

LENIN'S EMBALMER

Ilya Zbarsky & Samuel Hutchinson

If man has been able to turn the noble principles of Christ into the Inquisition, it is not difficult to understand how the Marxist ideals of equality and justice could be turned into Soviet terror. And, no matter how you despise our Western democracies, reading Zbarsky's biography, you will understand that some utopian alternatives can be much worse. The ordinariness of its outdated prose describes extremely well the hypocrisy and the fear that soaked, as embalming fluids soak a corpse, Soviet society from the roots to the top. In this diary from behind the iron curtain you can grasp the real meaning of an Orwellian society where even the language - "dictatorship of the proletariat", "Committee for Immortalization" - has sinister nuances. There are many books that can illuminate on the theory of Marxism, its pros and cons, but only a few, of which this slim volume is one, can open a window on the sad life of decent, well educated, people in real world communism. And the macabre and gloomy efforts to preserve the corpse of Lenin, "the symbolic centre of Soviet power", well reflect the murky atmosphere pervading a Soviet empire struggling to keep alive the fiction of communist utopia. As, looking at the other face of the coin, similar efforts to restore the corpses of the murdered nouveaux riches of the 90s well reflect the fiction of Russian democratization.

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LENIN'S ILLNESS AND DEATH

Valentinov-Volsky tells us that Stalin took it upon himself to summon a meeting, held behind closed doors, of the Politburo, at which he was the first to moot the idea of embalming Lenin's body. To this Trotsky angrily replied: "If I understand Comrade Stalin correctly, he proposes to replace the relics of Saint Sergei Radonezhsky and Saint Serafim Sarovsky with the remains of Vladimir Ilich Lenin. "Trotsky is right," said Bukharin. "To turn Lenin's remains into a relic would be an insult to his memory. We should not even contemplate such a thing." The indignation of Trotsky, Bukharin and Kamenev left Stalin unmoved, however.

Held in late October 1923, the secret conference was attended by six of the eleven members of the Politburo: Trotsky, Bukharin, Kamenev, Kalinin, Stalin and Rykov. Nearly four months later, on 20 January 1924, Lenin seemed to be trying to tell his doctors that he could no longer see, though Professor Averbach, a celebrated oculist, could detect no deterioration in his vision. At six in the evening of the following day, however, Lenin was seized with violent convulsions. His breathing grew more and more irregular and his pulse rate rose to 130 beats a suffered a stroke. His face turned red, and for a moment he seemed to be trying to sit up. Then suddenly he stopped breathing. His head fell back and his face turned deathly pale. The autopsy established that he "died from cardio-respiratory arrest following a brain haemorrhage in a context of atherosclerosis".

There is a bizarre postscript to this bizarre end. For a long time after Lenin's death rumour had it that he had suffered from creeping paralysis brought on by syphilis. The doctors who performed the autopsy, however, categorically denied this in an appendix to their report: "No sign of syphilis was found in the analysis of the blood, or of the brain and spinal fluids, or in the results of the autopsy." Nevertheless, Bunin and Shulgin,

two emigrant Russian writers, have maintained the opposite view, as have other commentators. It is true that the treatment Lenin received, based on the administration of iodine, mercury, arsenic and bismuth, was almost indistinguishable from the remedies then used to deal with "*la Maladie honteuse*". Yet so politicized are opinions on this sensitive question that even today it is impossible to decide the truth of the rumours.

The "cult of Lenin" was inaugurated immediately after his death. The Party laid on a grandiose funeral; Petrograd was renamed Leningrad. Moreover, the idea of preserving Lenin's body, first aired by Stalin at the secret meeting of the Politburo in late October 1923, began to be seriously debated. On the evening of 23 January, during a meeting of the committee responsible for organizing the funeral, the head of the political police declared: Kings are embalmed because they are kings. In my opinion, the question is not so much if we should preserve Vladimir Ilich's body but how."

The archives of the Lenin Institute, however, show that the Politburo decided on the embalming on the evening of Lenin's death. By the 27th the "temporary mausoleum", as historians have called it, was ready. The corpse was, however, already showing the first signs of decomposition: the skin of the face and hands had darkened wrinkles could be seen on various parts of the body, and observers noted that the lips had become slightly parted. This evidence of decay set the Soviet authorities off on a race against time. A "committee of three", made up of the Bolshevik leaders Molotov, Yenukidze and Krasin, tried frantically to find a way of saving the corpse from decomposing. Krasin, a former engineer with no specific qualification in biology, was the first to come up with a solution: refrigeration. The "committee of three" therefore ordered a series of tests to be carried out on corpses, although even before the results of these tests were known they ordered refrigerating equipment from abroad.

MY DAYS AT THE MAUSOLEUM

I entered the mausoleum for the first time in January 1934 as assistant to Professor Vorobiov and my father. The first thing that struck me was the solemnity of the place. In the middle of a room plunged in semi-darkness stood Lenin's catafalque, an impressive bronze structure with moulded pillars and a cone-shaped lid, inside which narrow beams of pallid light converged, through a flat glass cover, on the dead man's face and hands.

As we took up our positions around the sarcophagus I could hear the hum of an electric mechanism, whereupon pistons situated at the four corners gradually raised the glass lid. We took hold of the body by the legs and shoulders and transferred it to an operating table on castors. A pair of heavy steel doors then opened, and we wheeled the corpse into an adjoining room with white-tiled walls that had been washed down with surgical spirit and antiseptics. The preservation process involved, first of all, removing Lenin's jacket and trousers, which were kept in place with laces tied behind the back. As I moved the arms I could tell from the touch of the skin, which was yellowish-white in colour, that it had retained its natural elasticity. I found the sensation disagreeable. Since, during my university studies, I had often handled dead bodies without experiencing the slightest discomfort, I was surprised to find it different with the body of Lenin. Not till I was outside the mausoleum again did I realize the reason for my repugnance: it was because Lenin was not an ordinary "stiff", but the venerated - or hated - symbol of an entire nation.

Professor Vorobiov and my father had been visiting the mausoleum twice a week since 1924 to inspect Lenin's face and hands, the only parts of the body visible to the public. The routine they carried out on these occasions consisted merely of smearing the skin with "balsam" to prevent it from drying up and wrinkling. A general overhaul was a different matter, however. This took place about every eighteen months, and while it was going on the mausoleum was completely closed to the public.

Beneath his uniform Lenin was wrapped in rubber bandages, and we would inject "balsam" into the body inside this covering to ensure that the skin as a whole was constantly impregnated with the fluid. Once the bandages were removed, the body was lowered into a large glass bath full of glycerine and potassium acetate. This was the solution known as "balsam", and which had been devised by Professor Vorobiov in 1924.

As we have seen, the first embalming of Lenin, carried out just after his death according to the method most popular at the time, had done little to promote long-term preservation. Abrikosov had injected into the dead man's aorta 30 measures of formalin, 20 measures of alcohol, 20 of glycerine, 10 of chloride and 100 of water. This mixture was intended to maintain the body in a state of stability until the funeral five days later.

The somewhat primitive nature of this process, together with the endless arguments between politicians and scientists about the best method to adopt, resulted in so serious a deterioration of the body that immediate burial had to be seriously considered. The corpse had turned sallow, with more marked discolouration around the eyes, nose, ears and temples. Wrinkles and a purplish stain had appeared over the frontal and parietal lobes of the brain. The skin had sunk in over an area, roughly a centimetre in diameter, at the place where the skull had been opened to extract the brain. The tip of the nose was covered in dark pigment, and the walls of the nostrils had become paper thin; the eyes were half open and sinking into their sockets; the lips had parted, leaving the teeth clearly visible; brown spots had appeared on the hands, and the fingernails were tinged with blue.

All these details were carefully noted by a special committee responsible for establishing the state of the corpse at the end of March, before the second embalming began. It was also on this occasion that my father asked the architect Alexander Pasternak, Boris's brother, to record in watercolour the tones of nine different parts of Lenin's body. This was because Vorobiov wanted to avoid being held solely responsible for the deterioration of the body should his own team's attempt at embalming fail.

Finally, on 26 March 1924, about two months after Lenin's death, Professor Vorobiov and his assistants Arnold Shabadach, Alexander Juravlev and Yakov Zamkovsky, aided by Professor of Anatomy Piotr Karuzin and my father, were at least able to set to work. The proceedings, which Vorobiov expected to last four months, took place in a cold gloomy cellar underneath the temporary mausoleum.

My father told me later how much he was affected by the sight of the partially decayed corpse, the smell of decomposition emanating from it, and the enormous responsibility resting on the embalmers' shoulders. Now that he, who had moved heaven and earth to get Vorobiov involved in this venture, found himself face to face with the body, he was momentarily at a loss: he had had no experience of working on corpses.



Vorobiov, on the other hand, was in his element. He began by getting rid of the sutures that had been used to sew up the head and chest after the autopsy. Then, having removed the lungs, liver, spleen and other viscera, he ordered the inside of the ribcage to be flushed out with distilled water. He next fixed the tissues with formalin, a powerful antiseptic which also inhibits autolysis. Wads of cotton wool steeped in a 1% solution of formaldehyde were laid over the face, hands and body. After the body cavities had been cleaned out with acetic acid, formalin was injected into such areas of tissue as showed signs of softening. In late March the outside temperature was below zero, and as this was too low for the work of anatomical conservation Vorobiov had stoves installed in the cellar to bring the temperature up to 16 degrees C.

The next step was to immerse the body in a 3% solution of formaldehyde. The immersion of the body in the formalin bath did not produce the desired results. The tissues had not absorbed the fluid sufficiently, which meant that incisions would have to be made in the skin and muscles. This prospect worried Vorobiov, however, for he was afraid that he might later be criticized for mutilating the sacred remains of the leader of the world proletariat. He asked Professors V.N. Rozanov and B.S. Weissbrod, who had been charged with supervising the operation as a whole, to give him permission to go ahead. Rozanov's reply was not encouraging: "I'm more worried about the living than about the dead in all this," he said. Vorobiov finally took his courage in both hands and made incisions in the abdomen, shoulders, thighs, and back, and in the palms and the webs between the fingers.

Meanwhile the liquid in the bath had been modified. The content was now 20% alcohol, which has the property of improving the colour of the skin and making it more permeable. After six days the percentage of alcohol was increased to 50%, and 20% of glycerine was added. The body remained immersed in this solution for two weeks, and was then put into a mixture of glycerine and water. The tissues gradually recovered their elasticity. Next, large jars of potassium acetate were poured into the bath, which by the end of June contained 240 litres of glycerine, 110 kilograms of potassium acetate, 150 litres of water and, as a disinfectant, between 1% and 2% quinine chloride. This was the formula adopted for all subsequent treatments of the body, treatments which, even now, still takes place beneath the mausoleum every eighteen months.

Vorobiov was not the first Russian scientist to use this process for preserving tissues. In 1895 Professor Melnikov-Razvedenkov, an anatomical pathologist at Moscow University, had concocted a similar solution containing potassium acetate, glycerine and alcohol. In the course of his researches Melnikov-Razvedenkov had observed that potassium acetate is highly hygroscopic, and that this power to absorb and retain water helps prevent loss of moisture. Similarly, he noted that glycerine preserves the elasticity of tissues and permits the skin to keep

its natural colour. It may be said, therefore, that Professor Vorobiov's real distinction lies in his adopting and improving upon Melnikov-Razvedenkov's method.

One of the main difficulties encountered by Lenin's embalmers was the appearance of dark spots on the skin, especially on the deceased's face and hands. In the event Vorobiov managed to solve the problem: in between baths the spots were eliminated by the use of a variety of different reagents. For example, if a patch of wrinkling or discolouration occurred it was treated with acetic acid diluted with water. Hydrogen peroxide could be used to restore the tissues' original colouring. Damp spots were removed by means of disinfectants like quinine or carbolic acid. Once these visible defects had been attended to, there remained the restoration of the eyes and mouth. Stitches were inserted under the dead man's moustache to close the lips. False eyes replaced the real ones to prevent the sockets from becoming too sunken; then the eyelids were closed again and sewn in place.

DEMOCRATIZATION AND THE NOUVEAUX RICHES

I am now eighty-four years old. For four-fifths of my life I suffered, like most of my fellow citizens, under the inhuman political regimes imposed by Stalin and his successors. During all those years I have always kept in mind the Party's lies about "the radiant future of Communism"; kept in mind, too, the arrests, the show trials, the mass executions.

More than ten years have gone by since the process of democratization started by Mikhail Gorbachev began. In Russia, freedom of the individual, of the press and of religion have become reality. I, as much or more than anyone, relish the possibility now given to us of living without fear of being arrested unjustly, and of travelling freely all over the world — provided, of course, that one can afford it. For that is the other side of the coin as far as the "new Russia" is concerned. Instead of Berlin Wall separating East from West both symbolically and physically, we now have the wall of money. Since the introduction in January 1992 of liberal reforms that have resulted in hyper-inflation and a precipitous fall of the rouble against the dollar, our people have become a great deal poorer. To take science alone, state funding has been reduced by 95% since 1991. Our scientists, who once held distinguished positions in society and had salaries to match, now earn less than the equivalent of 100 dollars a month, and are obliged to engage in business activities in order to stay alive. The youngest and the most gifted go abroad. Those who remain are losing faith in science, partly because of the lack of adequate resources and equipment.

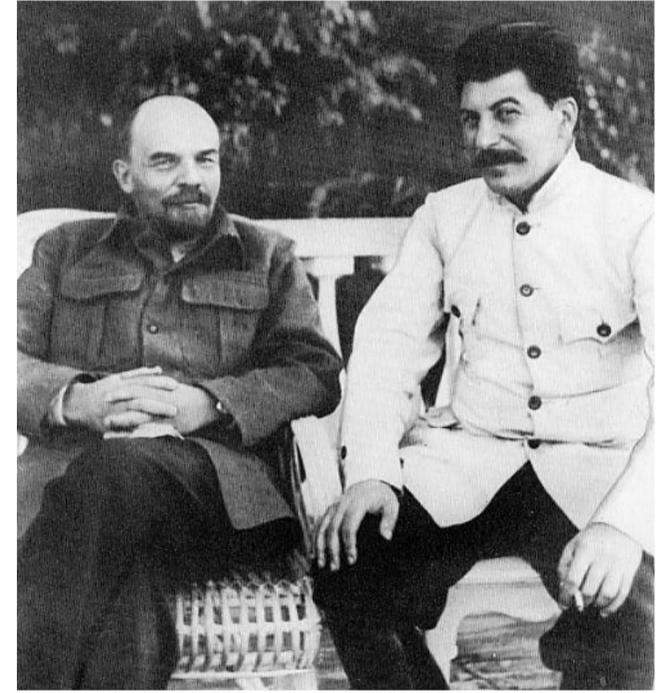
It is the same story with the laboratory of the mausoleum. Before 1991 the state contributed 100% of its budget; now it gives only 20%. As a result the lab found itself looking for other ways of ensuring its survival. At that point Yuri Lujkov, the Mayor of Moscow, worried about the deplorable state of the funeral provisions inherited from the Communist regime, had the bright idea of letting the staff of the mausoleum set up Ritual Service, a company that handles embalming at the mausoleum lab for the nouveaux riches. This proved to be very timely. The crime rate was shooting up - nearly twenty-five thousand murders had been committed in Russia during the previous year. Since many of these nouveaux riches were gangsters of one kind or another, and since gang warfare had become endemic, orders soon started to come in at an average rate of four embalmings a month. I am indebted to a scientist who now works in the mausoleum lab for a description of how this kind of embalming is carried out.

To begin with, the commercial director of Ritual Service meets the family of the murdered nouveau riche, and between them they draw up a list of what is to be done: restoration of colour to the skin of the hands and face; restoration of flexibility to the arms and neck, and so on. A number from one to six is written down beside each heading on the list, according to how the family responds to each suggestion. Using these figures, it is possible, apparently, to arrive at a fairly accurate idea of the client's resources. Charges range from 1,500 US dollars for a single day's work (for example, when the head has not been smashed to a pulp by bullets) to 10,000 US dollars for a whole week (if the whole body was blown to pieces by a bomb and has to be put together again). Once these details are agreed, the embalmers go to fetch the body from the mortuary. I was told that on one occasion a Russian mafioso knelt beside the corpse of a murdered friend and licked his wounds to show how much he had loved the dead man. At this edifying spectacle a young woman who worked in the mortuary, though used to the sight of corpses, fainted away.

The body of the nouveau riche is then taken to the mausoleum lab and laid on a table of thick grey marble - in fact, the one that was used for embalming Stalin. The scientists, who are not supposed to know the identity of the dead person, inject 8 litres of "balsam" into the arteries, helping it to circulate by massaging the arms and legs. In just a few seconds the hands turn from blue to ivory white. If the face has been badly damaged it is reconstructed with the aid of photographs, using pieces of bone and skin taken from other parts of the body. Then another scientist, the "beautician", goes to work with a box of makeup. Using foundation and lipstick, it is her job to restore the dead man's youth, and she must also ensure that any marks resulting from the murder disappear. Finally, a thin white tissue is placed on the forehead, since that is where the friends and relations will deposit a parting kiss. I ought to add that this kind of embalming bears little resemblance to the method used for the long-term preservation of a body. Quite apart from anything else, the corpse is not immersed in a special bath, as was the case with Lenin. It is merely "reconditioned" for the day of the funeral. On one occasion, however, Ritual Service did decide to check up on the efficiency of the preserving liquid it used, and exhumed one of its "clients" nine months after he had been embalmed. The body, it seems, was still in the same state as it had been just after the work had been completed.

Ritual Service also sells luxury coffins to the families of the nouveaux riches. Prices are steep, ranging from 5,000 dollars for a wooden coffin "Made in the USA" to 20,000 dollars for a crystal version made in Russia. The most popular model is the "Al Capone", an elaborate affair which got its name after someone saw a similar coffin in a video of The Godfather. In fact, prices paid for embalming and a luxury coffin form only a relatively small part of the total bill for burying a gangster who has been gunned down. Before going into more detail about the burial rites of the Russian mafia, I should point out that they are particularly elaborate in Yekaterinburg (Sverdlovsk) in the eastern Urals, the capital of the heavily industrialized Oblast district. I have therefore taken events in Yekaterinburg as a benchmark for these rites among Russia's nouveau-riche gangsters today.

For nearly six years this town has been the setting of bloody mafia war. Two gangs - "Centralny" ("Town Centre") and "Uralmash", named after the metallurgica) complex, the largest in the country, located in the northern suburbs of the town - are engaged in a fight to the death for control of the business in the region and of the clandestine export



of metals and precious stones from the mineral-rich Ural Mountains. All this is worth several million dollars a year, and is correspondingly dangerous. A local official involved in the fight against organized crime once told me that, taking only the leaders into account, Centralny has lost five of its bosses in this struggle for power, and Uralmash seven.

Nor is this war a simple matter of the settling of scores between local "families". The gangs' activities affect all of Russia, and even other countries. For example, Uralmash "protects" the market for the import of cars into Vladivostok, as well as freight in and out of Moscow International Airport; it also controls banks whose interests stretch as far as the London metals market. Backed by a unified financial system and a thousand active members in the Urals region alone, Uralmash, according to the Moscow police, is the most powerful gang in Russia.

Moreover, when one of them loses a godfather, both Uralmash and Centralny give him a send-off worthy of a head of state. I have been told that of all the funerals that have taken place in Yekaterinburg, that of Oleg Vagin, the godfather of Centralny, was by far the most sumptuous. The day after he was murdered his remains and those of his three bodyguards who died with him lay in state in the middle of the casino he ran. The four coffins were then carried by pallbearers along a route that ran for three kilometres through the town. Ten police cars closed the town centre to traffic so that the procession could pass through - in theory, a privilege that belongs only to the highest government dignitaries. After the funeral mass, which was celebrated by the city's most fashionable archimandrite, representatives of every clan were supposed to kiss the corpse. There is no escaping this ritual, for any abstention is at once interpreted as an avowal of guilt.