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SUMMARY

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THE DEATH OF CHERNENKO AND GORBACHEV'S SUCCESSION

ke Joan Harris
(SS) RD

1. Gorbachev's appointment as Chernenko's successor ends the transitional period in the Soviet leadership since Brezhnev's death in 1982. The funeral ceremonies (attended by 160 foreign delegations, including the Prime Minister and yourself) and Gorbachev's accession were arranged with extraordinary haste; there may be pockets of doubt among the old guard about a new General Secretary who is so young, and relatively untried (paragraphs 1 - 4).
2. Chernenko was a stop-gap who in personality and in policy was a left-over from the Brezhnev era. His one achievement may have been the decision to resume arms control negotiations with the United States. Otherwise he left little mark and departed unmourned (paragraphs 5 - 9).
3. Gorbachev is the Soviet Union's first essentially post-war leader, with a different educational background. Despite his pragmatic personal style, he is a dedicated communist. At home his primary problem will be the stagnant economy, but his freedom of manoeuvre will be limited by the political risks of change and by the inertia of the system. Abroad, there will be continuity of policy in East/West relations (paragraphs 10 - 19).
4. The funeral as diplomacy (paragraph 20).
5. Gorbachev's visit to Britain in December 1984 has given us a head start. We should build on this, in making our contribution to the improvement of East/West relations, by developing our political dialogue and commercial and cultural contacts with the Soviet Union. Gorbachev will prove a more adroit adversary, but it is safer that the Soviet Union should be led by a man with whom we can do business (paragraphs 21 - 22).

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etc., etc.,
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BRITISH EMBASSY

MOSCOW

21 March 1985

Sir

THE DEATH OF CHERNENKO AND GORBACHEV'S SUCCESSION

1. At 2.00 pm Moscow time on 11 March 1985, it was announced that Konstantin Ustinovich Chernenko, the Soviet Party leader and President, had died the previous evening at the age of 73. Just over four hours later, it was announced that Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev, aged 54, had been elected to replace him as General Secretary of the Party. Within two days, on 13 March, Chernenko was buried by the Kremlin wall in Red Square in a ceremony attended by the entire Soviet hierarchy and some 160 foreign delegations. This was the third change in the Soviet leadership within two and a half years, and it marks the true end of the transitional period brought about by Brezhnev's death in 1982.
2. The sequence of events and the ceremonial arrangements closely followed the precedents set by the deaths of Brezhnev and Andropov. The ceremonial, described in detail in my despatch of 2 December 1982 on Brezhnev's funeral, was almost identical. At Chernenko's funeral United Kingdom representation consisted of myself, representing The Queen; the Prime Minister and yourself, representing the

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government; and the leaders of the opposition parties, Mr Kinnock, Mr Steel and Dr Owen. Details of the programme and of the other foreign delegations which attended are set out in annexes to this despatch in which I have the honour to examine the circumstances of the transition of power, to give an assessment of Chernenko's short tenure and to consider the implications of Gorbachev's succession.

THE TRANSITION

3. When Andropov died thirteen months ago, the Politburo jibbed at selecting so young a man as Gorbachev and plumped instead for a safe elderly candidate. When Chernenko died in his turn, Gorbachev was installed with what appeared to be almost indecent haste. There are a number of straightforward reasons why this should have happened. The Soviet system abhors a power vacuum. A rapid transition underlines the stability and continuity of the régime. In this case it may also have reflected feelings of pent-up frustration and embarrassment in the Party and Government at the fact that the leadership of the country had been in the hands of elderly, ailing and constantly incapacitated men for more than four years. A third state funeral in so short a period was beginning to look like carelessness. Although never formally designated as such, Gorbachev had for some time been singled out as the number two in the Party hierarchy. Though I do not have conclusive evidence, I believe that the Politburo had agreed some time in advance that he should succeed on Chernenko's death.

.../4. All



4. All the same, there may have been more in this than meets the eye. It seems odd that the Central Committee met within three hours of the announcement of Chernenko's death, while one full member of the Politburo, Shcherbitsky, was still on his way back from the United States and very likely before all members of the Central Committee would have had time to reach Moscow from abroad or outlying areas of the USSR. Furthermore, the speech by Gromyko, in which he proposed Gorbachev to the Central Committee, was not published in the central press at the time. When it appeared a week later, in a specialised and limited edition, it was found to have overtones suggesting that Gromyko, who spoke in unusually direct and unstilted language, was making a deliberate effort to win over some doubting Thomases in the Central Committee, perhaps especially members from outside Moscow, and to sell the candidate as the right man for the job. In short, I do not exclude the possibility that the haste to install Gorbachev was partly dictated by a desire in the Politburo to forestall the possible development of any movement to block him; and, within the Politburo, it is possible that the prior decision to nominate him may have emerged after some bargaining with the old guard. In one sense these speculations - for such they are - may be thought academic now that Gorbachev has taken over. But they are of interest in suggesting that in some quarters he may have been only grudgingly accepted, and may therefore find his freedom of manoeuvre more restricted than he would wish.

CHERNENKO

5. Although the proper forms were observed on the announcement of

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Chernenko's passing, there was no sign of public grief or even of official regret. At 72 he had been the oldest man to assume the office of Party leader and his tenure proved to be the shortest. In my despatch of 23 February 1984, I described him as by some way the least impressive man to have been elected to the Party leadership and his subsequent performance did nothing to belie that judgement. He was an organizer and a committee man who had none of the obvious attributes of a leader. Even at his best he was an ineffectual public speaker and as his health declined his increasingly infrequent public appearances became painfully embarrassing. He had made his career entirely in the Party apparatus and had no previous direct experience at any level of running the economy or the conduct of foreign affairs. His basic credo was that problems could be solved and progress achieved by making the existing Party and State machine function more smoothly and efficiently and inspiring the workers by ideological work to more conscientious efforts. This comfortable philosophy must have appealed at the time to his more conservative colleagues and subordinates as a welcome relief after Andropov's more incisive and astringent approach.

6. Discipline, which had been the watchword of the Andropov interlude, continued to be emphasised under Chernenko. But although the campaign to root out corruption and abuse of office was pursued, it lost momentum as it had already begun to do during his predecessor's final illness, notwithstanding some sacrificial victims notably the former Minister of the Interior Shchelokov who is believed to have shot himself rather than face trial.

.../7. Chernenko

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7. Chernenko inherited an economy which during Andropov's term of office had produced a slight up-turn in performance, partly attributable to the one-off effects of the discipline and efficiency campaign. But its basic defects and problems had not been tackled and during the year of Chernenko a comparable improvement was not sustained. He himself injected no new ideas. He paid lip-service to the need for some adjustment to the system, an "overhaul of the economic mechanism", and strongly endorsed the current experiment involving a limited increase in enterprise autonomy, but showed no inclination for more radical measures. His one significant new initiative (which, it is worth recalling, appeared to run counter to ideas which Gorbachev had been expressing) was essentially a retrograde step in economic policy - the large-scale land-improvement measures approved at the 1984 October Plenum. In continuing and extending the Programme of irrigation and drainage launched as part of Brezhnev's Food Programme, Chernenko was attempting to solve the problems of agriculture by resorting to the old-fashioned remedy of extensive economic development, despite the failure of previous similar schemes to produce the hoped-for results.

8. In foreign affairs, Chernenko introduced no change of line, but adopted from the beginning a relatively conciliatory tone, calling for a resumption of East-West dialogue (on Soviet terms) and a return to detente. At times there was a contrast between his moderate and statesmanlike pronouncements and Gromyko's increasingly acerbic language but this probably reflected a tactical division of labour rather than evidence of any significant difference in views. While his health lasted, Chernenko was active in dealing with the backlog of foreign

.../visits



visits which had built up during the last six months of Andropov's tenure. But he did not even achieve the one visit abroad as Party leader which Andropov managed, and the Warsaw Pact summit due to take place in Sofia in January this year had to be postponed because of his inability to travel. Within the Soviet Union, he performed no official engagements outside Moscow. However, one crucial decision was taken and should be placed to his credit, although the extent to which he was personally responsible is not clear. The Soviet decision to resume the dialogue on arms control with the United States was perhaps inevitable once it became clear that President Reagan would be re-elected. But it came sooner than many had expected.

9. Chernenko was elected as a stop-gap and so he proved to be. Well before the end, the leadership and the Party at large must have recognised that his election had been a mistake. Soviet prestige abroad and morale at home has suffered during the past year. Although he affirmed continuity with the policies of Andropov, his accession brought a return to the sense of drift and stagnation of the Brezhnev era, to which he essentially belonged in background and in spirit. The sixty-five years from the Revolution to Brezhnev's death saw only four Soviet leaders. Barring accidents to Gorbachev, the two who so briefly held the stage after Brezhnev will surely come to be seen as no more than elements in the transition to a new phase in Soviet history.

GORBACHEV

10. Thirteen months ago the Politburo played safe and rejected Gorbachev, either because at that stage it was unable to choose between him and Romanov, or because of his youth and relative



inexperience in the senior ranks of the Party. Why should it now have acted so decisively to install him? The simplest explanation seems also the most likely. Despite the failures in Soviet agriculture over the years during which he bore responsibility for it, Gorbachev had not only become the senior Party Secretary and logical successor by process of attrition, but had demonstrated his competence in the acting role. Had Chernenko died suddenly some months earlier, it is just possible that we could have had another interim leader. But as Gromyko has now confirmed in his nomination speech, Gorbachev had already assumed some of the functions of a co-ordinator before Chernenko's death. It must have been pretty clear that the Party could not afford another elderly stop-gap such as Grishin, and there was therefore no serious alternative. There is some evidence that had Chernenko lingered on, he would in any case have been replaced by Gorbachev at an early Plenum.

11. Gorbachev's youth makes his biography very different from any of his predecessors as Party leader. He is the first who was not yet born when Lenin died. He was a child at the time of the Great Purge and during the Second World War. He had only just joined the Party and was still a student when Stalin died. His educational background is also unusual. He studied law at Moscow University (where he met his wife, a student and subsequently a lecturer in philosophy) as well as graduating subsequently from an Agricultural Institute in Stavropol. The first Party Congress he attended as a Komsomol delegate was the 20th in 1956 at which Khrushchev denounced Stalin in his celebrated "Secret speech".

12. The greater part of Gorbachev's career was spent as a provincial

.../Party



Party official in Stavropol Krai, one of the main grain-growing areas in the south of Russia. His rapid rise up the political ladder began seven years ago when at the age of 47 he was appointed a Secretary of the Central Committee responsible for agriculture. Two years later he was a full member of the Politburo. From 1982 on, the deaths of more senior Party Secretaries, Suslov, Brezhnev and Andropov and the departure of Kirilenko enhanced his seniority and led to a broadening of his responsibilities to include other aspects of the economy and foreign affairs. In May 1983 he visited Canada, the first time he had represented the Soviet State in the West, and in December last year he led the Supreme Soviet delegation which visited the United Kingdom.

13. That visit to Britain and his lengthy discussions with the Prime Minister and yourself have given us a special insight into Gorbachev's personality and style. But as yet we have limited evidence about his political attitudes and intentions. The popular image, based apparently on his energy, fluency and ease of manner is of a go-ahead, even a liberal reformer. It is an image which some Russians share with sections of the foreign press. We have learned enough about him to be sure that he is no liberal in any Western sense of the term, but the obvious toughness of his character does not necessarily lead to the opposite conclusion, that he is a "hard liner" in either domestic or foreign policy.

14. Gorbachev is evidently a leader of the Andropov rather than the Brezhnev-Chernenko school. In his funeral oration he cited as a principal source of authority for current policies since the last Party Congress the Central Committee Plenum of November 1982 held under Andropov, ignoring the three Plenums when the man he was supposed to be

.../eulogising



eulogising was in charge. He is at the same time a man of a different background and cast of mind to Andropov, being more pragmatic and practical (with direct experience of economic management) and, I believe, less intellectual and ideological in his approach. He is articulate and has an agile mind. Except for Andropov, during the brief period when he was active, he is the first Soviet leader since Khrushchev over twenty years ago who ventures to speak without text or notes.

15. The qualities of his style and the aspects of his background which distinguish Gorbachev from his predecessors are important but their significance especially in the short-term should not be exaggerated. He is a product of the same system and has been moulded by it. He has been little exposed to life outside the narrow world of the Party apparatus. He has been educated to the concepts and language of Marxism and Leninism and if, at least in addressing Western interlocutors, he does not preach or engage in ideological argument, this is not, I judge, because he has any doubts about their validity; on the contrary, although, as he demonstrated in London, he has a keen interest in Western methods and technology, he appears to believe implicitly in the superiority of the Soviet system.

16. In any event, the power of a Soviet General Secretary, especially one so new and young, to influence appointments and policies is more limited than is sometimes supposed. Any important change would require a consensus among the ten members of the Politburo, half of whom are over 70. Gorbachev is not only the

.../youngest



youngest member of the Politburo but one of the younger members of the Central Committee, the average age of whose 300 or so members is well over 60. Significant though his appointment is, it remains premature to speak yet of a "generational shift", in the Soviet leadership as a whole.

17. In his first public statements at the Extraordinary Plenum and at the funeral, Gorbachev, as is customary, stressed continuity with the existing Party line. There was a clear undertone of impatience to get on with the job but whatever his longer-term intentions, he is likely to proceed cautiously in the knowledge of the existing limits on his room for manoeuvre and the fact that time is on his side. The timing of the succession was fortunate for Gorbachev in that it gives him some time in which to put his own mark on the XXVII Party Congress, which will approve the 1986-90 Five Year Plan and a revised edition of the Party Programme and also elect a new Central Committee. It seems increasingly likely that the Congress will be held towards the end of this year. A Central Committee Plenum is expected to be held before long, perhaps already in April, which will set the date and the agenda. The Plenum will also provide an early opportunity to make some new appointments to the Politburo and the Central Committee Secretariat. But no dramatic changes in personnel are to be expected, at least until the Congress. The odds are that, like his three predecessors, Gorbachev will in due course be elected President of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. But a decision about this may not be taken for some time. Nor do I expect major changes in policy in the short term. He will wish to get the right people in position first. He may have to consolidate

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his own position vis-a-vis the armed forces which were conspicuously unrepresented at the top of Lenin's tomb for Chernenko's funeral. The back-room boys in the Institutes with blue-prints for new adventurous decrees may be disappointed.

18. Given his dedication to the system, there are no obvious ways forward for Gorbachev in tackling the main internal and external problems which confront the Soviet Union in the longer-term. The slight improvement in industrial performance during the past two years seems to be tailing off. It did not in any case derive from a solution of the underlying problems of the economy reflected in a succession of poor harvests, the beginning of a decline in the production of fuel, the inability to mass produce high quality goods or to develop and harness new technology fast enough. The central dilemma is that the economy is now growing at no more than about 2% per annum, i.e. less than is current in the Western industrialised countries even during the present high unemployment. With a public whose expectations will be further enhanced by the advent of a new leadership, the Soviet Union, which remains much less productive than the West in absolute per capita terms, will therefore fall still further behind unless ways can be found to galvanise the economy. Gorbachev's predecessors have for years hinted cautiously at the need for economic "reforms" (using various euphemisms for this dangerous word) but have balked at the political risks of tampering with the orthodox rigidly centralised system. A new leadership may surprise us all. A better economic performance is likely to be Gorbachev's highest priority and the natural^{and}/human resources are not lacking. But he is not a Deng Xiaoping.

19. In international affairs, the key issue will continue to be a



more stable relationship with the United States and an agreement which would avert technological developments in the arms race which the Soviet Union could not match or could match only at severe economic cost. It is worth recalling that, in his speech in his RSFSR Supreme Soviet constituency on 20 February, Gorbachev also made a special point of the importance of political dialogue with Western Europe - to confound the Americans, no doubt, if the opportunity is offered but also, as exemplified in our meeting with him after the funeral, because this is a natural and essential element in East/West relations. Gorbachev's other main, perhaps his first, priority, as he made clear in his speeches at the Plenum and at the funeral, will be to strengthen the cohesion of the socialist bloc, some of whose members have been showing a growing tendency, encouraged by the lack of a strong leadership in Moscow, to look to their own national interests in domestic and foreign policy matters. He has also put the Chinese on notice that, if they are willing, he looks to an improvement in relations with Peking.

THE FUNERAL AS DIPLOMACY

20. Here I digress to touch on Chernenko's funeral as the occasion for yet another major unscheduled and extraordinary gathering of world statesmen and communist delegates. What brought the former to Moscow to stand in the cold for two hours on Red Square was not the pathetic figure in the coffin with its waxen features and the secular state ceremony with quasi-religious undertones which I have found progressively less impressive on the four occasions I have witnessed it. Nor was it only the opportunity to see and be seen by each other, although the 13th and 14th of March saw innumerable

.../bilateral



bilateral meetings, formal and informal. You and the Prime Minister had six useful discussions at the Embassy which are listed in the annexed chronology. Chancellor Kohl, who stayed longer, had many more. What brought the world to Moscow was primarily to encounter the new Soviet leader, to form an impression of the man and hopefully to make in turn an impression on him. Gorbachev held no less than twenty-nine meetings with visiting delegates, whether Heads of State or Government, Ministers or Party Leaders. Chernenko had last year managed only fourteen, and conducted most in a routine mechanical manner. In his meetings, Gorbachev has shown himself able to adjust his style to his audience and make his dialogue fit his customer. As I have separately reported, he was tough with Chancellor Kohl, encouraging with President Pertini, businesslike with Mrs Thatcher and President Mitterrand and firm but positive with Vice-President Bush. The leaders have gone away with food for thought. At the meeting with Bush, Gorbachev spoke with apparent sincerity of his wish to see not only a successful outcome to the Geneva negotiations but a new era in relations with Washington. But with Kohl he was sharply polemical about American intentions. A certain facile glibness may also be part of his style.

21. For the Prime Minister and yourself, the meeting with Gorbachev was of course an opportunity to resume the dialogue already well begun at Chequers and Hampton Court in December. This has now established a solid foundation of mutual awareness and even respect. We have a head start on our Western partners and the omens for Anglo-Soviet relations are good. We should build on the possibilities for furthering our commercial and cultural interest as well as the political. It remains to be seen whether the Soviet Union under Gorbachev will be

.../any



any more open to constructive influence than hitherto, and the main dynamic impulse can only come from the United States. But we should move quickly to make what contribution we can. I have separately made recommendations about a variety of ways in which our relations and contacts with the Soviet Union might be developed at this juncture, particularly in the commercial and cultural spheres. Gorbachev himself has already been a factor in the developing political dialogue. The opportunities for personal meetings with Ministers or Ambassadors being inevitably very infrequent, I hope that consideration can be given to more regular exchanges of messages with him, to keep up the momentum.

CONCLUSION

22. It may be questioned whether we should welcome the accession of a man who is likely to prove a more vigorous and adroit adversary than his immediate predecessors. But it is surely better and safer, whatever new challenges we may face, that the Soviet Union should no longer be adrift under an incapacitated leader and should have at the helm a man with whom it is possible to do business. We are a long way from any new era as we know little as yet of Gorbachev's intentions. But he is an intelligent man prepared to engage in genuine discussion and this offers at least the possibility of more constructive East/West relations.

23. I am sending copies of this despatch to Her Majesty's Representatives at NATO and East European posts, Dublin, Tokyo,

.../Peking

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15.



Peking, Helsinki, Stockholm and Vienna.

I am
Sir
Yours faithfully

Iain Sutherland

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