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Lenin's Life After Death: An Analysis of the Politics Surrounding the Lenin Mausoleum as a Symbol of Power Throughout History

Marty Rogachefsky

ABSTRACT

This essay will cover the history of politics surrounding the Mausoleum of Vladimir Lenin, which sits below the Kremlin wall in the Red Square of Moscow, Russia. In it, I explore the question of whether Lenin's death, embalment, and placement within the mausoleum was used for political gain by leaders in the Soviet and post-Soviet era of Russian history. I also note that the mausoleum started as and continues to be seen as a symbol of power in accordance with Marxist-Leninist ideology and the Soviet Union as a whole. The paper covers contemporary debates about Lenin's final burial as well.

INTRODUCTION

Vladimir Ilich Ulyanov was born on April 22, 1870 into a well-educated family, which helped him to excel in school, where he eventually went on to study law. In 1891, he was expelled from his university for revolutionary thinking and later exiled to Siberia, where he adopted the pseudonym "Lenin." During World War One, Lenin led a successful *coup d'état* with the Bolshevik Party in 1917, which came to be known as the October Revolution. After the Revolution, he helped to form the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) under the banner of communism and worked to transform Russia into a socialist state. Lenin died on January 24, 1924, reportedly of complications from a stroke he suffered two years earlier.¹

His body now rests in a mausoleum made of black and red high-polished stone in Moscow's Red Square. The body is open for viewing by the public, but heavily guarded by Kremlin security. When tourists enter the dark and cold crypt, they risk be-

ing hushed when speaking too loudly or shoved on by the guards when walking too slowly. Lenin lies in a small room, under a glass case, lit only by a red light in the center. About.com guide and travel expert Kerry Kubilius describes the body as, "a poor substitution for Sleeping Beauty, appearing less real and more like a wax-cast replica."² Nevertheless, thousands of tourists and Lenin enthusiasts visit the tomb each day to pay their respects to the founder of the Soviet Union.

As a symbol of power, the mausoleum is a vivid representation of the wistfulness Russians continue to feel for the days of the USSR. The mausoleum's location in Red Square, the heart and center of Moscow, symbolizes the importance of Lenin to the Russian people. In addition, directly underneath the Kremlin is a sign that the current Russian government endorses Lenin's ideas and reveres him as a national hero. *Washington Times* writer Jeffrey Kuhner describes Lenin's embalmed body as "the shining symbol of Soviet communism—a martyr to the utopian cause of the socialist revolution." He goes on to write, "Lenin's tomb has become a shrine for many Russians still nostalgic about the Soviet empire."³

The shrine stands today as an epitome of Lenin's cult of personality. During the troubled times of the early Soviet period, Russians needed a leader to turn to. They needed someone who was looking out for their well-being.

Slobodan Stankovic writes in *Pravda* that Lenin was responsible for elevating himself to the level of demigod. He served to attach a face to an ideology that was so new and confusing to the Russian people. Without Lenin, chaos would ensue. Stankovic writes,

In such a county, with no revolutionary cadres available to construct socialism after the successful Bolshevik , it was the ‘system of command’ and ‘unconditional obedience’ which were extolled as the characters of a socialist county.⁴ Lenin’s cult of personality and precedent for an orderly society served as a source of stability in a country torn by ideological and political disarray. His mausoleum served as a source of stability for subsequent Soviet leaders and a reassurance that they were fulfilling the ideals of Lenin. Today, the mausoleum not only remains as a symbol of power for those who are sympathetic to Lenin and nostalgic of the communist era, but it is also a relic of the past that gives modern-day communist sympathizers hope for the future.

THE DECISION TO EMBALM LENIN’S BODY

On December 20, 1923, Lenin fell severely sick from complications with his stroke. Joseph Stalin unofficially met with three other Politburo members, Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Bukharin, to decide what should be done when the leader of the revolution passed away. Stalin suggested that Lenin’s body be embalmed under the banner of Russian tradition. The other three members objected to the idea however, saying the only tradition they had heard of that bore a slight resemblance to this was worship of the skeletal remains of saints in the Russian Orthodox Church. Stalin was attempting to draw on the religious zeal still embedded within the Russian people in order to perpetuate Lenin’s cult of personality.⁵

On the day of his death, Lenin fetched his cook and wrote her a note, reading, “Gavrilushka, I have been poisoned...Go fetch Nadia [Krupskaya] at once... Tell Trotsky...Tell everyone you can.”⁶ An embalment process would rid Lenin’s body of any signs of poison if an autopsy should occur, which may have been one of the reasons that Stalin was so eager to preserve the leader’s remains.

Embalment of Lenin was also popular among the Russian people. More than 1,000 telegrams and

letters came from people all over the USSR asking for Lenin’s body to be preserved. Historian Christopher Binns recalls the, “unending crowds waiting in the bitter cold” to get a glimpse of Lenin’s coffin during his funeral.⁷ By following through with the people’s requests, the new leadership would not only be seen as subscribing to Lenin’s ideas, but would appear democratic and responsive to the citizenry. They would be assured greater legitimacy at a time when the Soviet Union was in search of a legitimate successor.

As previously mentioned, the people’s inclination to stick with Russian Orthodox traditions also played a role in the decision to embalm Lenin’s body. Natural mummification was considered proof of sainthood. Russians believed that a divine body would not deteriorate. In effect, the formaldehyde preservative served as a coding of sainthood that could win over those who were unsympathetic to the Bolshevik attack on religion.⁸

Lenin’s embalment was also a symbol of Russia’s oriental tendencies. The embalment process was modeled off Egyptian mummification, which was considered repugnant to the West. In addition, mummification indicated that Lenin was an otherworldly leader (similar to the pharaohs) and that the Soviet Union was an empire that could compete with the greatness of the ancient Egyptians. The construction of the mausoleum also came at a time when the Russian capital was being moved from St. Petersburg back to Moscow, indicating a physical retreat from the West.⁹

Lastly, many believed that science would one day be able to return people from the dead. By preserving Lenin’s body, it was rumored that he would be able to once again serve the Soviet Union if only scientists could figure out how to revive him. This belief gives truth to the rallying cry, “Lenin lived, Lenin lives, Lenin will live!”¹⁰ In fact, Foreign Trade Minister Leonid Krasin was a follower of Moscow philosopher Nikolai Fyodorov, who was convinced that science would one day conquer death. Krasin argued for Lenin to be preserved for science in the state-run *Izvestia* newspaper, in which he said that workers of the world “would not be reconciled” and would not rest until Soviet scientists resurrected Lenin.¹¹

Those against embalming Lenin and placing his body in a mausoleum included his family and close friends. After his death, Lenin's wife, Nadya Krupskaya, told the Russian people,

Do not allow your mourning for Ilich to take the form of external reverence for his person. Do not raise memorials to him, name places after him...¹²

Leon Trotsky was also opposed to the idea of raising a mausoleum to Lenin fearing "that the plan was simply an attempt to pander to the religious sensibilities of the peasantry, replacing the relics of saints with those of Lenin."¹³ Lenin himself reportedly wished to be buried in St. Petersburg alongside his mother; however, Lenin's niece has since come out with public statements saying this rumor was a bold-faced lie.¹⁴

Despite the requests of friends and family members, the mausoleum was eventually constructed on a proposal by a special session of the Second Congress of the Soviets. Among other proposals such as changing the name of Petrograd to Leningrad and building monuments to Lenin in the principal cities of the USSR, the directive ordered that Lenin's body be preserved and a mausoleum be constructed under the Kremlin wall. A temporary crypt was constructed on January 27, 1924 for Lenin's funeral and was replaced by a wooden mausoleum in 1930.¹⁵

POLITICAL HISTORY OF THE LENIN MAUSOLEUM IN THE COMMUNIST ERA

No other leader politicized Lenin's death and the subsequent mausoleum more than Joseph Stalin. Stalin saw the mausoleum as a means of gaining popularity and legitimacy among the Russian populace. It was a symbol of connection between himself and Lenin. Upon Lenin's death, Stalin used the funeral to fulfill his own political aims by producing an "Oath to Lenin." He announced five commandments that he swore Lenin would have wanted to see fulfilled. These included party unity, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the alliance of the workers and peasants, the maintenance of the USSR, and the continuation of the Communist International principles.¹⁶ In other words, Stalin wanted to use Lenin's death to maintain stability after the

founder of the revolution was removed from the picture. It was clear that after Lenin's death, Leninism needed an interpreter that was to be found in Stalin. According to historian Nina Tumarkin, the ruling troika in the Politburo (Stalin included), "acted consciously at the time to create a cult of Lenin" which was intended to:

prevent civil war...keep intact the power structure...and individually to assure for themselves the measure of power and influence they each sought to attain.¹⁷

The mausoleum was meant to be a symbol of Stalin's adherence to and continuation of Leninist principles. He wanted to convey that he was the mouthpiece for Lenin's dissected brain and embalming his body was intended to show that Lenin's soul was still alive within the Communist Party.

Even the competition to find the best design for the mausoleum was highly politicized. Stalin used the contest as a means of getting artists thinking about ideas for communist art and architecture that would serve the state in the future. Evidence of this came in the fact that all 117 entries for the mausoleum were rejected in the end and a government commission invited AV Shchusev to recast the wooden mausoleum in stone under his own blueprint in 1939.¹⁸ Tumarkin writes:

There is reason to suspect that the well-publicized competitive process...was intended chiefly, or even solely, as a *campaign* to politicize artists and architects by encouraging them to participate in the design of Lenin's monumental tomb.⁹

The final design of the mausoleum was symmetrical, vastly different than the constructivist architecture of the past. It represented a greater centralization of power, an emphasis on stability, and the willpower to last an eternity. As Moscow State University Professor Olga Zinovieva contends, the beginning of classical style architecture began with the building of Lenin's tomb.²⁰ Stalin had effectively broken from the Leninist idea of power, while making it appear as if the Stalinist style of government and urban development had the Lenin stamp of approval by constructing his tomb in the same manner in which he built all of his other buildings. In short, Stalin

used Lenin's mausoleum to begin the shift to imperial classical architecture. While Zinovieva believes that the tomb was built like an Egyptian pyramid²¹ and Brooke says that it is more "reminiscent of Aztec tombs in Mexico," there is little doubt that Stalin intended to mimic the architecture of the great empires to send the message that the Soviet Union could stand amongst their ranks.²² The mausoleum was the initial spark that set off the rest of Stalin's urban propaganda.

Stalin also began the tradition of giving speeches, greeting military parades, and observing civilian demonstrations from on top of Lenin's mausoleum. During World War II, Lenin's body was moved due to German advancement on Moscow. His body was placed on a train to the Siberian city of Tyumen on July 3, 1941, where it was stored for four years until Moscow was secured in March 1945.²³ Most notably, Stalin stood atop the mausoleum on May 9, 1945 to greet Russian soldiers and celebrate the Soviet victory in World War II, symbolically showing the defeat of Nazi ideology by Marxism-Leninism.²⁴ This was a tactic picked up by Stalin's successors to make a public display of their adherence to Leninist principles and show their progress in fulfilling the goals of the revolution.

Year after year, many of those within Stalin's inner circle who were eventually murdered on his orders were cremated and placed in an urn next to Lenin's mausoleum. In the case of Vyacheslav Menzhinsky, for example, the curtains of his office were sprayed with mercury and acid for two weeks before his eventual death on May 10, 1934. His urn was placed next to the mausoleum after his cremation. The urns of Ordzhonikidze and Kirov, two Soviet higher-ups whom Stalin had murdered were also placed next to the mausoleum along the Kremlin wall.²⁵ Assuming the rumors of Lenin being poisoned by Stalin were true, the mausoleum and the surrounding area can be seen as Stalin's public showcase of those who crossed his path. It is a demonstration of his political victims and an eerie message to supporters not to overstep their boundaries.

On March 5, 1953, Stalin was pronounced dead. His body was embalmed and placed in the Hall of Columns, where Lenin's funeral was held three decades earlier.²⁶ Four days later, Stalin's body was taken

to Lenin's tomb in Red Square and placed next to Lenin.²⁷ The decision to place Lenin and Stalin side-by-side and make their bodies available for public scrutiny was a political one. Even in death, Stalin wanted to ensure that his greatness was equal to, if not greater than that of Lenin. To tie his legacy to Lenin's was to make himself a cofounder of the revolution. It was a political act to ensure that subsequent leaders of the USSR would devote themselves to the continuation of Stalinist policies as he had supposedly devoted himself to those of Lenin.

Stalin was to be disappointed in this goal. When Nikita Khrushchev took the reins of the USSR and delivered his Secret Speech in 1956, he denounced Stalin's policies by invoking the words of Lenin. He reminded the Twentieth Party Congress of Lenin saying,

Stalin is excessively rude, and this defect...becomes a defect which cannot be tolerated in one holding the position of Secretary General.

Khrushchev came to the conclusion that: "Lenin's fears were justified" and, "the negative characteristics of Stalin...transformed themselves during the last years into a grave abuse of power."²⁸

With the increasing trend towards de-Stalinization came the desire to have Stalin's body removed from the Lenin's mausoleum. Khrushchev considered Stalin's burial next to Lenin as a breach of Lenin's sanctity. In a special decree to the Twenty-Second Party Congress in October of 1961, Khrushchev stated:

The further retention in the mausoleum of the sarcophagus with the bier of J.V. Stalin shall be recognized as inappropriate since the serious violations by Stalin of Lenin's precepts, abuse of power, mass repressions against honorable Soviet people...make it impossible to leave the bier with his body in the mausoleum of V.I. Lenin.²⁹

Shortly following the speech, Khrushchev had Stalin's body quietly removed from the mausoleum and buried near the Kremlin wall on October 31st of that year.³⁰ Khrushchev had effectively used the cult of

Lenin to further his own agenda of the de-Stalinization campaign.

The mausoleum remained relatively uncontroversial until the beginning of perestroika. While general secretaries continued to stand atop the mausoleum during parades and public events, there was little left to politicize about an issue that had been so widely abused in the past for political gain. Stalin had soaked clean the idea of attaching himself to Lenin to ensure stability, while Khrushchev had wiped the surface clean by using Lenin to denounce Stalin. Leonid Brezhnev appeared atop the mausoleum to celebrate Soviet astronauts accomplishing the task of being the first to circle the earth in a multi-seat spacecraft; however, this was merely out of tradition rather than an attempt to manipulate Lenin's legacy for his own gain.³¹

The Gorbachev years gave rise to a greater period of politicizing Lenin and the mausoleum. Mikhail Gorbachev was attracted to the flexibility and progressiveness of Lenin's policies, but also knew that associating himself with Lenin could mean that his liberalizing policies would be more likely to win support among party stalwarts and the Russian people as a whole. Historian Archie Brown noted the now-common tactic, writing "Until very late, indeed, in the Soviet era, the way in which to legitimize concepts and policies was to invoke Lenin."³² Gorbachev frequently cited Lenin in speeches and talks in order to give an ideological basis to his shift in governing. He effectively used Stalin's strategy to dismantle his policies. Brown writes:

Gorbachev's frequent citations of Lenin were partly to legitimize innovation which was deviating sharply from past Soviet theory and practice.³³

Gorbachev used the contemporary political debates surrounding Lenin's mausoleum to attach himself with Lenin and Leninist ideology as well. With the beginning of perestroika came a more open call to remove Lenin from the mausoleum and have him buried. Gorbachev spoke out publicly against burying Lenin when he was general secretary. A *Baltimore Sun* article described Gorbachev as viewing the mausoleum as a "sacred site" and seeing it as "blasphemous to close it."³⁴ In addition, he recycled the tactics of Stalin and Brezhnev by hosting funerals for

high-ranking communists atop Lenin's tomb. From the mausoleum, Gorbachev watched the annual May Day celebration with the Soviet elite even as he was booed for changing parade rules to allow political activists and non-governmental organizations to march.³⁵

Russians became more skeptical of the politicization of Lenin at the same time that Gorbachev started to separate himself from the tactics of the past. Standing on top of the mausoleum was a symbolic gesture of unity with Marxist-Leninist ideology; however, it made Gorbachev a target of assassins. On November 8, 1990, a man fired two shots at the Politburo as they stood with Gorbachev atop the mausoleum during the Moscow Parade. Afterwards, Gorbachev broke with tradition and marched with President Yeltsin in the parade, showing the rift between old politics and new.³⁶ Liberalizers within the Communist Party were also getting antsy for reform. The Congress of People's Deputies first proposed the idea of burying Lenin. In September 1991, Leningrad Mayor Anatoly Sobchack told the Congress, "that we fulfill the last wish of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and bury him according to religious and national customs."³⁷ Although Gorbachev eventually tabled the touchy subject, he would ultimately come out with statements that struck a similar tone after the political pressure of being general secretary was no longer on him.

HISTORY OF POLITICS AFTER THE FALL OF THE SOVIET UNION

The fall of the Soviet Union brought upon itself increasing criticism of Lenin's legacy as well as a greater demand to have Lenin buried to symbolize the end of the communist era. Boris Yeltsin, the first president of the Russian Federation, wanted to do the deed once and for all, but could not find the political will to do so. Instead, he took marginal steps as part of a balanced approach to governing. On October 7, 1993, Yeltsin ordered that Post No. 1, the guard responsible for protecting the Lenin Mausoleum, be canceled. This occurred immediately following the quelling of an uprising by militants intent on restoring the communist empire. The changing of the guard had been a major tourist destination and symbolized state support of Leninist principles.³⁸ Yeltsin

had this post removed in order to show an end to government backing of communism and Leninism as an ideology. It was meant to destroy the hope of those who wanted to rewind the clock back to the USSR days. *The New York Times* described the event as follows: “But instead of smartly goose-stepping off to the Spassky Gates as guards had done for 69 years, the two guards today quietly walked into the mausoleum—and into history.”³⁹ In a further slam to the communist bloc, Yeltsin restored the post of Honor Guard No. 1 on December 12, 1997, but this time to the tomb of the unknown soldier of the Great Patriotic War. This came on the anniversary of the adoption of the 1993 Russian constitution, an indication that Yeltsin was moving to a less ideological form of government that reinforced state authority.⁴⁰ At the same time he had the guard removed, Yeltsin closed the Lenin Museum across the square to the North, forcing officials to move the world’s largest collection of Lenin artifacts.⁴¹ The movement to bury Lenin was gaining steam in Russian politics. Anti-communist Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov proposed burying Lenin next to his mother’s grave in St. Petersburg and restoring Red Square to its pre-revolutionary appearance in 1993. The Russian Orthodox Church also came out at the same time, saying that they would favor a “Christian” burial for Lenin.⁴² By the end of the decade, 43% of Russians said they would like to see the leader removed from his mausoleum and buried with full honors.⁴³

Despite the mounting support for the burial, Yeltsin ultimately failed to deliver choosing instead to veer to the center as part of his campaign to win reelection. In April 1995, Yeltsin pandered to tradition and greeted the crowd who came to see the World War II Veterans parade from atop the mausoleum just like the Soviet leaders before him. Yeltsin faced several critics in the Kremlin, who said that he was standing on the symbol of tyranny of the old regime; however, the president wanted to win the votes of communist sympathizers in the upcoming presidential election a year later.⁴⁴

It was not until after the election and at the end of his second term that Yeltsin publicly declared that he wished for Lenin to be buried. While Yeltsin had always wanted to bury Lenin, his government did not yet have enough political will to convert thoughts

into actions. A burial of Lenin would mean a symbolic end to the Soviet era, a truth that many Russians were not prepared to swallow. But with little time left in his presidency, Yeltsin finally told newspaper reporters in August of 1999 that he would bury Lenin at long last.⁴⁵ In an interview with *Pravda*, Yeltsin’s Chief of Staff mentioned that Lenin’s remains will be “definitely removed” and buried, and reassured his interviewer that there would not be a public protest in response.⁴⁶

In hindsight, this promise proved empty. This begs the question: Why did Yeltsin not set out to bury Lenin sooner, when the dust had first settled after the collapse of the USSR? According to Andrew Ryvkin, political commentator for *The Guardian*,

In the mid-90’s, when Yeltsin met fierce opposition from the Communist party... it was decided that tampering with such a key symbol of the Soviet past might [radicalize] the anti-Yeltsin sentiment in Russia. Burying Lenin would spark protests, which [...] could have seriously harmed Yeltsin’s 1996 presidential campaign and his administration’s ability to push its agenda through the Russian parliament, in which the communists were a major force.⁴⁷

The decision proved too politically hazardous for Yeltsin to make. In 1996, Yeltsin beat his Communist Party opponent Gennadii Zyuganov by a margin of only 3.3% in the first round of voting.⁴⁸ This slim victory may not have been possible if Yeltsin had alienated Communist Party sympathizers by having Lenin’s body removed. “If they forcibly accelerate the burial of Lenin,” said Grigory Pushkov of the Mnenie (Opinion) polling firm in December of 1993, “a significant portion of the population will be offended.”⁴⁹ At that time, the public opinion regarding the issue was split relatively evenly.⁵⁰ Literally putting the nail in the coffin of the foundations of the Soviet Union was a political gamble that Yeltsin was not prepared to take.

After his reelection, Yeltsin became too weak—physically and politically—to bury Lenin. The economic recovery from shock therapy, which was tepid at best, as well as charges of corruption for selling public industries to his friends in the loans-

for-shares program did not help to improve Yeltsin's political maneuverability. Although Yeltsin promised to bury Lenin in August of 1999, he was no longer really in charge. Yeltsin fell more and more ill by the end of his second term, leaving "The Family," the name for his bureaucratic clique, to take charge of politics.⁵¹ Even if Yeltsin really wanted to have Lenin buried, he could not do it. He simply did not have enough power to do so, because he was not actually making the decisions. As Mel Huang, a blogger on the Central Europe Review, puts it, "After those erratic episodes attributed to drink several years ago, it appeared that Yeltsin became more of a *kukla* (puppet) for the real people in power in the shadows."⁵² Due to a loss of political and physical strength, Yeltsin resigned in December 1999, four months after vowing to do away with the mausoleum. His promise remains unfulfilled.

Until recently, Yeltsin's successor, Vladimir Putin, has dodged the issue of closing the Lenin mausoleum and burying the body. In a public statement on the issue in February 2006 he said, "I wish to find solutions, which would enjoy support by the majority of citizens and promote reconciliation and unity of the nation rather than a split."⁵³ By choosing to stay away from the touchy subject, Putin was electing to appeal to his base of moderate voters who were concerned more about political stability than ideological purity. For the first time in Russian history, Lenin's mausoleum was seen as a source of instability rather than one of solidarity. Putin stayed away from the hot-button issue to win support rather than tamper with underlying animosities and nostalgia. His focus was on the economy and governing Russia instead of on petty topics that would court votes in the short-term, but divide the country in the long run. He was following through on the prevailing issues of the time: economic growth and jobs. Lenin was not so much on the minds of voters as was financial insecurity.

Dmitry Medvedev took a similar stance to Putin, but public sentiment was mounting for burial. A public opinion poll conducted in February 2011 found that 60% were in favor of burial, while 30% were against it.⁵⁴ At the same time, members of United Russia Party began bringing up the topic again to give themselves greater public appeal during parliamentary elections.⁵⁵ The Orthodox Church also be-

gan to back off of statements made in the 1990's and began to advise refraining from hasty decision-making. "It is obvious that the condition of Lenin's body does not fit into Russia's cultural tradition," said Archbishop Vsevolod Chaplin, "but we should take into account the opinions of various social groups and avoid making decisions that entail social upheavals."⁵⁶

The next month, a Kremlin rights council recommended to Medvedev that he bury Lenin's body among a list of steps to distance Russia from its communist past. "We are not a country of Lenin and Stalin but the country and people of Pushkin, Gogol, Tolstoy and Pasternak," the document said.⁵⁷ However, Medvedev stayed above the fray, choosing not to respond to the council's recommendations. During the annual May 9th Victory Day parade, Medvedev and Putin elected to metaphorically separate themselves from the issue by standing on a podium in front of the mausoleum rather than on the mausoleum itself as in years past.⁵⁸

Since the Medvedev years, the issue has been placed back in the spotlight, forcing Putin and United Russia to speak on it. Putin has attempted to remain neutral on the issue, saying in July 2012 that the "people should decide."⁵⁹ However, the pro-Putin party, United Russia, has been more vocal than Putin himself on the issue. United Russia continually affirms support for a bill that would require Lenin's burial in St. Petersburg.⁶⁰ Even Gorbachev has been leaning towards the burial option now that he is out of politics, saying that "I think we will come to this point at some stage," when asked about removing the body from its mausoleum.⁶¹ Putin-appointed Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky has also suggested that Lenin's body be buried with full military honors in June 2012, saying that the mausoleum should be turned into a museum "with expensive tickets."⁶²

Putin's appointment of Medinsky may be an underlying indication that he wishes for Lenin to be buried, but does not want to risk the political fallout from the still powerful communist bloc. Medinsky has co-founded and long belonged to an organization that tries to rename Soviet-era monuments.⁶³ Putin almost certainly knew of this and wished for him to reignite public debate on the issue to get a

sense of the public sentiment. An online poll hosted by United Russia found that 74% of voters wanted Lenin to be buried in January 2011.⁶⁴ United Russia had long touted the results of this poll as reason to bury Lenin; however, it should be noted that the poll was offered on a website called “goodbyelenin.ru” and that the webpage reminds voters that Lenin and his family never wanted a mausoleum erected in his name, while mentioning that, “the Communists did not care for [the] desire of the leader and his relatives.”⁶⁵ This has led to charges of “grave digging” by members of the Communist Party, who also criticized the poll for being skewed.⁶⁶ Now that Medinsky has floated the test balloon, those against Lenin’s burial have weighed in on the website, bringing the total down to 60.5% for and 39.5% against burying the body.⁶⁷ While this poll is unscientific and biased, it remains the most up-to-date way of gauging the Russian people’s sentiment on what has now become a national debate.

CONCLUSION

The politicization of Lenin’s tomb can be summarized in the often-told story of “Clever Lenin” recounted by Nina Tumarkin in *Lenin Lives*:

One day, two, a week, and then a month passed [after Lenin’s funeral] and Lenin grew tired of lying under the glass. One night he slipped out the back door of the mausoleum and went to the Kremlin, where the commissars met. He entered just after meeting and asked two janitors, who had been listening through the door, what they had heard. ‘Did they mention Lenin?’ he queried. ‘What a question.’ ‘Look,’ they say, ‘Lenin died but we now have almost twice as many communists. Now let the Entente dare to make a peep.’ Lenin returned to the mausoleum and lay down under the glass feeling satisfied.⁶⁸

The mausoleum has been used to both make the cult of Lenin possible and win support for not only the current leader during and after the Soviet Union, but also for the Communist Party as a whole. It can be stated that the decision to go against his family’s wishes and embalm Lenin was political at best and

manipulative at worst. The leader who most actively used Lenin’s death and subsequent embalment for political fulfillment was Joseph Stalin, but this does not exclude more liberal politicians, Gorbachev and Yeltsin in particular, from cynically attaching or detaching themselves from the mausoleum to win support for their policies. In short, the mausoleum was a source of power throughout Russian history, because it could be used as a means to win public support and create a more stable political climate as a whole.

However, in contemporary Russian politics the opposite has been true. Both Putin and Medvedev have seen the mausoleum as something that divides rather than unites the country. In a political climate that emphasizes personality over ideology, the mausoleum has been associated with ideological purity. On the other hand, contemporary political parties have been much more vocal on the subject mostly because they are ideologically driven. On June 14, 2012, three major Duma factions, Liberal Democrats, United Russia, and Just Russia, announced support of Medinsky’s plan to bury Lenin. Only the Communist Party is left to voice support.⁶⁹ As public opinion mounts in favor of burial, it can soon be expected that Lenin will be put to rest once and for all; however, this will only occur once Russians are willing to let go of their Soviet past. But for now, as long as Lenin remains in his mausoleum, he will remain a symbol of a past political era over which Russians remain very divided.

Endnotes:

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