ALMOST IMMORTAL?
The Ritual Transition of Power and the Dynamics of History in Three Cold War Media Events

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This article sheds theoretical and empirical light on the ritual media events constructed around the deaths of three Cold War political leaders in the 1980s: the Finnish president, Urho Kekkonen (1900–1986), the Swedish prime minister, Olof Palme (1927–1986), and the Soviet Union general secretary, Leonid Brezhnev (1906–1982). Investigating news articles published in the first days after the news of each death broke, as well as news articles on the funeral for each and the immediate aftermath, this study utilises historical news television and print media material, obtained from the national and media archives in Finland, Sweden and Russia. By bringing the study of media culture and history into a dialogue shared with anthropology and political history, this article produces new knowledge on the workings and outcomes of ritual media events in the context of Cold War history. The article places special emphasis on Victor Turner’s ritual analysis and the ways in which power was symbolically transformed in these societies with different political and ideological histories.

KEYWORDS ritual media event; death; Victor Turner; Cold War; Kekkonen; Palme; Brezhnev

The Death of a Leader as a Ritual Media Event

The death of a powerful ruler is never merely the end of one individual’s life. Instead, a momentum is borne; it marks a decisive moment in history, wherein the political future of society is at stake.1 According to Victor Turner2, this type of situation calls for ritualisation in society. Typically referred to as a rite of passage,3 this process is structured around three key temporal elements triggered by death, i.e. rupture, liminality, and transformation to a new order. In modern society, the mass media plays a significant role in performing and staging these rituals as intensifications of time and history generated by death and the related sense of emptiness. Hence, there is the concept of a ritualised media event around the death of a leader.4

The first theory concerning media events was developed by the communication scholars, Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz. Their idea was that a ‘media event’ is powerful
enough to interrupt the everyday media flow, brings the viewer into touch with society’s central (sacred) values, and invites the audience to participate. While highly influential, their work has been critiqued in four main categories: (1) the assumed ceremonial and integrative functions of media events, (2) their attempt to exclude any disruptive or traumatic events from the focus of their theory, (3) the strong focus on television and broadcasting, and (4) the presentist tendency of their understanding of media events, which freezes events in time.

In this article, we build on Dayan and Katz’s interpretation of death and funerary as a ritual media event with heavy symbolic communication and intensification of time and history. We approach death events as ritual constellations that are orchestrated in concert with news media institutions and the political elites in power. We consider them to be important temporal social constructions with the power to bring members of society together on key political values and ideas, thus helping society to overcome a loss. In addition, we argue—in line with Dayan and Katz—that a ritual media event enables a society to imagine its new political future, through its symbolic communication. As a consequence, there is a ritual transition of power and the dangers of the destruction or loss of order in society are eluded.

While our thinking owes much to the original theory of Dayan and Katz, we acknowledge the significance of the fourth main critique against the theory, i.e. its tendency to focus on the present. In line with Sonnevend, Ytreberg, Zelizer, and others, we believe that ritual media events must be conceptualised in the context of the time and also the history of the studied phenomenon. The concept of the ‘eventisation’ of history is used in this article to refer to the idea of ‘those moments in which the flow of social life is being punctuated by significant happenings and by complexes of social action that somehow change the course of history’. Sonnevend, Ytreberg, and Zelizer have all emphasised the importance of considering historical time when studying media events. In such a way, the past, present, and future of a society can be considered to be relevant to the ritual media performance that arises upon the death of its political ruler. This article concurs with that line of thinking, as well as with Ytreberg’s suggestion that the German tradition of studying the media history of an event should be integrated into the analysis of the ritual media event surrounding a political death. In Hamm’s view, the development of media events should be regarded in a wider historical context, where different types of media are considered. Drawing on these insights, we wish to explicitly connect our work on ritual media events with the political history and context of the 1980s Cold War era.

In empirical terms, we wish to shed light on the ritual media events generated around the deaths of three political leaders in the 1980s in Finland, Sweden, and the Soviet Union, and examine them in the context of the Cold War era. We investigate the deaths of the Finnish president, Urho Kekkonen (1900–1986), the Swedish prime minister, Olof Palme (1927–1986), and the Soviet Union general secretary, Leonid Brezhnev (1906–1982). By bringing time-sensitive media event theory into a dialogue with anthropology and political history, we hope to provide a nuanced conceptual and empirical interpretation of the workings of ritual media events and how they embody the political histories of these Cold War societies.
The article is structured in the following manner. It first provides a historical outline of the Cold War as a political and media context in this study. The article then moves on to explain the material and method applied in the study. This is followed by close empirical analysis of three key phases in ritual media events e.g. interruption, liminality and incorporation. The article ends with reflection of the findings and their contextualisation in a broader framework of media event theory in the framework of the Cold War era.

The Cold War Historical Context of the Ritual Media Events

Three Different Political Positions

The historical context relevant to the ritual media events in the three case studies is the Cold War. The term, Cold War, refers to the historical period of confrontation between the Soviet Union (the Eastern Bloc) and the United States (the Western Bloc). During the Cold War, tensions between the Soviet Union and the US manifested in the military and political spheres, as well as in other areas of life, including the economic and cultural spheres. The confrontation was deeply influenced by the two ideological models of communism and capitalism. The role of the mass media was key in the communication and upkeep of a sharp attitudinal opposition between ‘us’ and ‘them’.18

Throughout the Cold War, the intensity of the confrontation varied between periods of normalisation, called détente, and times of tense confrontation (between the US, the Soviet Union, and their allies and proxies). With some exceptions, the 1970s was a time of détente, or peaceful coexistence.19 During these years, the USSR and the United States signed a number of treaties limiting the use of weapons with the objective of preventing a nuclear war. The détente was characterised by a decreased likelihood of conflict escalation and revealed mutual shared interests in economics, science, and culture.20 However, in the late 1970s, relations between the two countries changed direction. Confrontations between the superpowers in regions of the Third World, the Soviet Union’s deployment of troops to Afghanistan in 1979, and the US’s uptake of active ideological confrontation with the USSR after Reagan’s election in 1980, indicated the beginning of a new stage of the Cold War, often referred to as the ‘Second Cold War’. This was vividly illustrated in Reagan’s description of the USSR as an ‘evil empire’.21

Nordic societies, as welfare state democracies, had diverse relationships with the two poles and their allies. Sweden had declared itself neutral and Finland, in an effort to maintain balance between the two camps, emphasised its neutrality in public discourse, though it also kept close ties and held a special treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance with the Soviet Union. Sweden and Finland, although close neighbours with a longstanding history, held different geopolitical positions during the Cold War and different attitudes towards the Soviet Union.22

During the 1980s, the Finnish position on its Eastern neighbour began to gradually shift and there was more political leeway from the ‘Soviet leash’. As Finland’s president, Kekkonen worked hard to maintain a balance between the two blocs; the 1975 Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) in Helsinki was one of his triumphs of public relations. After Kekkonen stepped down in 1981, President Mauno Koivisto
assumed the leadership of Finland and followed in his footsteps regarding foreign policy, while also emphasising the role of parliament in domestic politics. Koivisto’s style of ruling differed from Kekkonen’s, whose style of leadership in the realm of domestic politics was more that of an autocrat. As for Sweden, the country remained publicly committed to neutrality. This was coupled with active international politic efforts for peace, in which Palme was a prime actor, not always in accordance with the more cautious Swedish political elite. Interestingly, Sweden’s active role in peacekeeping was bolstered by its strong military to give the country credibility as an international political actor in building peace in the Cold War world.

In this analysis, the Soviet Union represents the leading nation of the socialist bloc. From the 1980s, the Soviet Union gradually moved from Brezhnev’s concept of developed or advanced socialism to Gorbachev’s glasnost (referring to political openness and transparency) and perestroika (referring to political and economic reforms in the Soviet political economy). However, at the time of Brezhnev’s death in 1982, these ideological developments were still some years away. Brezhnev was succeeded by two short-term leaders, Juri Andropov (1982–1984) and Konstantin Chernenko (1984–1985). In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev came to power and initiated the reforms, finally leading to the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War as we know it.

Different Systems of Government

When it came to their systems of rule, Sweden, Finland, and the Soviet Union also differed in their constitutions and systems of governance. Sweden, a constitutional monarchy and a historical North European superpower, was symbolically ruled in the 1980s (and still is) by a king, Carl XVI Gustav. In Sweden, the prime minister is first and foremost a political leader, as well as a representative of their party. In foreign policy, Palme, as prime minister, held the image of a defender of smaller third-world nations and a figure fighting for world peace. As for Finland, the nation had been a democratic republic since its independence from Russia in 1917. The political influence of the neighbouring Soviet Union was still strong, however, and would be up until the 1990s. At the time, a semi-presidential system gave strong powers to the president. During his time in office, Urho Kekkonen employed that power extensively to influence both foreign and domestic politics. The Finnish president represented both the political and symbolic leader of the country. In foreign policy, Kekkonen was as a bridge builder between East and West in the Cold War, as well as a safeguard of the Finnish nation against the Soviet Union. In the socialist republic of the Soviet Union, the general secretary of the Communist Party was the absolute leader of the country. Brezhnev represented his party and the country—which were one symbolically. The leader of the Soviet Union was also the ideological leader of the Cold War Eastern Bloc.

Media Systems and Ideological Control

Towards the end of the Cold War, the mainstream mass media came to play a significant role in constructing a common, national, Andersonian-imagined community and gathering the majority of the people in a nation around their TV sets and newspapers.
The media affected the way in which a nation saw itself in relation to its leader and the world. In a totalitarian system, like that of the Soviet Union, the task of the media and the press was to serve the state and its agenda.31 An authoritarian ideology regarding the media in the Soviet Union was based on Marxism–Leninism. Media representations were to be in accordance with the official communist ideology and the idea of objectivity at its core. To the rest of the world, the task of the media was to transmit an image of the Soviet Union and its allies as unified and intact, as well as in opposition to the West.32

Sweden and Finland, though both were Scandinavian welfare societies with a traditionally democratic–corporatist media system and liberal press, held (and still do up to a point) culturally different societies. Sweden, to this day, has a long tradition of the freedom of the press, dating back to 1766. Yet, the state regulates the media scene, in particular the public broadcasting as a state-funded public institution and a utility.33 Finland has a shared history with Sweden as it was part of its empire until 1809, when Finland became a grand duchy of Russia. In modern Finnish society, the media and press are liberal, though their output was accompanied by a measure of social responsibility or even self-censorship (i.e. they would not openly critique the Soviet Union, nor the president) during the Cold War. The social responsibility of the media and press was borne from close connections with the Finnish political and economic elite.34

**Materials and Method**

The media material that are analysed in this article, in connection with the three deaths, include TV news broadcasts from the public broadcasting companies, Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE) in Finland, Swedish Broadcasting Corporation (SVT) in Sweden, and the Soviet Gosteleradio (in particular, the programme *Vremya*). Broadcasting material from Finland and Russia was obtained from the media archives, while the Swedish broadcasting material was obtained from YouTube. The newspaper content that is analysed includes articles from the Finnish daily *Helsingin Sanomat*, and the tabloids *Ilta-Sanomat* and *Ilta-lehti*, the Swedish daily *Dagens Nyheter*, and the tabloids *Aftonbladet* and *Expressen*, and four Soviet daily newspapers, *Pravda*, *Izvestia*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, and *Trud*. All of the Soviet papers were produced by official representatives of the government structures of the Soviet Union.

When selecting data for inclusion in this article, we focused on national-level media. In the cases of Finland and Sweden, special emphasis was placed up selecting media outlets of as similar a status as was possible (i.e. largest circulation, daily vs. tabloid, and type of media). Due to the dissimilar political and related media system, the main correspondence between Soviet, Finnish, and Swedish media material is found in national-level media content, both that of TV output and newspapers. The data includes reports and articles from the first days after news of a leader’s death broke, as well as reports and articles on the funeral and its short aftermath (31 August–10 September 1986 for Finland, 28 February–3 March 1986 [death] and 14–16 March 1986 [funeral] for Sweden, and 11–17 November 1982 for the Soviet Union). The TV material includes the first news of each death, as well as the official broadcast of each funeral.35 All of the media
material is analysed in its original language for an in-depth interpretation of the events in their original contexts.

In the analysis and interpretation, we apply a theory-sensitive reading of the empirical material; here, we call this method ‘ritual analysis’.\(^{36}\) In this exercise, we identify patterns, recurring instances of symbolic narration, and representations in the news’ text and visual imagery. By elaborating on Turner’s\(^{37}\) seminal idea of ritual process (i.e. rupture, liminality, and transformation to a new order), in media events, we organise our analysis around three key moments that are characteristic of ritual media events: (1) interruption, as news of the death breaks; (2) liminality, as tributes are paid to the leader and his political legacy; and (3) incorporation, as there is a ritual transition of the power in the society.\(^{38}\) These three phases, we argue, are elemental in the ritual process of overcoming a symbolic and/or physical void and feeling of emptiness, as was triggered by the death of a ruler in these societies.

**Interruption: The News of the Death of a Leader Breaks in the Media**

The longest ruling president of Finland, Urho Kaleva Kekkonen, died in his official residence of Tamminiemi, Helsinki, on 31 August 1986 at the age of 86. Kekkonen had resigned from office due to illness five years earlier. In Finland, all the largest national media outlets (newspapers, radio, and TV) went quiet in the face of Kekkonen’s death. The media reported nationwide the news of the death within an hour and changed their programming to fit with the theme of death. One of the key elements in this ceremonial broadcasting was the mourning music played to the nation, who were also presented with a precise description of the post-mortem minutes. A TV news report concluded: ‘Already now it can be stated that Kekkonen is one of the greatest Finns in the nation’s history’.\(^ {39}\)

In the case of Olof Palme, his death was sudden and violent. On Friday 28 February 1986, at 11:20 pm, while they walked home from a movie theatre in Stockholm, shots were fired at Olof and Lisbeth Palme. Olof Palme was hit and taken to a hospital, where attempts to resuscitate him failed. He was declared dead after midnight, leaving Sweden without a prime minister. Upon Palme’s death, his cabinet began their first crisis meeting at the government office of Rosenbad. Deputy Prime Minister, Ingvar Carlsson, assumed the duties of prime minister and new leader of the Social Democratic Party. At 1 am, came the first radio broadcast about the murder and, at 4 am, the first TV broadcast. In the early morning, at around 5 am, the government held a press conference.

The general secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), Leonid Brezhnev, died of a heart attack in his sleep on the night of 10 November 1982, in a state-owned country house in Moscow Region Zarechye-6. Regardless of his long battle with illness, Brezhnev’s death was somewhat unexpected. The news of his death (and a subsequent four-day mourning period) did not appear on television and radio until a full day later, on 11 November at 10 am, and the news did not appear in print until the newspapers on 12 November. Many people in the Soviet Union, however, had realised that something must have happened. On 10 November, the country celebrated Police Day, but the television programme changed with no prior warning—all entertainment, sports, and children’s programmes were cut off, and all
radio channels broadcasted sad, classical music. According to the memoirs of contemporaries, similar events occurred earlier in 1982 when Michail Suslov, the main ideologist of the CPSU, died. Therefore, the citizens prepared themselves for sombre news, guessing that somebody from the Politburo had passed away. All of the information broadcast on TV or the radio or published in the press over those days was carefully dictated by the authorities, up to the point that the content of all of them was almost identical. The party’s official address to the people was read aloud on TV, after which it was published in all of the newspapers.

**Liminality: Public Tribute Legitimises Power**

The liminal phase in the death of a political leader refers to the ritual time between the old and new order. In Turnerian thinking, it consists an element of change, which may bring about instability. The most significant element that is common to all three of the ritual media events studied has to do with the fact that they all ‘marked’ the end of a historical era and the dawn of a new time, albeit in different forms. To make this transition smooth, public tributes played a part in all three of the ritual media events, acting to legitimise the political power of the establishment.

**Kekkonen: The King-Like Ruler**

Kekkonen’s portrayal in the Finnish media coverage in the aftermath of his death supported a narrative of Kekkonen as an exceptional ruler, who fought his way from humble beginnings to become a unifier of the nation, a bearer of safety, and a beloved father figure for all, reaffirming these power and style of Kekkonen’s leadership. The tabloid paper *Iltalehti* (1 September 1986), for example, stated that he was ‘one of history’s most prominent European statesmen’ and ‘the greatest Nordic politician and statesman in the post-war period’ (Europe refers here to the Western Europe and Nordic is used to refer to the prominent Scandinavian societies). These statements emphasise a certain Western political and ideological connection. The obituary in *Helsingin Sanomat* (1 September 1986) stated that ‘Kekkonen grew out of the Finnish system’. The atmosphere in Finland after Kekkonen’s death was such that he was considered to have been a superior ruler, an autocrat whose significance to Finland as a society was irreplaceable and beyond national comparison. Similar statements were made of Palme—he too was too great for his country: ‘He was the only Swedish and Nordic statesman of international calibre. Olof Palme was Sweden in our time, and our time in Sweden’ (*Aftonbladet*, 2 February 1986). Both Nordic leaders were hailed for their distinct personalities and their individuality was emphasised. This is in contrast to Brezhnev, who was mostly regarded as a loyal representative of the Party, though that was the most important qualification for a Soviet leader in the Cold War.

**Palme: The Contested Leader**

The news reporting of Palme’s death was the most complex of the three cases, as the cause of death was murder. The media simultaneously produced two narratives with
conflicting symbolical content. One news narrative that circulated emphasised the symbolical significance of Palme’s political legacy in Sweden and internationally. The second narrative was about why: how could this happen in Sweden? Palme’s murder and death came to represent an end of an era of innocence in Sweden. Ritualisation in the Swedish news media was, thus, not unanimous, but instead consisted of elements of ritual mourning in combination with more ordinary news work dealing with Palme’s death as a murder. One attempt to pair up the mixed messages in the news was to position the investigation of Palme’s murder as a rite of passage involved in the transition to the next phase of Swedish society. As reported by Dagens Nyheter (3 March 1986), ‘The nation is going through a Fall of Man’. Symbolically, it was a time for national self-reflection as the paper continues, ‘the fact that Swedish society does not tolerate violence will help the nation to survive the tragedy’ (Dagens Nyheter, 1 March 1986). Expressen (16 March 1986) wrote in its editorial that grief itself had become a phenomenon; in such a way, as a nation, the Swedes experienced something larger than life. Sweden had had few tragic, historical events to bring the nation together. Comparisons were made to Finland and the Winter War (fought against the Soviet Union). Expressen (16 February 1986) concluded: ‘We have healed our need for a historical communality. The occasion happened to be the murder of Palme.’ In these reflections, the Swedish papers explicitly acknowledge the ritual of the event, something that was absent in the Finnish and Soviet cases.

Brezhnev: The Loyal Servant of the Party

In Brezhnev’s case, the end to a ruler of 18 years was not explicitly presented in the media performance of this ritual media event. Instead, what was ritually repeated was the continuity of rule. In all news media, Brezhnev’s role as a link in a chain of good, loyal leaders in the Party was emphasised. All Soviet media distributed the address from state authorities: ‘a faithful successor to the great work of Lenin, a true patriot, an outstanding revolutionary and a fighter for peace, for communism, a significant political and state official of modern times, Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev, has passed away’ (Vremya, 11 November 1982; Izvestia; Pravda; Trud; Komsomolskaya Pravda, 12 November 1982). The ritual message delivered was that the ideals of the Communist Party continued to live, despite the demise of its leader. Confirming the idea of continuity, the day after the announcement of Brezhnev’s death, an official portrait and biography of Andropov—the newly elected general secretary—was published, along with a photograph of the participants in the extraordinary plenum at the farewell ceremony (Izvestia; Pravda; Trud; Komsomolskaya Pravda, 13 November 1982).

An image of Brezhnev as a loyal party fighter for world peace, dedicating himself to ‘the cause of mutual understanding and friendship between nations, fruitful and mutually enriching cooperation’ (Pravda, 14 November 1982), was constructed in the Soviet newspapers with the help of condolences from representatives of foreign delegations (Pravda, 13, 14 November 1982; Komsomolskaya Pravda, 13, 14 November 1982; Izvestia, 14, 15 November 1982). Expressions of sympathy and loss poured in from all over the Soviet Union. Tributes from different social groups and republics of the Soviet Union created a sense of unity throughout the country (Vremya, 11, 12 November 1982). However, all of
these materials had been written following the same template, starting with an expression of deep sorrow, followed by a description of Brezhnev as an outstanding political figure, a faithful continuer of the cause of Lenin, a fighter for peace and communism, and a patriot. Next, there was a description of Brezhnev’s contribution to the development of a certain political atmosphere, along with his personal qualities, such as being ‘a great friend, a wise and sympathetic mentor’ (Pravda, 12, 15 November 1982; Izvestia, 12 November 1982), and ‘a crystal communist, a man of exceptional cordiality, modesty and personal charm’ (Pravda, 12 November 1982). Finally, there would be a demonstration of his devotion to the Party, along the lines of, ‘In these days that are hard for the Party and for the people they will unite even more around our Leninist Party and its Central Committee, mobilising all their forces and energy for the great cause of building communism in our country’ (Pravda, 12, 13 November 1982; Izvestia, 12 November 1982).

The main goal of all of these stories in the media was to demonstrate a smooth transition of power and continuity: even though its political leader was dead, the Party would live on. As stated in an address to the Soviet people by the Central Committee of the CPSU, the Presidium of the Higher Council of the Soviet Union, and the Ministers Council of the USSR: ‘The people believe in the party, in its powerful collective mind and will, support its domestic and foreign policy with full heart. Soviet people know well: Lenin’s banner, the banner of the October that has seen worldwide historic victories, is in good hands’ (see Vremya, 11 November 1982; Izvestia; Pravda; Trud; Komsomolskaya Pravda, 12 November 1982).

Yet, the scale of the tragedy of the death of Brezhnev, not only for the Soviet Union but for the whole world, was illustrated not only by the incoming condolences from leaders of other states but also by the number of international delegations who attended the funeral. They were shown on TV in a strict order: the leaders of the Warsaw Pact and satellite countries, then the leaders of the communist parties, and then all other countries (Vremya, 15 November 1982). Furthermore, emphasising the role of Brezhnev in foreign policy and the Cold War, Soviet newspapers quoted the newspapers of the Soviet Union’s ideological opponent—the US. According to Pravda (12 November 1982), the Washington Post wrote that ‘Brezhnev had a great political talent, a huge talent for a leader. During years of Brezhnev’s leadership, the USSR became a truly great power, whose authority and influence in the world reached the highest point in the entire history of the Soviet state.’

Different Styles and Levels of Legitimising Power

In Finland, Kekkonen’s personal thinking had come to be identified with the official state policy, or even regarded as the political truth; therefore, the will of the nation and people was embodied in him, as well as their trust of the neighbouring Soviet Union. ‘The king’ was to be buried, but the legacy of his foreign policy would carry on. In contrast, Palme was a controversial figure in the Swedish news media; he was at once popular and loved but also hated. Palme was a loud critic of the Vietnam War, and, therefore, his relationship with the US was ambivalent. ‘The negative denouncing of Palme has been a common ritual at breakfast tables in homes around Sweden, a way to create a pleasing
feeling of togetherness …’ wrote Dagens Nyheter (1 March 1986), concluding that it was time for national self-reflection.

This is a major point where the case of Palme differs from the others: the deaths of Kekkonen and Brezhnev did not invite the people to consciously reflect on the values of the nation, to see how the society could go forward. Those death events offered a possibility for a smooth(er) transition. Palme’s assassination represented a historical turning point, brought about by two gunshots. There had been some political violence in Sweden, but this was beyond comparison and represented the end of an era: violence had reached Sweden (e.g. Aftonbladet, 2 March 1986). Palme’s legacy of non-violence has come undone; ideas on how the Swedes should continue with Palme’s aspirations for international peace in the Cold War world were widely discussed. It is interesting how, in a similar manner to Kekkonen, Palme’s vision was seen as so grand that Sweden was too small for it. Palme was seen as a kind of stranger amongst the people; he was perceived as feisty, someone who did not always have the patience for the moderate Swedish people. Only after his passing did he become, in media representations at least, one of the people. As for Kekkonen, his figure was elevated in the national media to such heights that he could not really be seen as one of the people but rather a godly figure above his subjects. In Brezhnev’s case, his personal powers were downplayed in the media: in the Soviet Cold War ideology, the head figure would always represent the Party, a collective that was above everything else.

All in all, the construction of the leadership of the deceased was much more controversial and ambivalent in the case of Palme than with Kekkonen and Brezhnev. The image of Brezhnev was the most intact and controlled, but, at the same time, he was a servant of the Party and a continuer of the work of Lenin. In the case of Kekkonen, he resembled the absolute exemplar, who had no real flaws or weaknesses, and, in the end, only represented himself. Of the three leaders, Kekkonen is the one who most resembled a king type of a ruler who was above party politics. Importantly, Palme was the only one of the three to be described as a private person. This is an important distinction, because the other two leaders had actually ceased to be ordinary people and instead had become ‘almost immortal.’ Palme was very mortal indeed—and vulnerable. When we consider the transformation of power, a more human construction of a leader in public mourning may well influence the ways in which a new future for society is imagined, along with the incorporation of new leadership.

Incorporation: Ritual Transformation of Power in Cold War Ritual Media Events

Regarding the transition of power and continuity, in the Soviet Union, even though a political leader had died, the important message was that the Party lived on and kept functioning. However, the Soviet public also had a sense that the funeral of their political leader, who had ruled the Soviet Union for 18 years, brought with some kind of an end to an era. That era has been described as ‘Breshnev stagnation’, referring to the latter period of Breshnev’s rule, characterised by a certain resentment of political and economic reforms that reflected the inefficiency and inflexibility of the Soviet system of governance. As such, the mourning Soviet public not only lamented their deceased elderly
leader, but also the era of stability that has continued until that point. The question hanging in the air was: ‘What happens next?’ There was an atmosphere of confusion over how the society would develop and what changes would occur. If, in liberal democracies, it is the media that provide a tone and give the society a voice for their expressions of grief, in the case of the Soviet Union, this function was performed by the Party.

In Palme’s case, as his death was sudden and violent, the end of an era was mourned along with the death of innocence, or rather, the death of an illusion. In Sweden, the legacy of Palme was the values that he represented in connection with the Social Democratic Party. Swedes also asked: ‘Where was the nation headed?’ ‘What was the role of the royalty?’ ‘What about political leadership (i.e. the party)?’

For Finland, although a democratic republic, the power of Kekkonen represented that of an autocrat, a king-like ruler who stood for the nation’s collective mind and will. The transition of power (when it came to the office) had already happened, but legacy of Kekkonen’s Finland was still very much alive and this was its final blow. Kekkonen was commemorated, especially in the field of foreign policy; he was thought of as one of a kind, so there could not be a successor. Kekkonen’s death represented the symbolic end of an era for Finland in many ways. The society, for instance, had reached a major turning point in the 1980s and opened up (again) to Western influences and structures. At the same time, the influence of the Soviet Union was weakening, and the nation was distancing itself from the East. The new political system that was emerging in Finland was different, more balanced between the power of the parliament and the president.

Thus, the story that was told of the rule of power in each ritual media event was different. In Sweden, the base of power was divided (between the royalty and democracy), in contrast to both Finland and the Soviet Union, where power resided either with the almost absolute leader (autocracy) or the party machinery (totalitarianism).

Conclusions: Political Pasts Shape Futures Through Ritual Media Events

In this article, we have examined the performances of three ritual media events constructed around the deaths of three political leaders, Kekkonen, Palme, and Brezhnev, in the 1980s era of the Cold War. We have analysed how the ritualised transition of power was carried out in media events, which have been discussed in the context of three different histories, and related diverse political ideologies and different media systems. Based on our findings, we make two main conclusions that are worth reflecting more deeply upon.

First, we argue that media event theory provides a fruitful framework for the analysis of different media events that have been carried out, in their diverse historical and political contexts. Although the political and media systems differed in each death event that was studied, many similarities could be identified in the function of these ritual media events for shaping the national character. The mass media was of significant importance for producing similar outcomes. In all three cases, the media was able to rouse people across the nation to mourn and reminisce about their great leader. A narrative of unity was constructed by applying similar symbols of mourning and power. It is, therefore, not an
exaggeration to say that these media events managed, in a more or less controlled way, to strengthen the power of each leader and their legacy, offering the people a way to participate in mourning their leader. The ritual media events produced—momentarily, during the first weeks after each death—an experience of one nation under its leader. After the media ritual and its different phases of interruption, liminality, and the incorporation of a new order, the studied media events provided a symbolic means by which the people could move on and society could transition into a new phase of Cold War history under a new leadership. In the case of Kekkonen, this was true at the symbolic level: Kekkonen had already resigned from power, and Koivisto was the President of Finland. During his illness, Kekkonen was completely out of the public eye, so no farewell had actually occurred before the ritual media event.

Second, empirical analysis points to many differences between the three symbolic performances, and their uses and functions when contextualised. This underscores the importance of historical and political contextualisation when interpreting ritual media events. When we look at how the ritual transition of power was carried out in each case, the differences are explicit. For Kekkonen, the ritual media event constructed around his death first and foremost to glorified Kekkonen’s significance to the nation in the Cold War world. It was a ritual farewell to his era and his political achievements; both his foreign and domestic politics were praised in the national media. Much media coverage also described Kekkonen’s unique relationship with the people. As a sort of autocrat, he rose above the mundane and ‘dirty’ party politics. In the context of the Cold War, the ritual transition of power was carried out in a way that assured the public there would be a continuation of Kekkonen’s foreign policy, as means of balancing the Western and Eastern Blocs.

Palme’s death as a ritual media event can be seen to have served a multitude of functions, some of which were not synchronised or complementary. The ritualisation of Palme’s death can at best be described as unplanned due to the unexpected nature of his death. We argue that it was his untimely, sudden death that led to certain tensions in Palme’s legacy. While ceremonial tributes were paid to Palme as a peace builder, public hatred of him (so called ‘Palme hate’) was also discussed in the media as part of the ritual commemoration. This variety in emotions associated with Palme’s death allowed the public to manage Palme’s death in a more resilient manner and perhaps helped society move forward into a new phase in Swedish Cold War history carried out by the new leadership. In connection with the ritual transition of power, the role of the Social Democratic Party was important. Although Palme had tragically lost his life, the legacy of his politics in the Cold War era would continue to live in his party; hence, the significance of the visibility of social democratic symbols and values in the Swedish national media event.

In the Soviet Union, the main task of the ritual media event was to deliver a unified message of the continuity of the Party and the state to the people. The ritual media event thus constructed a portrayal of the enduring Communist Party in which Brezhnev was a loyal servant, both proceeded and preceded by others. This was vital in the era of the Cold War: the purpose of the ritual transition of power, upon the death of a Soviet leader, was to demonstrate and symbolically manifest the power of the Soviet Union at
the helm of the whole Eastern Bloc, confirming the unity of its peoples and their loyalty to the communist ideology.

The Cold War context shaped all three of the events at this time. A crucial question for the future of a nation, almost an existential one, was how the nation would go forward: how would a new leader navigate the atmosphere of confrontation and the political realities of the Cold War? At the same time, the winds of change were beginning to blow in the mid-1980s and there was a sense of a shift in the international political scene. This made it crucial to collectively gather around a ritual, to bid farewell to something of the old and make way for something new to come along. The symbolic significance of a leader figure of a nation state was great, in all three cases. For Finland, the aim was to survive between the two blocs of power; for Sweden, to maintain an active and legitimate role as a neutral and peace building nation; and for the Soviet Union, to convince its citizens as well as the international scene that the superpower was not weakening. The ritual media events were orchestrated for the mourning national public, but also for an international audience, to convey how they were surviving and thriving as a nation.

To conclude with, based on our empirical analysis of these three ritual media events, we argue that historical and political conditions not only contextualise these events, but also shape the ways in which they are performed in the national news media, along with the ways in which they manifest cohesion (e.g. among the people, the party), contestation (e.g. in a nation) and, most importantly, the ritual transition of power in these studied Cold War societies. What is more, the historical and political conditions also influence the outcome of those ritual media events, as the societies move on to new phase in history under a new ruler.

In the case of Finland, this was carried out as a magnificent symbolic farewell that glorified Kekkonen’s personality and his political legacy as a negotiator between the Eastern and Western Blocs. The message for society was to respect and honour Kekkonen’s legacy, while Finland would continue to carry out his Cold War politics, seeking to balance the two blocs. In the case of Sweden, the ritual media event performed in the national media reflected Palme’s more divisive personality and his violent death. To pair this up with his commemoration at the nation’s ruler, more of a focus was placed on Palme’s political party, its continuing role in leading Swedish Cold War politics, and its neutrality and commitment to international peace making. Finally, for the Soviet Union, the political context shaped the ritual performance around Brezhnev’s death, driving a need to underline the power of the Party in society and the Eastern Bloc. The point of the Soviet media event was to confirm that there was cohesion and stability, not to change the power balance.

We may, thus, consider these three death events to represent momentous, decisive moments in the last decade of the Cold War, which are of relevance to a political era in the history of the twentieth century. If we, as the scholars of historical media events, want to better understand the power of ritual media events that occur in the future, we must continue to work with empirically-grounded, historical, and context-sensitive readings of such events, to analyse their characteristics and interpret them as momentary intensifications of history.
Disclosure Statement

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Notes

1. Hertz, *Death and Right Hand*; Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power*; Metcalf and Huntington, “Celebrations of Death,” 134–5; Turner, *The Ritual Process*.
2. Turner, *The Ritual Process*.
3. Turner, *The Ritual Process*
4. e.g. Sumiala, *Media and Ritual*; Dayan and Katz, *Media Events*.
5. Dayan and Katz, *Media Events*, 5–9.
6. Hepp and Couldry, “Introduction”; Cottle, “Mediatized Rituals”; Scannell, *Television and the Meaning of ‘Live’*; Sonnevend, *Stories without Borders*.
7. cf. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power*; Metcalf and Huntington, *Celebrations of Death*.
8. e.g. Dayan and Katz, *Media Events*; Scannell, *Television and the Meaning of ‘Live’*; Sonnevend, *Stories Without Borders*; Zelizer, *Seeing the Present*.
9. Sewell, *Logics of History*, 8.
10. Sonnevend, *Stories Without Borders*.
11. Ytreberg, “Change Is Gonna Come”; Ytreberg, “Historical Understanding.”
12. Zelizer, “Seeing the Present.”
13. Ytreberg, “Historical Understanding.”
14. Hamm, *Reformation als Medienereignis*.
15. Hamm, *Reformation als Medienereignis*.
16. e.g. Scannell, *Television and the Meaning of ‘Live’*; Ytreberg, “Change Is Gonna Come”; Ytreberg, “Historical Understanding”; Zelizer, “Seeing the Present.”
17. e.g. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*.
18. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain*; Silina, *Vneshnepoliticheskaya propaganda*; Belmonte, *Selling the American Way*; Jowett and O’Donnell, *Propaganda & Persuasion*.
19. cf. McCauley, “From Perestroika towards a New Order, 1985–1995”; Egorova and Chubar’yan, *Holodnaya vojna i politika razryadki*.
20. Egorova, *Obespechenie mezhdunarodnoj bezopasnosti*.
21. Samuljov, Ne Kongtorve uroki politiki razryadki.
22. cf. Tuikka, *Kekkosen konstit*.
23. e.g., Iloniemi and Immonen, *Mauno Koivisto presidenttinä*.
24. Bjereld and Möller, “Swedish Foreign Policy: The Policy of Neutrality and Beyond.”
25. Gorbachev, *Ponyat’ perestrojku*.
26. Kent, *A Concise History of Sweden*.
27. Dalsjö, “The Hidden Rationality of Sweden’s Policy of Neutrality during the Cold War”; Ekengren. “How Ideas Influence Decision-Making: Olof Palme and Swedish foreign policy, 1965–1975.”
28. Meinander, *Tasavallan tiellä: Suomi kansalaissodasta 2000-luvulle*; Kirby, *A Concise History of Finland*.
29. Egorova and Chubar’yan, *Holodnaya vojna i politika razryadki*; Thomson, *The Soviet Union under Brezhnev*.
30. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*. 
31. McNair, *Glasnost, Perestroika and the Soviet Media*.
32. Salminen, *Vaikeneva valtiomahti*.
33. Hallin and Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems*.
34. Herkman, “The Structural Transformation of the Democratic Corporatist Model”; Lounasmeri, “A Careful Balancing Act: Finnish Culture of Self-Censorship in the Cold War.”
35. The material on Kekkonen was gathered and coded by Lotta Lounasmeri, on Palme by MSc student Thomas Södergård, and on Brezhnev by Galina Lukiyanova.
36. Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*.
37. Turner, *The Ritual Process*.
38. Metcalf and Huntington, *Celebrations of Death*.
39. see Sumiala and Lounasmeri, 2016.
40. Dyatlov, “Kak khoronili Brezhneva.”
41. Kantola, *Matala valta*.
42. Metcalf and Huntington, *Celebrations of Death*.
43. cf. Sell, *From Washington to Moscow*, 9-21.
44. see Ytreberg, “Change Is Gonna Come”; Ytreberg, “Historical Understanding”; Zelizer, “Seeing the Present.”
45. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*.
46. Hamm, Reformation als Medienerignis; Ytreberg, “Change is Gonna Come”; Ytreberg, “Historical Understanding.”

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