collapse. In the Soviet Union after the death of Brezhnev, for example, opinion polling gradually began to provide more accurate information and by the time of perestroika served as a true barometer of popular support for (as well as popular dissatisfaction with) the regime. In turn, citizen complaints to the party and to various government entities declined, whereas complaints to the media soared.<sup>91</sup> Rather than suggesting that citizens were satisfied with the work of the party and the state, these trends in complaints indicated that citizens distrusted them and trusted the media. The role of the KGB during this period remains unclear, though the annual KGB reports for 1985, 1986, 1988 and 1989 do not indicate a radical change in its methods of operation when compared to the Brezhnev period.<sup>92</sup> Thus, one hypothesis is that although the information provided by these different channels changed throughout the 1980s, the Soviet leadership did not experience an information vacuum prior to regime collapse; rather, the regime had more information about its eroding popular support.

90 Vladimir Shlapentokh, *A Normal Totalitarian Society: How the Soviet Union Functioned and Why It Collapsed* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2001), 128–130.

91 On the decline of complaints to the party, see *Rossiiski Tsentri Khraneniia i Izucheniiia Dokumentov Noveishei Istorii (RTSKHIDNI)* f. 646, op. 1, d. 3., l. 11. On the growth of complaints to the media, see Christopher Cerf and Marina Albee, *Small Fires: Letters from the Soviet People to Ogonyok Magazine, 1987–1990* (New York: Summit Books, 1990), 17 and Jim Riordan and Sue Bridger, *Dear Comrade Editor: Readers' Letters to the Soviet Press under Perestroika* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 1–15.

92 See *Tsentri Khraneniia Sovremennoi Dokumentatsii (TsKhsD)* f. 89, per. 51, d. 8 (1985); *Tsentri Khraneniia Sovremennoi Dokumentatsii (TsKhsD)* f. 89, per. 51, d. 9 (1986); *Tsentri Khraneniia Sovremennoi Dokumentatsii (TsKhsD)* f. 89, per. 51, d. 15 (1988), and *Tsentri Khraneniia Sovremennoi Dokumentatsii (TsKhsD)* f. 89, per. 51, d. 16 (1989).

Another question that deserves future study is how the three channels for tracking public opinion in the Soviet Union under Brezhnev compare to the channels for tracking public opinion in other communist regimes. Research on communist regimes in the Eastern Bloc and in Asia indicates that they all rely on state security, on opinion polls, and especially on citizen complaints in order to extract information about popular preferences. One of the most intriguing conclusions that emerge from a comparison of the communist regimes that eventually collapsed and those that still survive is that the ability to extract, process, and adaptively respond to information about popular preferences is essential for communist regime resilience.<sup>93</sup>

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93 Martin K. Dimitrov, *Dictatorship and Information*; Martin K. Dimitrov, "Understanding Communist Collapse and Resilience" in *Why Communism Didn't Collapse: Understanding Authoritarian Regime Resilience in Asia and Europe*, ed. Martin K. Dimitrov (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 3–39.