

Polished ... but hard as steel

The Kremlin's Old Guard has finally shrugged its collective shoulders and given in to the march of time. The Soviet Union's new party leader is the 54-year-old "youngster," Mikhail Gorbachev.

While hardly a surprise, many observers thought that the Old Guard leaders — Gromyko, Tikhonov, Gribshin, Kunaev and Scherbitsky — might have split the leadership between the "youngsters" and one of their own hoary members.

Not so. Gorbachev has assumed full powers as party leader — though not yet the title of president of the presidium that would make him, like his predecessor, Konstantin Chernenko, leader of both party and state. The confirmation of Gorbachev, made only four hours after the news of Chernenko's death, indicates that the Kremlin's succession was decided well in advance.

Will Gorbachev bring a sweeping change in Soviet policy? Is a "new breath" about to sweep away the deepening frosts of the cold war? Hardly, according to most informed observers.

Each new change in Soviet leadership brings an instant surge of ill-founded optimism in the western press and even from some of our leaders who should know better. When Chernenko's predecessor, Yuri Andropov, came to power, western media was filled



ERIC MARGOLIS

with roseate stories about Andropov's liking for jazz and scotch whisky.

Andropov, who had run the KGB with great efficiency, proved no closet liberal. Western hopes that Chernenko would usher in a new era of "realism" proved equally fatuous.

Gorbachev represents the new generation of Communist Party apparatchnik: sleek on the outside, tungsten hard on the inside and equipped with an acute sense of which way the party winds are blowing.

In spite of his polish, Gorbachev is not likely to remake Soviet society. It should be remembered that his meteoric rise was due to the patronage of arch-conservative Victor Suslov and KGB boss Andropov. Suslov, in fact, was the most rabidly anti-western Soviet leader.

Even if Gorbachev wanted to make sweeping changes, he might well be unable. As now constituted, the party leadership is collegial: the chairman is merely a first among equals.

Decisions, in Moscow, are taken by committee. In the end, the senior Politburo members, allied to the military, may still be the real power in Moscow.

As the new regime emerges, it will also be interesting to watch the handing out of jobs. There are empty seats on the Politburo after the deaths of Andropov and Defence Minister Dmitri Ustinov, as well as a host of lesser positions of power.

Kremlin watchers are now keeping their eyes on Grigori Romanov, Gorbachev's rival, a man with close links to the military industrial complex. Will he remain to balance Gorbachev, be demoted or end up running a dam in Siberia? Watch also Viktor Chebrikov, Politburo member and head of the KGB and heavy industry czar Vladimir Doligikh.

Another intriguing player is the Azerbaijani, Geidar Akiev, one of only two non-Russians on the Politburo, who reportedly dominates Soviet Near East policy. Given the demographic changes occurring in the Soviet Union, the upsurge of Muslim and non-Russian peoples, his role may become increasingly important.