

The Pantheon of Brains

Michael Hagner

In the autumn of 1927, 10 years after the Russian October Revolution, the Brain Research Institute was officially opened in Moscow. Here, housed in the former palace of a wealthy merchant, Lenin's brain was examined three years after his death, using the latest methods in neuroanatomy. The institute's director, Berlin brain scientist Oskar Vogt, was appointed by the Russian government to undertake the examination. At the grand opening, Vogt gave a sensational lecture regarding his examination results. *Pravda* wrote that Vogt had found a thickened third cerebral cortex layer on Lenin's brain, which he attributed to the remarkable size and number of the localized pyramidal cells. As these cells also showed many fibrous connections to other cells on the cerebral cortex, Lenin's associative skills were obviously highly developed. However provisional these results were, they certainly suited the developing Lenin cult by putting the admiration for the leader of the revolution on a supposedly scientifically proven foundation. This result, *Pravda* concluded, was "an important contribution to the materialistic explanation of the psyche in general".¹

The Bolsheviks as well as Oskar Vogt himself were absolutely sure that harnessing brain research could only work if the brain were declared to be a public matter. Vogt began writing articles for newspapers. In Berlin's Communist Party newspaper, the *Rote Fahne* (Red Flag), Nikolai Semashko, Russian Secretary of Health, left no doubt that researching Lenin's brain would help the victory of materialism "in the area where metaphysics and dualism are still strong".² The fight against metaphysics also meant fighting for eugenic breeding of the New Soviet Man, which was a great matter of concern for the Communist Party in the 1920s. The Brain Research Institute was supposed to contribute to that endeavor. The examination of Lenin's brain was only the scien-

tific and ideological tip of the iceberg; more brains of renowned revolutionaries and other significant Russian public figures as well as "brains from the various nations of the Soviet Union" were collected and examined.³

The linking of elite and so-called racial brain research, brain anatomy based on the comparison of individual and ethnic characteristics, melted seamlessly with the vision of the *new communist man*, which was primarily developed by Leon Trotsky. In a synthesis of pedagogical and psychophysiological elements, this human was supposed to be bred to be a "higher social-biological type," a "super human" in order to lift the "average human type [...] to the level of Aristotle, Goethe and Marx". Trotsky dreamed this scientific practice up as a conglomerate of reflexology, psychoanalysis and psychotechnology, but these breeding ideas represented the bio-political nerve of the communist utopia for some years.⁴

The shift from brain research to brain politics was not an isolated case in the Soviet Union in the second half of the 1920s: In 1925-1926 film director Vsevolod Pudovkin made a documentary propaganda film about Ivan Pavlov's reflexology that also dealt with the blending of brain and

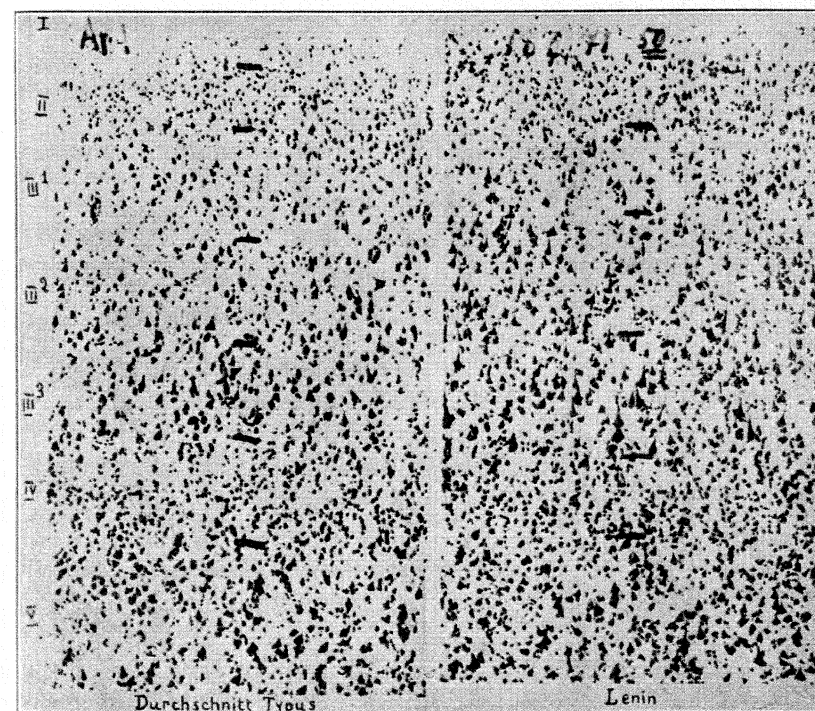


Abb. 150. Das Gehirn Lenins

ist das erste Gehirn eines bedeutenden Menschen, das durch viele tausend Serien Schnitte nach modernen Prinzipien untersucht wurde. Mit einem Durchschnittshirn verglichen, zeichnet es sich in den Assoziationsphären durch Größe und Zahl der Zellen und durch den Reichtum an Assoziationsfasern aus. (Präparate von Prof. O. Vogt.)

Lenin's brain, published in: Fritz Kahn, *Das Leben des Menschen*, vol. 4, Kosmos Verlag, Stuttgart, 1929

higher breeding ideas with Marxist utopia.⁵ The connection of hagiography and bio-politics, however, led to one of the most bizarre occurrences in the history of elite brain research, the so-called Pantheon of Brains. The Moscow Brain Institute, near Red Square, was meant to be both a research facility and a mix of museum and Bolshevik Valhalla: a secular memorial room (which should, like the nearby Lenin Mausoleum, attract the masses) plus a site that was scientific through and through, presenting brain research as the leading science of the Soviet social utopia. When a visitor in one

room saw the plaster cast of Lenin's brain he could be sure that, a few rooms farther, the real brain was being anatomically examined layer by layer.

The idea of opening a public pantheon came from Vladimir Bechterev, who had been one of the most renowned European brain scientists long before the October Revolution. At the beginning of the twentieth century he had founded a psychoneurological clinic just outside the center of St. Petersburg, focused on the "general research of

⁵ Margarete Vöhringer, Michael Hagner, "Vsevolod Pudovkins Mechanik des Gehirns – Film als psychophysiologisches Experiment," in: *Bildwelten des Wissens. Kunst-historisches Jahrbuch für Bildkritik*, vol. 2/1, Akademie Verlag, Berlin, 2004, pp. 82-92.

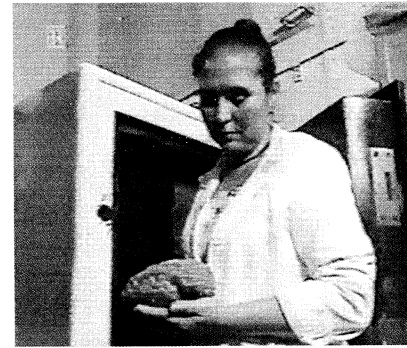
- ¹ *Pravda*, no. 261, November 15, 1927, p. 7. Cited after the German translation in Jochen Richter, *Russe – Elite – Pathos. Eine Chronik zur medizinischen Biographie Lenins und zur Geschichte der Elitegehirnforschung in Dokumenten*, Centaurus, Herbolzheim, 2000, p. 187f.
- ² Nikolai Semashko, "Die Erforschung von Lenins Gehirn," in: *Die Rote Fahne* (The Red Flag), no. 279, November 27, 1927, first insert (trans. Uli Nickel). For details see Michael Hagner, *Geniale Gehirne. Zur Geschichte der Elitegehirnforschung*, Wallstein, Göttingen, 2004, pp. 249-264.
- ³ Oskar Vogt, Undated manuscript on the program of the Moscow Institute [around 1925 or 1926], Cécile and Oskar Vogt-Archiv, Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf, Akte 276 (I, J) (trans. Uli Nickel). On the attempts to build an institute for investigating geniuses see Irina Sirotkina, *Diagnosing Literary Genius. A Cultural History of Psychiatry in Russia, 1880-1930*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2002.
- ⁴ Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1968, pp. 255f.



Brains in containers in the Moscow Institute for Brain Research, stills taken from a documentary film



Plaster cast of Stalin's brain



Plaster cast of Lenin's brain

personality, its education and hygiene of the mental sphere as well as the studies of prophylaxis and the healing of nervous and mental illnesses". Bechterev also was interested in the brains of important men: In 1909 he had already published an anatomical study of Dmitry Mendeleev's brain, in which he certified the famous chemist as having a "deluxe model of convolutions of the brain" which allowed a "distinct sharpness and vividness in his thinking".⁶ The idea of connecting elite brain research and brain politics had been established before the October Revolution, but only with the new political situation did the time seem to have come, even for a senior brain scientist like Bechterev, to convert the ideas into reality in grand style.

As the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* wrote in the issue of July 24, 1927, Bechterev had originally planned an "all-Russian Pantheon" in Leningrad, the city where he had been living for decades, which had fallen behind Moscow after the October Revolution. "But this Pantheon," wrote Bechterev, "must not be similar to the Parisian Pantheon, which houses the coffins of a few people and hasn't got any scientific value, this Pantheon must be a living institution for scientific research and enlightenment."⁷ By emphasizing the educational aspect of such a place he showed his latent guilty conscience, as Bechterev knew how easily the impression could arise that this was just a place where the

hero cult of bourgeois societies was imitated. Just as Vladimir Tatlin wanted to surpass the Eiffel Tower with his famous *Monument to the Third International*, the Pantheon of Brains was to demonstrate the superiority of socialist progression over bourgeois decadence. Compared to the Lenin Mausoleum, which was entirely dedicated to the cult of the man, the Pantheon seemed to have an advantage. It was able to suggest by evidence that the Bolshevik revolutionaries even after their deaths were not lost to science and indirectly continued to work for the new society by publicly displaying the most precious part of their bodies. Usefulness and memorial cult were two sides of the same bio-political medal.

Given that Lenin's brain had been examined in the institute managed by Vogt, it seemed understandable to build the Pantheon in Moscow rather than in Leningrad. One further aspect has to be considered. In 1927 Bechterev suddenly died under circumstances that still haven't been entirely explained. While attending a congress in Moscow, he was ordered to the Kremlin by Stalin

to examine the future absolute dictator. Bechterev diagnosed paranoia and carelessly told this to Stalin's personal physician. A week later Bechterev was dead, allegedly of food poisoning after a dinner in Moscow. Stalin's revenge even made a sarcastic neurological point, as Bechterev's brain didn't return to Leningrad but was dispatched to the Moscow Brain Research Institute. From then on, brain scientists and party leaders were not squeamish when it came to taking possession of elite brains. When Vladimir Majakovski committed suicide, his brain, much to the horror of his relatives, was removed on his deathbed in a lighting operation before his body was released for burial.⁸

In November 1929 Vogt gave another lecture in the Pantheon of the Brain Research State Institute where he coined the term "association athlete" to describe Lenin, meaning, in terms of association psychology, that Lenin was immensely gifted at associating and combining many heterogeneous ideas.⁹ The lecture caused international media attention, with the Pantheon receiving much wider recognition. The *Düsseldorfer Nachrichten's* correspondent described it in these terms: "The thirteen brains, each one in a glass case, are aligned along the wall of a large room that might have been the ballroom when the palace was still owned by a rich merchant in Moscow. Above each case is the name of the man

whose head the brain was extracted from, there are also some notes on his career; in some cases even photographs of the man and also enlarged photographs of cross sections of the grey brain matter. The glass cases are placed on wooden containers, containing some of the person's works, medical records, case histories, etc."¹⁰ Vogt had mentioned those 13 brains by name in his lecture. In addition to Lenin's brain, the collection at that time contained several brains of scientists, artists and politicians.

The glass cases, of course, displayed only copies of the brains; the real things were anatomically examined a few rooms down the hallway. But the connection between the brain and mental brilliance became obvious, nonetheless. Although Lenin's brain was the main attraction, the Pantheon was dedicated to revolutionaries still living, and some cases were still empty, waiting to be filled. The absurdity of these empty cases would be proved only a few years later when Stalin, in the infamous show trials, eliminated several revolutionary comrades. Honored party members were declared persona non grata, executed and extinguished from Soviet history. The Moscow brain researchers, though, didn't get into the precarious position of having to decide whom to display in the Brain Pantheon. Sometime around 1930, only months after its glorious opening, it was closed.

From contemporary sources the immediate cause for the closure cannot be clearly established, but the motives become obvious even without concrete archival documentation. First, after Stalin finally took over power he focused the people's cult exclusively on Lenin and himself. A memorial room for a whole group of Bolsheviks would simply have undermined this intention. Second, after 1930, eugenics no longer played a major role in the Soviet Union. The brain represented the human as being primarily a biological being and only secondarily a social one. Stalin, however, planned more radically than had the Bolsheviks

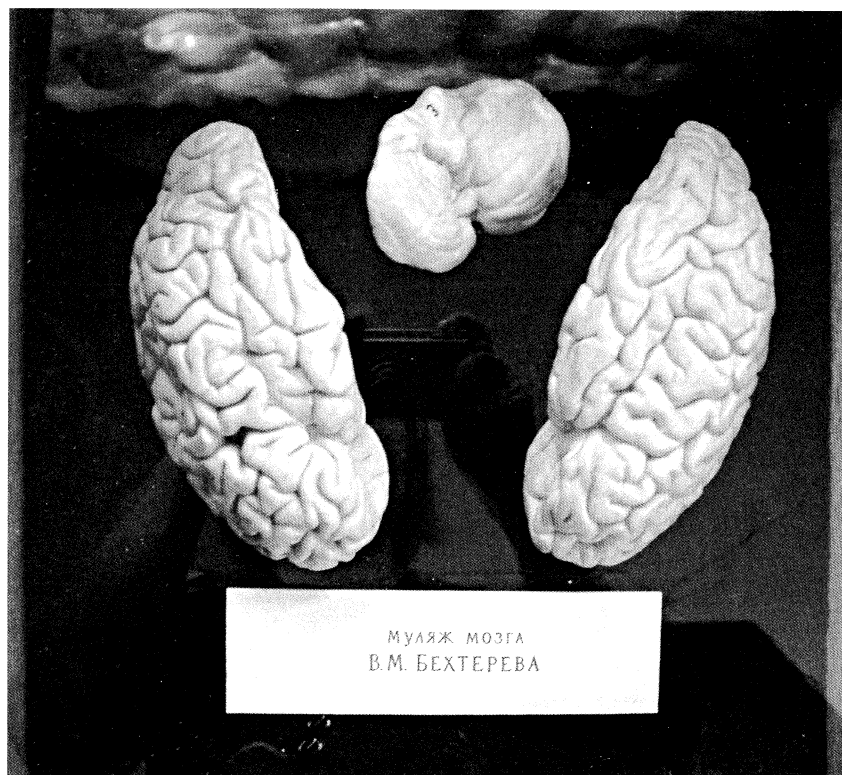
6 Vladimir Bechterev, "Selbstdarstellung," in: *Die Medizin der Gegenwart in Selbstdarstellungen*, Louis R. Grote (ed.) vol. 6, Meiner, Leipzig, 1927, p. 4; Vladimir v. Bechterev, Richard Weinberg, "Das Gehirn des Chemikers D. J. Mendelejew," in: *Anatomische und entwicklungsgeschichtliche Monographien*, first issue, Engelmann, Leipzig, 1909, p. 15.

7 WJ, "Ein Pantheon der Gehirne in Moskau," in: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, July 24, 1927, p. 7; Vladimir Bechterev, "Über das Pantheon," in: *Wochenblatt der WOKS*, 1928, no. 2, p. 5.

8 Monika Spivak, *Posmertnaja diagnostika genial'nosti: Eduard Bagrickij, Andrej Belyj, Vladimir Majakovskij v kollekcii Instituta mozga (materialy iz archiva G. I. Poljakova)*, Agraf, Moscow, 2001.

9 Oskar Vogt, "r. Bericht über die Arbeiten des Moskauer Staatsinstituts für Hirnforschung," in: *Journal für Psychologie und Neurologie*, 40, 1930, pp. 108-118.

10 DN, "Im Pantheon der Gehirne. Ein Besuch im Moskauer Institut für Gehirnforschung – Lenins graue Substanz in 31000 Teilchen zerschnitten," in: *Düsseldorfer Nachrichten*, December 3, 1929 (trans. Uli Nickel).



Plaster cast of Vladimir Bechtere's brain, published in: Michael Hagner, *Geniale Gehirne*, Wallstein, Göttingen, 2004, photo: Margarete Vöhringer

in the 1920s to elevate the social above the biological.¹¹ Third, the Brain Research Institute developed more and more into a place where not only the brains of prominent artistic, political and scientific figures were collected but also those of political dissidents and dispelled people. Over time the institute turned into a unique repository of skulls from Russia's twentieth-century history. Apart from the previously mentioned public figures, the institute houses the brains of the symbolist Andrej Belyj (reposing there due to Boris Pasternak's intervention), Maxim Gorki, Konstantin Stanislavsky, Sergei Eisenstein, Ivan Pavlov and Clara Zetkin, as well as Stalin's brain and even the

brain of the nuclear physicist and dissident Andrei Sakharov, who died in 1989. Worldwide, there are a number of anatomical collections containing the brains of distinguished people: in Göttingen, Stockholm, Paris, Düsseldorf, Philadelphia, Ithaca and Tokyo. None, however, has gathered together so many celebrities as has the Moscow collection. Research also continued, although the examination of Lenin's brain was brought to a temporary conclusion in 1936, but somehow today nobody in the Moscow Institute seems to want to know too much about it.

11 Hans-Walther Schmuhl, "Rassenhygiene in Deutschland – Eugenik in der Sowjetunion: Ein Vergleich," in: *Im Dschungel der Macht. Intellektuelle Professionen unter Stalin und Hitler*, Dietrich Beyrau (ed.), Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 2000, pp. 37ff.

After the brain ceased to be a propaganda instrument for communism, the Pantheon was surrendered to a dialectic that is not uncommon in dictatorships: serving the public in what had been a cult room was now eliminated in favor of total secrecy; the place was treated as if it had never existed. If we didn't have eye-witness reports from 1929, there would be no evidence of the Pantheon's existence. As far as I know, there is not a single photograph of this room. Therefore there is no answer to the question as to how the right half of Lenin's brain had been displayed, the left half of his brain having been damaged by several strokes. To develop a Lenin cult, using brain material of an infirm Lenin would have been out of the question. The displays of the Pantheon – plaster casts, glass cases and documents about the relevant public figures – probably remain today, safely locked away and barred to outsiders in the Moscow Brain Research Institute. After the closure of the Pantheon and Oskar Vogt's fall from grace, work on elite brains was continued but in secret. The 1936 report of the conclusive results of the work on Lenin's brain was kept strictly confidential. Some documents about elite brains were later published in Russian, but in principle nothing has changed the highly secretive attitude of the Moscow Brain Research Institute regarding its past.¹²

There has been one exception: During the months of turmoil surrounding the Soviet Union's breakdown at the beginning of the 1990s, a film

team was able to gain access to the Brain Research Institute. The film doesn't show anything of the former Pantheon, but it provides an insight into Room 19 where the elite brains are stored. A view of the shelves shows standard glass containers with the floating brains inside. A technical assistant holds the plaster cast of Lenin's brain in front of the camera with only the intact half visible. Even in 1991, the damaged part of his brain was not shown. As the assistant presents Stalin's brain, the reporter gets a little uneasy as this *brain* was responsible for his father's murder. This is the moment when it becomes obvious that the Moscow Pantheon is an undeniable part of the Soviet Union's history, and it is probably only a matter of time until it returns to the public domain again.

It is not in Moscow but in St. Petersburg that the traces of elite brain research can be followed. In the psycho-neurological clinic founded by Bechtere and still operating, a splendid museum room reminds us of the clinic founder's scientific and organizational achievements. In a corner at the far end of the exhibition rotunda is a glass cabinet housing three objects: a laurel wreath that belonged to Bechtere, his death mask and a plaster cast of his brain. The symbolic (the laurel wreath), the imaginative (the death mask) and the real (the brain) could not be more precisely aligned.

Translated from the German by Uli Nickel

12 S. Blinkov, G. Poliakov, "The Activities of the Moscow Brain Institute," in: *Acta Medica URSS* 1, 1938, pp. 674-679. For further information see Richter, op. cit., pp. 89-98; Spivak, op. cit. The secret report on Lenin's brain by Semjon Sarkisow is published in German translation in Richter, op. cit., pp. 302-307.

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