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Chapter Three

Lenin's Brain

Background

Vladimir Il'ich Lenin died on January 24, 1924, victim of a fourth and fatal stroke. Since his first stroke in May of 1922, Lenin had struggled with a variety of ailments, including an assassin's bullet lodged near his spine and possibly syphilis. Lenin's death, without an anointed successor, set off a bitter power struggle that ended in December of 1930 with Stalin as the undisputed ruler of Russia.

Stalin's feuds with Lenin had become so inflamed that Lenin, in a political testament dictated from his deathbed, warned that Stalin should be removed as party General Secretary before it was too late. Fortunately for Stalin, Lenin's testament spoke ill of other Bolshevik leaders; there was no rush to make it public even by Stalin's enemies.

We do not know the real origins of the decision, but we do know that a commission of physicians, many of whom had attended Lenin and conducted his autopsy, recommended that his brain be subject to detailed scientific study. Such a study would have suited Stalin's plan to confer sainthood on Lenin. He established, under the auspices of his Central Committee, the Institute of V. I. Lenin shortly after Lenin's demise. Proof that the Lenin Institute was to be a weapon in Stalin's power struggle is found in the naming of Stalin's personal secretary, Ivan Tovstukha, as its managing director. Among Tovstukha's jobs was to gather critical remarks written by Vladimir Il'ich about other

party leaders for Stalin's use as compromising material when needed. The "immortalization" of the Great Vladimir Il'ich Lenin was to be accomplished by the display of his embalmed body at the Red Square mausoleum and by the publication of his writings. The Lenin Institute was to provide yet another posthumous honor—scientific proof that Lenin was a genius.

The Institute of Lenin served as a repository for Lenin's writings and for other Lenin memorabilia. Among its most unusual items was Lenin's brain, preserved in a formaldehyde solution in a glass jar. This is the story of the study of Lenin's brain from early 1925 to 1936 as told by the sixty-three-page secret collection of documents from the Central Committee's special files.¹ It is not necessarily a tale about Stalin, although Stalin's guiding hand can be seen throughout. During the early years of these events, decisions about Lenin's brain were likely made collectively by the Politburo, with Stalin always aligned with the majority. After Stalin's assumption of complete power, the matter of Lenin's brain was turned over to his trusted deputy, V. M. Molotov, and Lenin's brain itself was entrusted to a friend from his Georgian youth, A. Enukidze. Throughout the story Stalin was either acutely aware of what was going on or was guiding events.

The file begins three months after Lenin's death, with the decision to study Lenin's brain to prove his genius already made. The story then modulates between Berlin, where a single specimen of Lenin's brain is being studied by a renowned German scientist, Oskar Vogt, and Moscow, where Russian scientists are increasingly lobbying for their own "Institute of the Brain." The Soviets, reluctant to alienate a foreign scientist of international renown, allow Vogt to remain at least nominally in charge of the study, although he is rarely in Moscow where the brain resides. A series of attacks on Vogt's credibility, bearing the markings of Stalin operations, raise questions about his continued role, but it was Hitler's Gestapo that freed Stalin of an independent outside voice. The last entry in the file dates to May 27, 1936, as the nominal head of state, Mikhail Kalinin, distributes to Comrade Stalin and the Politburo "for its examination, the report of the acting director of the Institute of the Brain entitled 'About the study of the brain of V. I. Lenin.'" The Institute of the Brain, indeed, fulfilled its plan. Its report cites indices proving the extraordinary nature of Lenin's brain, while pointing out that the Institute could provide even

more convincing evidence if the Politburo awarded it new funds and new premises.

The Story

The story of Lenin's brain begins with a joint proposal to the Politburo from the minister of health, Nikolai Semashko, and Stalin's personal assistant cum deputy director of the Lenin Institute, Ivan Tovstukha, to "export" Lenin's brain to Berlin for study. Semashko and Tovstukha had already received their marching orders: to prove Lenin's genius; they were simply setting up a procedure to deliver the desired results. According to the official account, the proposal to study Lenin's brain originated with a group of eminent scientists and doctors, several of whom had conducted Lenin's autopsy.

Despite their political savvy, Semashko (who initiated the first purge of non-Soviet doctors for Lenin) and Tovstukha (who conducted dirty tricks for Stalin) begin with an error that would jeopardize the politics of the study for the next decade: They proposed to turn the study of Lenin's brain over to Professor Oskar Vogt of the Neurobiological Institute of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Berlin, as the "only world specialist on this question." Lenin's brain should be transferred to Vogt's laboratories in Berlin. Their mistake: Whether Lenin was a genius or dullard would be decided by a foreigner!

Vogt, who had already met with Russian scientists on February 16 and 17, confirmed that it is "possible for such a study to provide a material basis for determining the genius of V.I. Lenin." He proposed to compare Lenin's brain with other brains, an undertaking that required enormous experience, care, and facilities. Vogt warned against such a study in Moscow and, if measures were not taken immediately, the deteriorating brain could not absorb the dyes required for analysis.

Professor Vogt's warnings must have shaken Semashko and Tovstukha, who could be accused of botching the entire study if Lenin's brain was allowed to deteriorate further. Perhaps they viewed the outsourcing of the project as an easy solution. Yet, as experienced bureaucrats, they must have realized that the Politburo (and Stalin) would not turn Lenin's brain over to a foreigner. Indeed, the Politburo met on February 19 and concluded to "refuse the proposal to export

the brain of V.I. Lenin abroad for research and instead to conduct the research in Moscow.”

Two days later, Semashko came forward with an alternate proposal. Vogt should take one specimen back to Germany for the purpose of determining whether the brain was losing its value, a more modest proposal which the Politburo approved on the same day (February 21, 1925): “to allow Vogt to export and study one specimen of the brain and, in the case of favorable results, to give him further specimens.” (It should be noted that Vogt received only this one specimen throughout the entire history of the study).

Three months later (May 22, 1925), the Politburo approved the Lenin Institute’s plan of attack: It approved a contract for Vogt, ordered Semashko and Tovstuhka to find an appropriate building and equipment, and to identify two “communist-physicians” to study under Vogt in Berlin. The head of the secret police, Feliks Dzerzhinskii, was ordered “to identify a reliable comrade to be designated as the responsible depository of Lenin’s brain as work on it proceeded.” The project design was set: the eminent Vogt was in overall charge; the brain was to remain in Moscow; and “reliable” communist-physicians were to be trained under Vogt. Surely, a communist-physician would know what the party required of him.

The story moves forward more than one year later to January 25, 1926, as the minister of health (Semashko) delivers his progress report to the Politburo. He reports that there are as yet no findings, but a German assistant of Vogt is working on specimens in Moscow in close consultation with Vogt, and two “physician-communists” (Sapir and Sarkisov) have finished a course of study under Vogt in Berlin. The empire-building Semashko points out that, insofar as many brains must be studied for comparative analysis, a scientific institute for the study of the brain in honor of Lenin should be created under his ministry of health. On April 28, 1926, Stalin personally ordered the government to award 154,480 rubles for a Medical Commission for the Study of the Brain of V.I. Lenin within the ministry of health.

Thus, as of mid-1926, a Soviet “Institute of the Brain” had been created with the personal approval of Stalin. At least two “communist-physicians” had been trained in Berlin, but the person in charge of determining Lenin’s genius remained an independent German scientist. Although apparently no record was taken, Vogt briefed a “narrow

circle” of members of the government at some point in 1927 giving them an account of his preliminary findings and a plan for further research.

For Stalin, having a foreign scientist in control of such a delicate project would not have been acceptable in the long run. Danger lurked in the fact that Vogt, the nominal chairman of the Moscow Brain Institute, edited an international scientific journal that listed his affiliation with both the Moscow and Berlin institutes. Such an arrangement would have been a nightmare for Stalin and Soviet censors—a reputable scientific journal outside the reach of Soviet censorship that could issue a verdict on Lenin’s genius or lack thereof with the apparent stamp of approval of the Russian side. Vogt had to be contained without causing an international incident.

We can only speculate about the origins of a January 28, 1928, “report memo” from a Military Commissar, Lamkin, to a Comrade Bubnov of the Political Administration of the Red Army, but it bears the markings of a Stalin operation. Stalin would typically move against opponents after receiving “spontaneous” complaints from below that he himself had orchestrated. Indeed, the dutiful Bubnov passed the memo on to Stalin “for his information.”

Lamkin (writing as a mole moving in scientific circles) reports that Vogt’s position as director of the Moscow Brain Institute and his editorship of a scientific journal that lists his Moscow affiliation are attracting attention from those who consider it “their party duty” to point out a number of problems. Lamkin (whose own scientific credentials are not given) reports that Vogt’s published work “does not satisfy the requirements of our neuropathologists, and does not appear to be sufficiently scientifically grounded.” Lamkin further adds: “There are honest discussions about why we do not use for this case our own brain scientists whose erudition is comparable to Vogt’s.” He then goes on to list them by name, including a Dr. Doinikov, identified as a former assistant of Vogt, who refused the directorship of the Brain Institute on the pretext that he “is working in a different direction,” but in fact, he considers the Vogt School “not able to give all that could be done in this field using other experimental sciences.” Lamkin’s memo ends with a caveat: “It is of course true that such conversations take place in a narrow circle of specialists who are not free

of envy of foreign scientists. Therefore it is very difficult to determine the real state of affairs, but it is necessary to do so.”

Stalin’s strong suit was his extraordinary patience. The Lamkin report was only the first building block in what may have become an orchestrated campaign to deal with the troublesome Vogt. For the time being, Stalin simply filed the Lamkin report. Vogt remained nominal director of the Lenin brain project, protected by his international reputation, but Stalin gradually shifted the Lenin project to his closest associates and political operatives. In January of 1932, four years after the Lamkin report, Stalin’s deputy, Molotov, was made the Politburo’s project overseer, and Stalin’s fellow-Georgian A. Enukidze, the head of Kremlin security, was soon to be placed in charge of Lenin’s brain. A. Stetskii, the Head of the Culture and Propaganda Department of the Central Committee, now led the attack on Vogt.

Stetskii’s report of April 10, 1932, to “Comrade Stalin” (who carefully underlined its key passages) raised a number of problems: Lenin’s brain was being kept under intolerable security conditions. There was no guard and the key was kept by one of the scientific workers. There was currently no work being done on the brain. Professor Vogt had not been in Russia since 1928 and had practically no contact with the institute.

Vogt’s worst sin, however, was his public lectures based on the one specimen of Lenin’s brain in Berlin. To quote Stetskii: “Vogt’s presentations are of a questionable nature; he compares Lenin’s brain with those of criminals and assorted other persons. Professor Vogt has a mechanical theory of genius using an anatomic analysis based on the presence of a large number of giant cortical pyramidal cells.” Stetskii also complains that Vogt’s theory is making a mockery of Vladimir Il’ich’s mental acuity because: “In the German encyclopedia of mental illness, a German authority (a Professor Spielmaier) claims that such pyramidal structures are also characteristic of mental retardation. In this connection, a number of evil remarks about Comrade Lenin have been placed in the bourgeois press.”

Stetskii ends with two proposals for Stalin: “1) to preserve Lenin’s brain in a safe place, maybe in the mausoleum placing responsibility on Enukidze, 2) to cut off the relationship with Professor Vogt, sending two comrades to Berlin to take back the specimen of Lenin’s brain.”

The Politburo met three days after Stetskii's indictment of Vogt, and its actions were, at first glance, puzzling. The Politburo agreed to establish an independent Brain Institute, now subordinated to the Scientific Committee of the Central Executive Committee. Vogt was to be invited to be its director, and "communist-physician" Sarkisov was named as deputy director. The fourth point reads: "to send Comrade Sarkisov to Berlin for two weeks for negotiations with Professor Vogt." On the surface, these negotiations were to persuade Vogt to accept the directorship of this new institute; in fact, it may have been a masterful move to finesse Vogt from the project, while blaming Hitler.

What happened in Berlin in 1932 is described four years later in a February 5, 1936, memo from Sarkisov (now acting director of the Brain Institute) to his boss, Ivan Akulov, of the Central Executive Committee. It turns out that, prior to Sarkisov's visit, the Soviet ambassador to Germany had reported that Vogt had fallen out of favor with Hitler. In the course of Sarkisov's meetings, Vogt confirmed that his apartment had been searched and his telephone conversations bugged. Sarkisov (writing later in his 1936 memo) reported that, according to the latest news, Vogt had been removed from the directorship of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Brain Research, and his case had been turned over to the interior ministry. (Vogt survived. He was drafted into the army as a private in his sixties as punishment for his transgressions, but he was discharged after six weeks of service).

In other words, Vogt was out, thanks to Hitler. There would be no scandal amongst the international scientific community if Vogt's ties to Moscow were severed. In fact, Vogt graciously acknowledged, according to Sarkisov's account, that the Moscow Brain Institute could carry on its work on Lenin's brain without him, particularly now that he was no longer able to visit Moscow. According to Sarkisov, Vogt was especially impressed with the Moscow Brain Institute's collection of brains of key figures from the sciences and arts, such as Lunacharskii, Bogdanov, Mayakovsky, Tsiolkovskii and other notables. Instead of comparing Lenin's brain with ordinary people, the Moscow scientists could compare him with peers.

In a touch of irony, Vogt requested that the final approval for carrying on without him should come from Tovstukha, who had represented the Soviet government when the initial contract was signed. Upon his return to Moscow, Sarkisov received (obviously without dif-

faculty) Tovstukha's permission to continue the project with a fully Russian team. Sarkisov became "acting director" of the Brain Institute. The Russian team remained on good terms with the eminent Vogt and could use his scientific reputation to support their findings.

Sarkisov's 1936 report noted that the Brain Institute had successfully carried out its work over the past four years without Vogt because: "In the years of its existence, our institute has grown and strengthened such that the absence of Professor Vogt, as its director, did not reflect negatively on our work." Eleven years after the project was started, Sarkisov announced: "I hereby inform you that the Institute is prepared to present to the party and the state the results of its research on the brain of V.I. Lenin."

Akulov went about making preparations for the long-awaited report. In a September 7, 1936, memo to Stalin, Akulov reports that he gave the Brain Institute a month in order to complete its comparative analysis and set a date for the first half of March for the final report. On May 27, 1936, Mikhail Kalinin, Akulov's boss and head of the Central Executive Committee, submitted to Stalin and other members of the Politburo the Brain Institute's ten-page report entitled: "Study of the Brain of V.I. Lenin."

The faded and scarcely legible report is full of scientific jargon that would have confused members of the Politburo, but its message was clear: The Brain Institute had done thorough work (153 pages and fifteen albums, and 30,953 brain slices). Lenin's brain had been compared with the brains of ten "average people" and with the brains of leading figures, such as Skvortsov-Stepanov, Mayakovsky, Bogdanov, and even Nobel Laureate I.V. Pavlov, who had died in February of 1936 and could be added to the brain collection. Excerpts from the report speak about an exceptional "high organization" of the brain and other indices "which are associated with an especially high functioning of Lenin's brain in the areas of speech, recognition, and action" and "with processes requiring great diversity and richness of cognitive powers, in other words, with an exceptionally high functioning of the higher nervous system." Lenin's brain "possessed such a high degree of organization that during the time of his illness, regardless of the great damage, it functioned at a high level." Their comparative analysis with the brains of prominent persons showed that Lenin had large pyramidal cells in the third layer of the cerebral cortex—Vogt's



Sketch of Lenin showing his prominent forehead, presumably a sign of genius.

initial finding and his “proof” of Lenin’s genius—and that Lenin’s brain had ratios of the temporal lobe to the total brain mass superior to those of the poet Mayakovsky and physician-philosopher-science fiction writer Bogdanov.

Sarkisov’s presentation ends with self praise and a plea for funds: “From humble beginnings as a small laboratory, the institute has grown into a large scientific-research establishment possessing capabilities to carry out research in the most complex new spheres of neurological science recognized by our own scientists and by scientists of the West.”

The reward for such good work: a decree of the Politburo to create a commission comprised of those making the report to study the work of the assessment of Lenin’s brain. The final point is an order to the Central Executive Committee to organize a special facility in the institute with specialized equipment for the preservation of the brains of leading personalities.

Lessons

The story of Lenin’s brain continues to fascinate. It has been the subject of a novel,² and scientific papers about Vogt and his work on Lenin’s brain continue to be published in scientific journals to the present day. As told above, the story extracted from the official Soviet archives raises a number of questions and puzzles.

The first of these is why Stalin appeared to be paving the way for Vogt’s removal from the project. Vogt, in his public lectures and writings, represented the view that Lenin’s brain showed distinct anatomic signs of genius. Apparently, this is what he told a “small group of Soviet leaders” in 1929. Why then did he represent a danger to the Soviet side? Vogt operated in the area of international science, where debate and counter-hypotheses are welcomed, not in the controlled environment of Soviet science. Vogt’s findings of Lenin’s genius could be publicly challenged and even turned on their head, such as the counter-argument that Lenin’s “giant pyramidal cells” could also be indicators of mental retardation. In “Soviet” science there were no counter-arguments, especially when it was the party line that Lenin was a genius.

The second puzzle is why the Central Committee’s files on Lenin’s

brain were included by Russian archivists in the archival collection (Fond 89) “The Communist Party on Trial.” This archival collection was created as evidence for prosecutors in the trial of the Communist Party, which took place early in the Yeltsin regime (and never addressed the key issue of past terror). The inclusion of these files, therefore, meant that they somehow provide evidence of misdeeds or crimes. But what was the crime or misdeed in this case?

The “crime” that the Lenin brain file discloses was the extreme elitism of the Soviet regime. Although the Soviet Union was a “worker-peasant state,” workers and peasants were not to be in charge; the state was to be run on their behalf by a Stalin or a Politburo. Workers and peasants were to be controlled by wise and even genial Bolsheviks who knew what was good for the masses. In their own conversations, the Bolsheviks spoke of peasants and workers with derision. In a Politburo meeting of the mid-1920s, peasants were described as so greedy they would grab a small bit of land even if it belonged to Saint Peter. Workers were sullen, unwilling to work, and unreliable. Lenin, until the Bolshevik revolution, had never met a worker or been in a factory. Without this enlightened elite to manage these unruly masses, there would never be a peasant-worker paradise.

By this logic, the creators of this dictatorship of the proletariat must themselves be head and shoulders above the rest. This thought was expressed by Leon Trotsky reporting on Lenin’s worsening physical condition: “Lenin was a genius, a genius is born once in a century, and the history of the world knows only two geniuses as leaders of the working class: Marx and Lenin. No genius can be created even by the decree of the strongest and most disciplined party, but the party can try as far as it is possible to make up for the genius as long as he is missing, by doubling its collective exertions.”³

Vogt’s comparison of Lenin’s brain with those of “ordinary people” and even criminals would therefore be the ultimate sacrilege. More politically correct Soviet scientists approached this sensitive topic with much greater delicacy by comparing Lenin’s brain with those of leading figures of the sciences and arts, but even here they had to obtain Trotsky’s result—to demonstrate that Lenin’s brain was superior even to prominent scientists and literary figures.

The final puzzle is why, after waiting eleven years for the result, Stalin failed to publicize Lenin’s genius through the controlled Soviet

press? One explanation may have been that by 1936, at the very time when Stalin was executing his most prominent political rivals, he did not want to remind the party of a “genius” Lenin, who might have treated his enemies more humanely. It may also be that the habit of secrecy was too hard to break. All the documents in the file from 1925 to 1936 are labeled “secret” or “top secret.” At no point was there an announcement that Lenin’s brain was being studied. To inform the public that Soviet scientists had found that Lenin was a genius was more than the security conscious Soviet leadership was prepared to bear.