

Bury Lenin's Body: The Symbol of Communism Should No Longer Mock Humanity

By Doug Bandow
December 13, 2014

MOSCOW—Red Square remains one of the globe's most iconic locales. Enter by walking past the statue of World War II general Georgy Konstantinovich Zhukov on horseback. The Kremlin dominates on the right, GUM Department Store on the left, and St. Basil's Cathedral looms in front. Before the Kremlin wall is a small, squat, pyramidal building: Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov Lenin's mausoleum.

The tomb may be most famous as the reviewing stand for Communist Party leaders. Studying who stood where was an important part of the game of Kremlinology. Who was to the General Secretary's right and left, who was moving up or down in the Kremlin power ladder? No where was the leadership symbolism more dramatic.

Kremlinology has disappeared as an occupation. But the mausoleum remains. Along with Lenin's body. Dressed in a black suit, his face is grim and his right fist is clenched, as if he was ready to smite the capitalists who now dominate even his own nation's economy.

Lenin is one of history's most consequential individuals. Without him there likely would have been no Bolshevik Revolution, slaughter of the Czarist royal family, and murderous civil war. No Joseph Stalin, brutal party purges, mass starvation in Ukraine, and Hitler-Stalin pact to fuel what became World War II. No post-conflict occupation of Eastern Europe and Cold War with the West. No Soviet support for China's revolution and a mix of dictatorship and insurgency in smaller states around the globe. No North Korea and Korean War. No Cuban missile crisis. No Berlin Wall to fall in 1989. No tens of millions of people murdered by what Ronald Reagan rightly called the Evil Empire.

Of course, without Lenin there still would have been a Bolshevik movement. But it would have lacked his intellect, tactical skills, and, most important, determination. He promoted Marxist revolution while imprisoned and in exile. He insisted on dictatorial leadership within the social democratic party, holding his Bolshevik ("majority") faction together against the Menshevik ("minority") members and even some of his own supporters angered by his intransigence. So

feared was he by his enemies that he became Germany's secret weapon against Russia; in 1917 Berlin allowed him to travel in a sealed train from his exile in Zurich to Petrograd (now St. Petersburg) in order to spread the bacillus of radical revolution. And he did, with devastating effect.

Lenin pushed the Bolsheviks toward power as the authority of the moderate Provisional Government, which had ousted the Czar, bled away. At the behest of Russia's Entente allies the moderate revolutionaries continued the war, leaving the Bolsheviks to demand "peace, land, and bread" for millions of soldiers fighting in a meaningless conflict. In November came Lenin's moment, the famous putsch ("revolution") in Petrograd. Almost alone in his party Lenin then forced peace with Germany. He had contempt for the "idiot" Czar Nicholas who had been deposed and the "windbag" Aleksandr Kerensky, the last premier in the Provisional Government. But Lenin recognized that the German Army could end Communist rule. The Bolsheviks then fought a multi-year, multi-sided civil war from Archangel to Sebastopol to Vladivostok to consolidate power.

Lenin was no humanitarian whose dream was perverted by his successors. He likely ordered the murder of the deposed Czar and the latter's entire family. Lenin insisted on solitary Bolshevik rule, brooked no dissent even within the party, established the Cheka secret police, employed terror against opponents, and led the victorious side, with the assistance of Leon Trotsky, Joseph Stalin, and others, in one of history's most horrid civil wars.

As Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars he was the dominant power within a regime filled with murderous activists, such as Trotsky and Stalin. Despite his later complaint that the latter was "rude," Lenin seemed unconcerned with Stalin's equally brutal commitment to preserve power irrespective of human cost. Lenin created the institutions used by Stalin to wreak so much human havoc. Tens of millions of people ultimately died as slaughter became routine. Wrote social scientist R.J. Rummel: "murder and arrest quotas did not work well. Where to find the 'enemies of the people' they were to shoot was a particularly acute problem for the local NKVD, which had been diligent in uncovering 'plots.' They had to resort to shooting those arrested for the most minor civil crimes, those previously arrested and released, and even mothers and wives who appeared at NKVD headquarters for information about their arrested loved ones." This is what Lenin's Russia became.

Lenin had his first stroke in May 1922. Two more strokes left him helpless. He died on January 21, 1924, just 53 years old. His death triggered a complex power struggle which left Stalin in control. (Since Lenin had turned against Stalin, who was using his position as party general secretary to amass increasing power, some suspect the latter of speeding Lenin's demise through poison.)

Lenin's body lay in state for four days, during which nearly a million people passed by. Petrograd was renamed Leningrad. Many statues followed. Perhaps most momentous, however, was the idea broached within a week of his death: preserve his body. His family opposed the idea and, ironically, Lenin had previously criticized attempts to turn Communism into a quasi-religion: "every god is a necrophilia."

However, despite some internal opposition, the party—spurred by Stalin, who made convenient use of Lenin’s legacy—decided otherwise. It declared: “the mausoleum with his remains will be the place of the pilgrimage of all those who are oppressed and offended by the current system. In the future, this will become the site of the pilgrimage of the entire liberated humanity.” At least that part of humanity not murdered by the Communists.

Officials first proposed to freeze his body, but eventually had it embalmed. A secret laboratory was created to make Lenin look better than when he died. Cynics wonder if a wax figure has been substituted for the real corpse, but the official word is that the body is real. He is preserved by professional teams including anatomy professors and doctors, which have helped with other special embalmings, such as of Vietnam’s Ho Chi Minh and North Korea’s Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il.

The mausoleum started as wood and turned into the current granite and marble structure in 1929. Lenin’s body was temporarily moved from Moscow after the German invasion in 1941, and Stalin’s body was added from 1953 to 1961, before being reburied as part of the de-Stalinization campaign. The latter’s corpse now lies in a tomb topped by a marble bust between the mausoleum and Kremlin wall. Joining him is a rogue’s gallery including Felix Dzerzhinsky, first Cheka head; Leonid Brezhnev, general secretary; Mikhail Suslov, party ideologist; and Yuri Andropov, KGB chief and general secretary.

The mausoleum attracted more than ten million visitors through 1972. It remains open (and free), though it no longer is the must-see attraction that it once was. The lines now are shorter and include many foreigners, like me, with the main delay going through metal detectors and checking cameras, which cannot be carried into the building. The mausoleum is small and dark; a couple hallway turns take you by soldiers and then to the body under glass. The contrast with Mao Zedong’s Mausoleum in Beijing couldn’t be greater—large, well-lit, long lines, visitors bearing flowers.

What is Lenin’s future in a post-Communist world? Obviously, it would be difficult to remove every sign of the Communist ancien regime. Lubyanka serves the Russian state still, despite decades as the locus of murder and repression for the KGB and its predecessor agencies. The famed “Seven Sisters,” distinctive buildings erected by Stalin in inimitable Soviet style, continue to house the Russian foreign ministry, Moscow State University, Hotel Ukraina (now the Radisson-Royal Hotel), and more.

Nevertheless, less functional Communist imagery came under attack with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The Soviet flag was lowered from the Kremlin. Older Russian symbols replaced the Soviet hammer and sickle. Leningrad was renamed St. Petersburg. Lenin statues disappeared. A crowd pulled down Dzerzhinsky’s prominent statue in front of Lubyanka.

A debate even emerged about the holiest Communist relic of all: Lenin’s mummy.

Two decades ago Moscow’s anti-communist mayor backed burying the corpse and restoring Red Square to its pre-revolutionary state. The Orthodox Church also urged burial. Boris Yeltsin, the first president of non-Communist Russia, removed the honor guard from the mausoleum and

proposed to bury Lenin. Yeltsin's chief of staff said Lenin's corpse would be "definitely removed." But as Yeltsin's health faltered and political strength weakened he abandoned plans to challenge the still powerful mythology surrounding the Soviet Union's founding.

In 2001 Yeltsin's successor, Vladimir Putin, expressed fear that burial would suggest the Russian people had lived under "false values" all those years. Five years later Putin said that he wanted to "promote reconciliation and unity of the nation." He concluded in 2011 that the decision would be made when the time was right.

Yet the same year Vladimir Medinsky, then a leading member of Putin's United Russia Party, complained: "Lenin is a very controversial figure and his role as the focus of a necropolis at the heart of our country is absurd." Lenin's colleagues "wanted to create a substitute religion based on Lenin's cult, but they failed. It's time to finish with this." Medinsky suggested burying the corpse next to Lenin's mother in St. Petersburg and turning the mausoleum into a museum.

In 2012 Putin appointed Medinsky Minister of Culture, suggesting support for removing Lenin's body. However, Putin failed to act and announced that the "people should decide." He responded to those complaining about mummification running against Russian traditions: "We can see holy remains in the Kiev-Pechora Monastery and in other places." Since then he has ignored the issue.

The Russian public appears conflicted. Poll results varied over time. In general more Russians believed Lenin's role to have been positive than negative, even though more want him buried than preserved. However, those most energized tend to be Communist romantics. Party leader Gennady Zyuganov proclaimed the proposal to be "sacrilegious, irresponsible and provocative." Fyodor Suvorov, head of the Moscow party chapter, complained about the attempt "to erase our history." Lenin, said Suvorov, "led a state that was by and for the people."

When in power the last Communist Party general secretary, Mikhail Gorbachev, refused to consider de-deifying Lenin. Since then, however, Gorbachev changed his mind: "I think that we will come to this point at some state. But I do not think that we should be forcing things."

The time has come. While Russia cannot escape its history, it should stop glorifying the country's turn down one of history's great deadends. Although an unjust despotism, Imperial Russia still fostered the hope of liberal reform. The obstacles to change remained great as the Czar backed away from reforms promised in response to the 1905 Revolution. Nevertheless, the imperial regime could have been transformed into some form of constitutional rule.

But by entering World War I the Czarist autocracy sacrificed that opportunity and its future—and for that deserved its fate. The regime sacrificed millions of its people in pursuit of imperial aggrandizement. Why would any sensible Russian, at least one without an extensive landed estate and access to the royal court, defend such a system?

The Provisional Government, led by liberal constitutionalists and democratic socialists, promised a better and fairer society. Yet these political leaders put the previous regime's commitment to war before the Russian people's interests. When the Bolsheviks struck the Kerensky government there was virtually no one to defend it. The war was the one issue which the Bolsheviks, and

only the Bolsheviks, got right: the people wanted, indeed needed and deserved, peace above all else. Only Lenin and his party promised to give it to the Russian people.

Nothing else did the Bolsheviks get right, despite the delusions of acolytes in the West. “I have seen the future and it works,” declared journalist Lincoln Steffens in 1919. That future may have worked for Lenin and the revolutionary elite, but no one else. They suppressed free markets, stole private property, crushed political dissent, murdered political opponents, imposed materialist ethics, and exalted ruthless dictatorship. The result, as even Steffens came to see, was a sustained assault on the history, traditions, ethics, and very essence of the Russian people.

Tens of millions died under the lash employed by the new, even more brutal elite. The spirit of a nation and people died as well. Although after more than seven decades Russians finally were able to turn back from this deadly detour, they have yet to find their way to a future built on respect for the lives and dignity of all. Alas, the same old authoritarianism has been born again, repackaged to make it more palatable to both older Russians cynical about past abuses and younger Russians entering a more globalized world.

Burying Vladimir Lenin, perhaps the person more responsible than anyone else for the horror known as the Soviet Union, would be a powerful symbolic gesture to close an era. That still might not help the West understand what Vladimir Putin is, but it would emphatically show what he is not. And that would be no small feat at a time of dangerously rising tensions between Russia and the West.

Someday Russians will be free. Not just from Communism, but also less forms of authoritarianism. Liberation will come only through the Russian people’s own efforts, however, not from the West. Only they can make their own future. The day liberty arrives will be the real Russian Revolution.

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