

Lenin Lab: the team keeping the first Soviet leader embalmed

As the Kremlin releases preservation costs for the first time, The Moscow Times looks back on this unlikely 90-year experiment



It's thought to cost the Russian state 13 million roubles per year to maintain Lenin's body.
Photograph: Sergei Karpukhin/AP

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He lies in a glass sarcophagus, his reddish moustache trimmed and his hands resting on his thighs. Dressed in an austere black suit, Vladimir Lenin, the first Soviet leader, looks at first to be a waxwork.

Yet this is in fact the preserved body of a man who died 92 years ago. If carefully monitored and re-embalmed regularly, scientists believe he can last in this state for centuries more.

But it might get expensive. Last month, the Federal Guard Service – which looks after all grounds near the Kremlin, including the mausoleum Lenin is kept in – announced for the first time that the costs for the “medical and biological works to maintain Lenin's body” would amount to 13 million roubles (\$197,000) in 2016.

The first idea didn't involve embalming, but deep freezing

When Lenin died in January 1924, no one planned to preserve his body for quite this long. In fact, the renowned pathologist, Alexei Abrikosov, who performed the autopsy on the body, cut its major arteries. “Later he would say that if he had known they would embalm the body, he wouldn’t have done it,” says Alexei Yurchak, professor of social anthropology at the University of California. “The blood-vascular system could have been used to deliver embalming chemicals to the tissue.”

After the autopsy, Lenin’s body was temporarily embalmed to prevent it from immediately decomposing while for four days the corpse was kept in an open casket at Union House in the centre of Moscow. Crowds of 50,000 people passed through the hall where he lay, despite freezing temperatures of -7°C .

But as droves of people kept coming from all over the country, the government moved the casket to a temporary wooden mausoleum on Red Square. As it was so cold, the body was still in tact and it was only 56 days later – as warmer weather slowly edged in – that Soviet officials decided to permanently preserve the body.

The first idea didn’t involve embalming at all, but deep freezing. Leonid Krasin, the international trade minister at the time, was granted permission to acquire special freezing equipment from Germany. Yet in early March 1924, when preparations were gaining momentum, two well-known chemists, Vladimir Vorobyov and Boris Zbarsky, suggested embalming him with a chemical mixture that would prevent the corpse from decomposing, drying up and changing colour and shape. After a series of government meetings and inspections, they got the go-ahead to give it a try. For several months, a team of scientists set about whitening his skin and calculating the correct chemical mixture. Under the pressure of reporting to Soviet officials, they worked day and night.

When the mausoleum on Red Square finally re-opened for visitors on 1 August 1924, the response was overwhelmingly positive. “Amazing! It’s an absolute victory,” Zbarsky was reported as saying.



Russians lay flowers at Lenin's mausoleum in Moscow's Red Square. Photograph: TASS / Barcroft Media

The Lenin Lab

Since 1924, a group of scientists has been tasked with maintaining the body. At the peak of its activity during Soviet times, the “Lenin lab” had around 200 specialists working on the project, according to Yurchak.

Today, the group is much smaller, but the work has hardly changed. Every few days scientists visit the mausoleum to check on the body, where it is preserved under carefully calculated temperature and lighting, and every 18 months Lenin is taken to a lab beneath the dimly-lit viewing room to be re-embalmed and washed.

Though scientists have managed to preserve Lenin's skeleton, muscles, skin and other tissues, all his internal organs have been removed. His brain was taken out to be examined by the Soviet “Brain Institute” – created not long after Lenin died with the specific role of studying his “extraordinary abilities”. Pieces of his brain are still preserved to this day at the Neurology Centre at the Russian Academy of Sciences.

The new management of the lab doesn't want journalists to turn their work into a joke, which they often do - Alexei Yurchak

The unique technique developed by Soviet scientists has also resulted in several “customers” from abroad. Besides Lenin, the lab in Moscow also embalmed, among others, Vietnamese president Ho

Chi Minh, Bulgarian leader Georgi Dimitrov, and North Korean leaders Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. Not to mention Soviet dictator Josef Stalin, whose embalmed body lay alongside Lenin's from 1953 to 1961.

All the embalming processes were carried out in complete secrecy, with scientists from the lab occasionally flying out to Vietnam or North Korea to provide maintenance. "Junior specialists – like I was at the time – weren't told any of the specifics," Vadim Milov, an embalmer who worked in the lab from 1987 to 1997, explains. "And yet I had enough information to travel to Vietnam to work on Ho Chi Minh's body."

Attempts to interview someone currently assigned to the lab were unsuccessful. After several written requests for comment, Nikolai Sidelnikov, director of the All-Russia Institute of Aromatic and Medicinal Plants, refused to provide access on the grounds it is "subject to commercial and state secrets".

Yurchak, who has been studying Lenin's body for years and has interviewed people working at the lab, says such secrecy hasn't always been the case.

"They gave plenty of interviews in the 1990s, one Russian television channel even filmed a detailed documentary featuring the facilities under the mausoleum. But the new management of the lab doesn't want journalists to turn their work into a joke, which they often do," he said.



Lenin addressing a crowd of people at a rally in Moscow, 1917. Photograph: Popperfoto

Post-Soviet Lenin

Lenin's lab hit hard times after the Soviet Union collapsed. In 1991 many of Russia's new democratic rulers called for the demolition of the mausoleum, and for Lenin to be buried elsewhere. This caused a big protest, recalls Yevgeny Dorovin, State Duma deputy from the Communist Party and chair of an NGO supporting preserving the mausoleum in its current state.

"A lot of people went to Red Square to protest this blasphemy," Dorovin says. "Fortunately, the commandant of the Kremlin garrison eventually came out and calmed everyone down, and told them that the mausoleum is safe."

But the government pulled the plug on the project's funding in 1991, putting the future of the mausoleum in question. The Communist Party responded by collecting donations. "We paid for everything except gas, water and electricity," Dorovin explains, though he refused to specify how much money the foundation raised and spent. The state only began funding the mausoleum again a couple years ago, he adds.

But the bigger threat to the future of the mausoleum is generational. The scientists are getting older, and there are no young researchers willing to replace them. "Young people are not that interested in mausoleum science, it's not prestigious anymore," Yurchak says.

There is one obvious solution, but the idea of burying the Soviet icon is not a popular one. If that were to happen, it would mean an unparalleled 92-year-long experiment will have come to an end. "It would represent a loss of science, studies and discoveries – that is what scientists fear," says Yurchak.

In the meantime, the mausoleum is closed – but only temporarily. Authorities are preparing Red Square for today's Victory Day Parade, and the mausoleum will open again on 18 May, with Lenin looking as sprightly as ever.

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