

Russian Leaders and their Foreign Doctors: A Historical Review

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Introduction

Russian medicine had its zenith at the beginning of the 20th century when two Russian scientists were awarded the Nobel Prize; Ivan Pavlov (1904) for his work on the physiology of digestion, and Ilya Metchnikoff (1908) for his work on phagocytosis. In the late 19th century, Professor Sergey Botkin was a physician who served the Czar's family and oversaw their various ailments. Having replaced K.K. Gaartman, a German physician who was deemed insufficiently versed in internal diseases, Professor Botkin served as the royal physician to the Empress Maria Alexandrovna from 1870 to 1889 [1]. Professor Botkin was meticulous in conducting thorough examinations including skin temperature levels, pulse, cough intensity, physical strength, auscultation of the lungs, density and tenderness of the liver and spleen, the position of the kidneys, the thickness of subcutaneous fat, hearing condition, swelling of the legs, etc. Furthermore, in analyzing the content of the royal spittoon, its structure and the volume of sputum, Botkin used a microscope at a time when laboratory diagnostics as a specialty was just beginning to emerge. Botkin calculated the volume of urinary sediments as well as its gravity, carried out chemical reactions for protein identification, and searched the sputum for elastic fibers, which were a known sign of lung tissue destruction.¹ After studying abroad under Rudolf Virchow in Würzburg, Ernst Felix Hoppe and Ludwig Traube in Berlin, Karl Ludwig in Vienna, and Claude Bernard in Paris, Professor Botkin established a laboratory in his clinic for the first time in Russia [2].

Nikolay Sklifosovsky was another prominent pre-revolutionary physician who facilitated the widespread use of anesthesia in surgery, initiated abdominal surgery in Russia, and performed the first successful laparotomy. Sklifosovsky proposed the "Russian castle," which was a novel method of connecting tubular bones, and developed a technique for removing bladder stones, among others [3]. After he graduated from the Imperial Moscow University in 1859, Sklifosovsky was granted the opportunity to broaden and enhance his medical and surgical knowledge by visiting the best clinics of Germany, France, and Great Britain [3].

After the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, centralization, forced collectivization, international isolation, and restrictions on travel to Western Europe, medical sciences suffered from a lack of funding and a lack of government prioritization. The new Soviet government radically transformed medical care in Russia to a system that formally focused on equal access to health care and preventive medicine. The Soviet state declared that if their society was to function effectively, it must have healthy members. Because the state believed that health care is a right rather than a privilege, medical care should be free and available to all. Additionally, the government heavily prioritized preventive medicine as they believed that it was the foreground of all health activities. In order to implement these new approaches and to ensure health can be planned on a large scale, the government took control of all health activities and instituted the People's Commissariats of Health. Hence, medicine became a public function of the state [4].

On November 13, 1917, just days after the revolution, the government declared that the previous Czarist government, representing the capitalists and the landowners, failed the workers and all poor citizens. Because of this perceived abuse, the Soviet government promised to provide insurance for all wage workers and poor citizens covering all disabilities such as illness, injury, old age, maternity, etc. In implementing the state's desired focus of preventive medicine, in 1921, the aforementioned Commissariat of Health was tasked with monitoring the health of all people from the day they were born till their demise. Because the Soviet Union was devised to represent one great entity built in complete harmony, medical services became a function of the collective, i.e., if one individual is harmed, then all of society is harmed. In short, the new Russian state was an equal, collective society. This philosophy was put into practice first in health resorts, establishments once only available to the wealthy and privileged, now open to and handed back to the people [4].

Making healthcare free and accessible to all in Russia did not occur smoothly and was plagued with deficiencies. Leo Trotsky, one

of the founders of Bolshevism (communist expansion) in Russia, banned private practices, arrested, and threatened a number of prominent Russian physicians with the death penalty. All private hospitals built by philanthropists, such as Abrikosov and Morozov, were declared government property. There were serious shortages of physicians, medical personnel, and medical facilities [4]. The Soviet state was somewhat successful in granting medical care to its people regardless of class; however, the quality of the services suffered. Due to limited investment in medical research and technology, Soviet medicine fell far behind its Western counterparts. As a result of the many restrictions placed on physicians, medical education took a hit as doctors had no access to medical progress outside Russia and medical students were unable to study abroad. Unlike Czars Alexander II and III, who employed Professor Botkin as their personal physician [5-11], the leaders of the Soviet Union could not easily secure a Russian physician for specific ailments requiring specialized expertise. They had isolated Russian society from the West by outlawing Western influences, including advances in medicine. The leaders of the Soviet Union were stuck with the equal health system that was accessible to all citizens, and were not satisfied, as they felt that given their high-ranking position, they merited better [12-15].

Consequently, the Soviet government created two systems of medical care; one for regular citizens, and one for highly privileged, high-ranking government officials, essentially creating an upper class with regards to access to high-quality health care. Top government officials, including Politburo members, were allowed to use top foreign physicians who were invited to Russia to provide consultative and surgical services. Starting with Vladimir Lenin, Soviet leaders used prominent Western specialists, eluding the equal system of which they were the creators. Although communist philosophy endeavors to treat all working people as equals, the leaders' families were provided with the best health care available around the globe, a service that was unattainable for the common man.

Below, please find a pictorial essay of Russian leaders and dignitaries (on the left) and their foreign doctors (on the right).

VIP Patients

Vladimir I Lenin (Ulyanov) (1870-1924) was a pivotal figure in world politics in the early part of the 20th century. He was one of the founders of the Russian Bolshevik (communist) party and became the first head of the Soviet government. An atheist and true believer in the class theory of Karl Marx, Lenin stood as an icon of communism. In an assassination attempt on Lenin that took place on August 30, 1918, he was wounded and operated on.

Later he developed a right hemiparesis, including both the arm and the leg. During a period of slow recovery, he resumed his activities at home. He wrote articles, or rather, dictated them to his wife or secretary. Lenin asked Stalin for potassium cyanide, saying, "if I lose my speech, I'll take poison." According to Fotieva, Lenin's secretary, in December 1922, Lenin secretly sent his secretary to Stalin for poison, but was apparently refused after Stalin consulted

with Foerster, Lenin's attending physician, who confirmed Lenin's sister's impression of the unpredictability of his illness.

Felix Klemperer, Professor of Medicine, Berlin, Germany. On April 7, 1922, Lenin wrote to Ordzhonikidze complaining of continuing headaches. Dr. Felix Klemperer suggested the symptoms might indicate lead poisoning caused by the bullets remaining in Lenin's body since the attempt on his life of August 30, 1918. His colleague disagreed with him; nonetheless 1 of 2 bullets was surgically removed by professor Moritz Borchardt from Berlin [16-22] (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Moritz Borchardt, Professor of Surgery, Germany.

Otfrid Foerster (1873-1941) was a student of Carl Wernicke and a renowned German neurologist. Foerster developed several procedures, including electrocorticography for the identification of epileptic foci. He also described the atonic-astatic type of cerebral palsy, which bears his name. His reputation as a neurologist, as well as his speaking knowledge of Russian, made him a natural choice as one of Lenin's consultants (Figures 2 & 3).

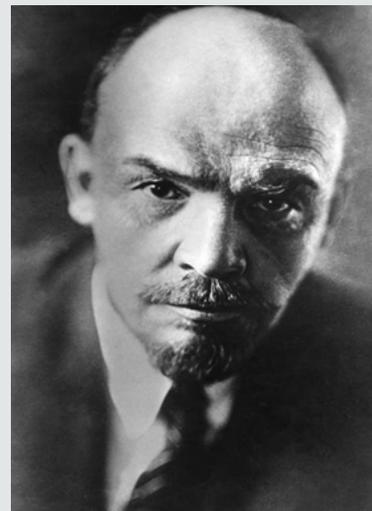


Figure 2: Vladimir I. Lenin (1870-1924).



Figure 3: Otfried Foerster (1873-1941).



Figure 4: Elena Khrushcheva, Nikita Khrushchev, Rada Adgubey.

Elena Khrushcheva (1937—1972), N. Khrushchev's daughter, who suffered from Lupus with renal involvement (Figure 4).



Figure 5: A. McGehee Harvey and his wife, Dr. Elizabeth Treide Harvey.

A. McGehee Harvey (1911-1998) was born in Little Rock, Arkansas (USA). He developed the first research-based school of medicine in the United States at the Johns Hopkins Hospital (Figure 5). "He was truly one of the greatest physicians of the 20th century" said one of his students, Dr. Eugene Braunwald, at the Hersey Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School. Dr. Harvey's application of scientific methods and clinical problem-solving got him called upon for difficult cases around the world. In 1969, Dr. Harvey and his wife, Dr. Elizabeth Treide Harvey, went to the Soviet Union to treat the daughter of Nikita S. Khrushchev, the former Soviet leader, for lupus, which was one of his specialties.

M. Suslov, Politburo member

He suffered from Angina (Figure 6)



Figure 6: M. Suslov(1902-1982).

M. Suslov's wife

She suffered from poorly controlled diabetes mellitus.



Figure 7: Bernard Lown

Bernard Lown (June 7, 1921) was born in Lithuania. He emigrated to the United States at the age of 14. Dr. Lown is the original developer of the DC defibrillator and the cardioverter (Figure 7). In 1985, Lown accepted the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, an organization he co-founded with Soviet cardiologist, Yevgeny Chazov, who later became the Minister of Health of the USSR. Bernard Lown was once asked to see Suslov's wife in the Kremlin Hospital; it was one of the few cases where a renowned foreign doctor was invited to visit the Kremlin Hospital. Suslov expressed his gratitude for Lown's work but avoided meeting Lown in person because he was a representative of an "imperialistic" country.

Mstislav Keldysh, a nuclear scientist and President of the Soviet Academy of Science (1961-1975).

He was a chain smoker and suffered from chronic vascular insufficiency (Figure 8).

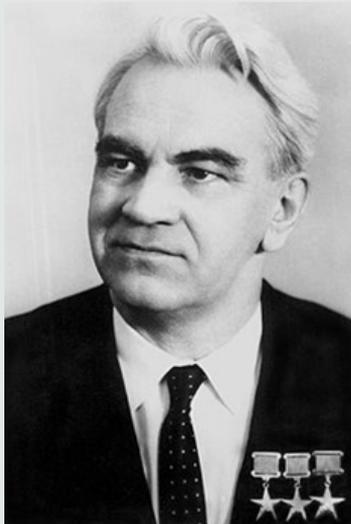


Figure 8: Mstislav Keldysh (1911-1978).

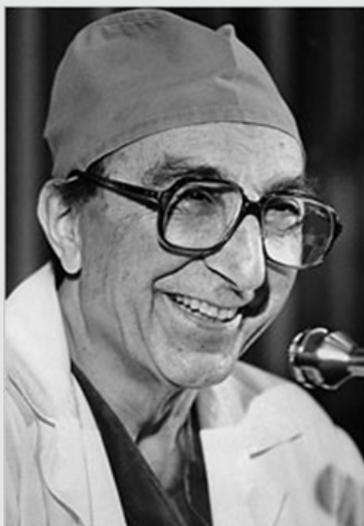


Figure 9: M. DeBakey (1908-2008).

M. DeBakey (1908-2008) was born in Lake Charles, Louisiana (USA). He pioneered the use of Dacron grafts to replace or repair blood vessels (Figure 9). In 1958, Dr. DeBakey performed the first successful patch-graft angioplasty. The patch widened the artery, so that when it closed, the channel of the artery returned to normal size. He also never let politics come between him and delivering needed care. In the middle of the Cold War he became a respected physician in the Soviet Union, operating on Mstislav Keldysh, the President of the Soviet Academy of Scientists during the 1970's.

Leonid Brezhnev, General Secretary (1964-1982)

Suffered from speech impairment and dental issues (Figure 10)



Figure 10: Leonid Brezhnev.

Jacobs, DDS and Oral Surgeon

Bonn, Germany

Yuri Andropov, KGB Chief, General Secretary (1982-1984) (Figure 11)



Figure 11: Yuri Andropov.

Suffered from chronic renal insufficiency

A. Rubin, Cornell University. Dr. Rubin was the first nephrologist in New York to provide kidney dialysis (1956)

and renal transplantation (1963) (Figure 12). To implement his comprehensive, integrative approach to kidney disease, he created the Rogosin Institute. Dr. Rubin* initiated and shepherded the Institute's major research programs in renal disease, diabetes, lipid disorders, and cancer. By the summer of 1983, Andropov's health was giving rise to serious concern. He found it hard to move, signs of general debility increased. Yevgeny Chazov, the Health Minister and Chief of the 4th Main Administration, which included the Kremlin clinic, recalled that Professor A. Rubin, a noted American specialist, was invited to Moscow. Rubin carried out a thorough examination and concurred with treatment the Soviet physicians had been giving. His diagnosis was generally encouraging and reassuring.



Figure 12: Rubin.

Konstantin Chernenko, General Secretary (1984-1985) (Figure 13)



Figure 13: Konstantin Chernenko.

Dr. Patterson, LA California.

A former chain smoker, he suffered from chronic obstructive lung disease, and emphysema

Raisa, Gorbacheva, wife of Mikhail Gorbachev, Soviet President, suffered from leukemia (1932-1999) (Figure 14)



Figure 14: Raisa Gorbacheva and Mikhail Gorbachev.



Figure 15: Thomas Büchner.

Thomas Büchner was born in Berlin. He graduated from the Albert-Ludwig University in Freiburg (Figure 15). In 1971, his publication "Inflammatory cells in Blood and Tissues" was awarded the Theodor-Frerich Prize from the German Society for Internal Medicine, followed by a professorship in Internal Medicine and Hematology at Wilhelms University in Münster. He managed a Laboratory of Special Hematology at the Medical Clinic of Münster University. Raisa Gorbacheva travelled with her husband and daughter to Münster in Germany for treatment at the medical clinic of the Münster University Hospital. She received treatment for two months under the supervision of Professor Thomas Büchner, a leading hematologist.

In 2007, in memory of his wife, Mikhail Gorbachev, in cooperation with Pavlov University, funded the construction of the Raisa Gorbacheva memorial institute for Hematology and Transplantation, which started to work with the support of Professor Büchner.

Boris Yeltsin, Russian President (1991-1999)

Suffered from chronic heart disease and multiple heart attacks.

Later, due to chronic alcoholism, B. Yeltsin suffered from an

unspecified neurological disorder that affected his sense of balance, causing him to wobble as if in a drunken state.

Dr. M. DeBakey

In addition to providing Mstislav Keldysh with medical care, Dr. DeBakey worked extensively on treating heart patients.

DeBakey operated on more than 60,000 patients, including several heads of state. DeBakey and a team of American cardiothoracic surgeons supervised a quintuple bypass surgery performed by Russian surgeons on Russian President Boris Yeltsin in 1996 (Figure 16).



Figure 16: Boris Yeltsin and Michael Ellis DeBakey.



Figure 17: Michael Staal.

Dr. Michael Staal was born in Amsterdam on August 17, 1949 (Figure 17). He wrote many articles on neuromodulation and received a professorship for neuromodulation in 2003. He was chairman of the Benelux Neuromodulation Society (BNS) chapter of the INS from 2009-14. He successfully organized several symposia

on motor cortex stimulation. He had been secretly flown to Moscow to operate on Yeltsin; the goal of the operation was pain reduction.

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