How can a revolution, a momentary, instantaneous event, become everlasting? This was one of the first questions the leaders of the victorious October Revolution of 1917 had to answer. Inscribing it into the names of streets and squares and erecting monuments of ‘monumental propaganda’ was one strategy. Another one, which opened this historical moment into the indefinite future by stopping the clocks’ hands at exactly 6:50 pm on 21 January 1924, was the mummification of the body of Vladimir Lenin, the head of the young Soviet Republic.

Lenin died from atherosclerosis that was the complication of a bullet injury after the murderous assault of 1918. Initial measures to temporarily preserve the body were taken immediately after the death to allow the long farewell ceremony; the idea of a long-term preservation of Lenin’s body was announced a week after his death by Leonid Krasin, People’s Commissar of Foreign Trade. Krasin, alongside the Commissar of the Enlightenment Anatoly Lunacharsky, the writer Maxim Gorky and the philosopher Alexander Bogdanov, had earlier been involved in the God-building movement that proclaimed socialism a new religion—worshipping the progress, the collective and the society—for which a new god should be ‘built.’ Ironically, Lenin himself was highly critical of the movement, reminding that “every god is a necrophilia.”

Taking Lenin’s metaphor somewhat too literally, Krasin (who was educated as a refrigerators engineer) suggested the freezing of Lenin’s body; later on this technique was substituted with that of embalming. The success of the endeavor surpassed the boldest expectations: Lenin’s body still exists, more than eight decades later. Moreover, the anatomists managed to ‘restore’ Lenin’s appearance, making him look fresher than while still alive.

Soviet propaganda often stated that the reason for the permanent preservation of Lenin’s body was the impossibility of stopping the flow of people who came to pay their homage, and the multiple letters addressed to the Party pledging to make the body imperishable as the symbol of the new communist era (contemporary scholarship, though, discovered that these letters mostly dealt with the perpetuation of his memory in monuments or architectural memorials). Meanwhile, Lenin’s family opposed any attempts to preserve

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the body in a vain attempt to prevent the emerging cult of his personality. Lenin’s widow Nadezhda Krupskaya wrote in the newspaper Pravda 30 January 1924, addressing the readers: “I have a big favor to ask you: do not let your grief for Il’ich go into the external adoration of his personality. Do not erect monuments to him, build palaces in his name, organize magnificent ceremonies in his memory—to all this he, during his lifetime, paid so little attention. All this was a burden to him.”

But (and here Lenin would have definitely agreed) the Party interests were more important than the individual ones: the revolution demanded more than Lenin’s whole life—it also needed his cadaver. After Lenin’s death the Party was left without a universally respected leader; it risked not just wallowing in the internal rows, but also being abandoned by the broad masses of its supporters. Rebutting this threat, Lenin’s preserved body signified a continuous material and spiritual presence of the late leader in the political life of the country, emphasizing the exclusive privilege of the Party to proclaim his decisions.

The Party’s intentions to rebuild Lenin as a quasi-god of the future religion were quite conscious:

This grave will become the site of the world’s pilgrimage. As long as in the world still remain the oppressed and the offended, for whom Lenin had lived and struggled, 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. Already now, Lenin’s name is inscribed in the sacred calendar [sviatsy] of the Revolution as the name of the people’s greatest leader who has ever appeared in history.

This new cult required its shrines. The sarcophagus and the mausoleum were commissioned to renowned architects Konstantin Melnikov and Alexey Schusev, respectively. Both used geometrical forms in order to convey abstract quasi-religious symbolism. For Schusev, “the cube is eternal in our architecture. It is from the cube that all the variety of architectural creativity stems.” Therefore, he suggested “to make the mausoleum in the memory of Vladimir Il’ich as a derivative of the cube.” At the same time, the form of Schusev’s mausoleum makes a reference to another symbol of eternity—Egyptian pyramids.

The sarcophagus was designed by Melnikov in the shape of a high tetrahedral pyramid, which is said to have resembled a crystal. Thrice reflected from the side glass, the body of Lenin-the-god was miraculously transformed into trinity. The dark Mourning Hall was lit just by the electric lamps at the top verge of the sarcophagus: the harsh dramatic light and sharp shadows were described as “à la El Greco.”

The uncanny darkness of the hall and the baffling reflections of the sarcophagus would have contrasted rather dramatically with the simplicity of Lenin’s appearance. His face was cleanly shaven and the body was dressed in a brown pseudo-military jacket of a type which, as the contemporaries noticed, he never wore during his lifetime. Presenting Lenin as a heroic martyr, the military costume was perhaps also referring to Fanny Kaplan’s 1918 bullet rather than to atherosclerosis as the real cause of Lenin’s death.

This atmosphere of cult and mystery, however, was undermined by the fact that this ‘shrine’ was completely open to everyone and, in fact, specifically designed for the display. It was supplemented with a positivistically objective exposition about the process of mummification: initially, alongside Lenin’s body one could see embalmed anatomical preparations (human body parts) that were preserved using the same technology as the actual body of Lenin. Also, the Party commission (which included Dzerzhinksy, Molotov, Voroshilov, and Krasin among others) asked the scientists to compile a “popular description of the method” and publish academic articles on the technology of Lenin’s preservation. Indeed, numerous publications followed in mass periodicals and scholarly journals, in Russian and Western languages as well as in the languages of other republics of the USSR.

This dualism of Lenin’s body has been recently noticed by Boris Grois, who called the Mausoleum a “videocombination of a pyramid and the British Museum”: “Lenin’s mummy is worshiped and solicitously
stored in the pyramid that is called ‘Mausoleum.’ At the same time, the museum ‘Mausoleum’ is exhibiting Lenin’s body.” Translating Groys’s argument into terms introduced by Walter Benjamin we can say that Lenin’s body unites cult and exhibition value. Indeed, cult value, in Benjamin’s theory, being the earliest form of artistic value, is an instrument of magic, which only later came to be recognized as a work of art; it demands art to be hidden, as in pre-historic caves. Exhibition value is its complete opposite: having emerged with the new forms of reproductive technology, it makes the art object visible and approachable to everyone.14

Groys continues to say that, although unraveled, the mummy still keeps its mystery due to special exhibition conditions: those of a contemporary art museum, which creates a mystery by” not demanding an explanation of why this or that example of banality is kept there.”15 In this respect, Groys compares Lenin’s mummy to a readymade, which, for him, is a banal object that happened to be in a museum only by an accident. To illustrate this observation, the scholar points to Lenin’s banal costume (the jacket, white shirt, and tie) that makes him look like everyone else.

However, I would like to suggest another explanation for the role of Lenin’s outfit: it indeed looks banal, but this banality was designed to destroy, not to create, the enigma. This costume dates back to the late-1930s—it was then when the relationship between cult and exhibition of Lenin’s body was reversed.

Indeed, in 1938 the conception of Lenin’s display was radically changed at the direct request of Stalin. The old Melnikov’s crystal-like sarcophagus was replaced by a new one, made after the architectural project of Schusev and sculptural decoration of Vsevolod Lakovlev in 1939-1944. The team of professionals working at redesigning the ‘exposition’ also included the leading Socialist Realist painter Alexander Gerasimov, who was responsible for supervising light and color effects.

In the new sarcophagus, the glass leaned towards the viewer to prevent reflections. The sarcophagus, which resembled rather a glass coffin with a little mausoleum model on its top than any abstract symbolic form, rested on a platform richly decorated with banners and other sculptural motifs. The light, too, was made less dramatic: sharp shadows disappeared, so that the contemporaries now compared it to Rembrandt’s palette. Moreover, the lamps were now supplied with pink filters that improved Lenin’s face color, making it more joyful in accordance with the new Stalinist aesthetics.

If Lenin’s old costume presented him (alongside with Stalin, who started wearing a jacket of the same type) as a heroic leader of the Revolution, the new one shifted him into the domain of subjects for whose happiness Stalin (still continuing to wear the old heroic costume) allegedly fought alone. Lenin’s new costume parallels—in time, subject, and goal—Old Bolsheviks’ purges: nobody was allowed to compete with Stalin for the role of the leader of the Revolution.

At the same time, in 1944 a central tribune was added to the Mausoleum (that previously had only two side tribunes). One could speculate that Lenin was now denied his voice: instead of being in the center of the building, with the actual speakers staying at his sides (which would have emphasized the idea that they were just mediums through whose mouths Lenin spoke), Lenin was now reduced to the role of a pedestal under the new ruler’s feet.

A further step in desacralization was achieved when, also in 1939, a secret embalming laboratory was created for the preservation of Lenin’s body and potentially applying the same techniques to creating other mummies (and indeed seven were produced between 1949 and 1994 to eternalize the leaders of other socialist countries). This replication of mummies destroyed the status of Lenin’s body as the only original, which, as Leah Dickerman has argued, previously guaranteed the truthfulness of multiple reproductions of his image, transferring it to the sphere of replicable objects.16

The year 1939 brought yet another reform: all the work connected to the functioning of this laboratory and the embalming of Lenin’s body became strictly secret.17 This move of Stalin raises many questions: nothing
could be farther away from the original conception of explaining all the scientific details of the process of embalming, and more contradictory to the desacralizing policy that Stalin adopted in regards to Lenin’s cult. How can this sacralizing move be reconciled with the desacralizing one that was made simultaneously? I suggest that by the late 1930s Lenin’s body had fulfilled its mission: unification of the country around the Communist Party and unification of the Party itself. Moreover, it became superfluous in the situation when the country was united around the new leader. Burying Lenin, however, would be perceived as blasphemy. The chosen way offered a solution to the dilemma: Lenin’s body remained in its place, signifying the continuity of the regimes, but by depriving it of the cult value and by transmitting the latter to the process of its preservation, the new ruler was stealing Lenin’s magic power: now only Stalin, who knew the secret, was the sole guarantor of his predecessor’s existence in the Mausoleum. Earlier, on the contrary, the body was sacral, whereas the process of its preservation was desacralized: this was legitimizing the status of Party leaders as being in magical touch with Lenin, still following his orders.

By saving his body for the future, the heirs of Lenin suggested two different stories their descendants had to learn about the Revolution: according to the first, recounted in 1924, Lenin was a godlike genius who gave his flesh and blood for the salvation of the people; according to the second, rewritten by Stalin, Lenin was a mere honest man, the preservation of whose body reminds one of the achievements of a future that has already ensued—a “better and more joyful” life that was finally brought to last forever.