

**'The Final Struggle':
The Art of the Soviet Death Mask**

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“Death is a highly mediocre portraitist.”

-Johann Wolfgang von Goethe¹



The sculptor Sergei Merkurov was working late one night in his Moscow studio, bundled in furs against the winter cold, when the phone rang. The voice on the other end informed him that he was being sent on a secret assignment. A car pulled up, and two secret policemen in leather jackets emerged to push him inside. Merkurov still did not know where he was going as they exited a motor coach outside Moscow and climbed into a horse-drawn sleigh. It was January 24, 1924, and Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the Revolution, lay dead at his estate. Inside, the mirrors were shrouded in black cloth, in keeping with the belief that the dead man’s spirit can use them to return and claim the living. Merkurov was ushered to the table where the leader’s body lay under bright lights. “It was like a dream,” he later wrote. Lenin’s widow, Nadezhda Krupskaya, approached the sculptor. “You were supposed to sculpt Lenin’s bust,” she whispered. “Now, you must make his mask.”²

The making of Lenin’s death mask became part of the mythology of his death, the moment when the leader “shed the mortal husk of his body to become the personification of the building

¹ “Der Tod ist ein sehr mittelmässiger Portratmaler.” Quoted in *Le Dernier Portrait, Musée d’Orsay, Paris, 5 mars-26 mai 2002* (Paris: Réunion des Musées nationaux, 2002), 34.

² S.D. Merkurov. *Vospominaniia. Pis'ma. Stat'i. Zametki. Suzhdeniia sovremennikov* (Moscow: Kremlin Multimedia, 2012), 160-62.

of socialism.”³ In Moscow and Leningrad, Tashkent and Ul’ianovsk, Soviet citizens were urged to venerate plaster copies of the relic in their local Lenin Museum. Meanwhile, Lenin’s death mask served as invaluable source material for the dozens of artists who created statues of him across the Soviet Union. The death mask also became part of Merkurov’s personal myth, securing him commissions for the Soviet Union’s premiere Lenin statues and a prime position in the emerging art establishment. Merkurov would repeat the story of how he cast Lenin’s death mask time and again. The mask was his key to power—and it could not hurt to remind his colleagues.⁴

Death masks had been made of European monarchs and cultural luminaries since the fourteenth century. But at the same time that this tradition was fading in the rest of Europe, the Bolsheviks embraced it with relish. From 1917 to 1991, dozens of Soviet sculptors created hundreds of death masks. They immortalized the members of a wide variety of professions: ideologues and agronomists, coin collectors and circus clowns. Most Soviet citizens had little idea of the practice’s scope, and it has received almost no attention from historians.⁵ Part of the difficulty lies in the secrecy that has always surrounded death masks. While some masks are on display in museums, many more reside solely with families or friends of the deceased. Sculptors rarely wrote or spoke publicly about making them, and their hasty, hush-hush creation left little by way of a paper trail. Nevertheless, by piecing together photographs, memoirs, newspaper articles, and family archives, we can begin to build a picture of this largely forgotten art form.

Top Bolsheviks’ death masks performed a key ideological function in Soviet society. They bolstered the cult of revolutionary martyrdom, which created new heroes to replace the idols of the old regime. The appropriation of an imperial tradition by an avowedly anti-imperial project was in keeping with Soviet culture’s millenarian self-conception, which empowered it to raid the past for its own ends. While Communist ideologues disavowed the idea of a transcendental afterlife, the death mask helped immortalize a new set of Bolshevik saints. At the same time, the friends and family of cultural luminaries commissioned death masks in greater numbers than ever before, with the official adoption of the practice serving to bolster its popularity among a wide range of prominent members of society. While some of these masks were installed in museums, others remained in friends and loved ones’ homes, becoming meaningful pieces of prosthetic memory.

According to the literary scholars Elisabeth Bronfen and Sarah Webster Goodwin, “The

3 Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 67.

4 For example, Merkurov told a version of the story to the staff of the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, of which he was then serving as the director, on the twenty-second anniversary of Lenin’s death. OR GMII, f. 81 o. 1 e.kh. 29 l. 3. The story was also recounted at Gorki-Leninskie, the estate outside Moscow where Lenin died, which became a house museum in 1949. See V. Volkova, *Lenin v Gorkakh* (Moskva: Moskovskii rabochii, 1968), p. 113-4.

5 There is only one book on death masks in Russian, a brief volume dominated by mystical interpretations from one of the authors. The literature on death masks in Europe is also scant. The authoritative book on the subject, Ben-
kard’s *Undying Faces*, was published in 1929.

community's idea of itself in history cannot be disentangled from the ways it represents death."⁶ Death masks were powerful totems, confirming the importance of recipient and maker alike. However, the meanings tied to them were contradictory and constantly shifting. Their uncanny straddling of the boundary between life and death led them to be viewed in diverse and unpredictable ways, which called their sacred status into question. While they were sometimes revered, they were also mocked, feared, or ignored. The death mask became a mirror image of the hopes, anxieties, and absurdities of Soviet society itself.

An Ancient Tradition

In late nineteenth-century Russia, as in the rest of Europe, the deaths of monarchs, nobles, and cultural icons were honored with an elaborate set of rituals. They included deathbed portraits and photographs, which were often printed on the front pages of the papers, lying-in-states, lengthy funeral processions, and commemorative memorabilia, including postcards and wreaths.⁷ The 1894 funeral of Tsar Alexander III featured over 200 sections of mourners processing through the streets of the capital, which were draped in black, and the details of his autopsy were published on newspapers' front pages.⁸ The Bolsheviks appropriated these funerary practices to create their own cult of martyrdom, with splendid "red funerals" commemorating the deaths of revolutionaries such as V. Volodarskii. In keeping with Orthodox tradition, red funerals, unlike those of French revolutionaries, had an open casket.⁹ The customs embraced in the revolutionary years continued for the rest of the Soviet era. When top Party officials and allied cultural figures died, artists were invited to create death masks and portraits. Next came the autopsy, during which the brain was sometimes removed for study at Moscow's Brain Institute.¹⁰ The deceased was then displayed at a sumptuous lying-in-state, their coffins surrounded by lilies and palms. After a large funeral procession through Moscow or Leningrad, the ashes were either interred in the Kremlin wall, or the coffin was taken to one of the country's most prestigious cemeteries, especially Novodevich'e.¹¹ There was even a special type of coffin for leading officials, No. 6.¹²

6 Elisabeth Bronfen and Sarah Webster Goodwin, *Death and Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 15.

7 For example, after Victor Hugo's death in 1885, painters, sculptors, and photographers were called in to memorialize his body. Hugo's deathbed portrait appeared widely in the press, and on postcards sold to the public. For more on these rituals in late nineteenth century France and Germany, see *Le Dernier Portrait*, 39-62.

8 Catherine Merridale, *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Twentieth Century Russia* (London: Granta Books, 2000), 34.

9 Avner Ben-Amos, *Funerals, Politics, and Memory in Modern France, 1789-1996* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 21-23.

10 The Brain Institute opened in 1928 to study Lenin's brain, and continued to analyze Bolshevik brains for evidence of genius for the rest of the Soviet era. See Monika Spivak, *Mozg otprav'te po adresu...* (Moskva: Astrel', Corpus, 2010), 37.

11 Merridale, *Night of Stone*, 181-95.

12 Valerii Perezvozhchikov, *Pravda smertnogo chasa: Vladimir Vysotskii: god 1980-i* (Moskva: Sampo, 1998), 212.

Though largely absent from historians' accounts, the death mask was a key part of this ritual.¹³ While the funeral drew to a close and the tomb was confined to a cemetery, the individual's sacred memory lived on in the mask, which was displayed, reproduced, and transformed into sculpture. The practice has its origins in ancient Egypt, where funerary masks were placed over mummies' faces to help the spirit locate its body upon its return to earth.¹⁴ Death masks appeared in Western Europe during the Middle Ages, when they became part of the court funerals of French and English monarchs. The royal's body was displayed for days or weeks at a splendid lying-in-state. To avoid decay, a puppet stood in for the actual remains, with wax casts of the deceased's face and hands lending the effigy a lifelike appearance. This practice gradually subsided with the rise of more effective preservation methods, but the casting of death masks continued.¹⁵ The first death mask in Russia was made of Peter the Great in 1725. The tradition remained a standard part of the court funeral ritual through the end of the Romanovs' reign.¹⁶

Death masks' precise documentation of the facial features also made them helpful tools for artists. During the Renaissance, the rise of naturalistic portraiture called for a better understanding of the face's structure. Leonardo da Vinci's teacher Verrocchio pioneered the usage of death masks in fifteenth-century Florence.¹⁷ This innovation laid the groundwork for the gradual emergence of death masks and hand casts as objects of veneration in their own right. This changing use was connected to the rise of the Enlightenment cult of the "great man" and *Sturm und Drang*, which identified the face as the seat of genius. Death masks' popularity peaked in the nineteenth century, when "great men" such as Napoleon, Schiller, Dickens, Chopin, Beethoven, and Goethe all received masks.¹⁸ Death masks and life masks also became a fixture in the United States, immortalizing the features of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln.¹⁹ Nineteenth-century Russia was no exception: death masks were made of writers Alexander Pushkin, Ivan Turgenev, and Fedor Dostoevskii; painters Il'ia Repin and Ivan Aivazovskii; textile merchant and art patron Pavel Tretiakov; the assassinated reformer Petr Stolypin; and philosophers Nikolai Fedorov and Vissarion Belinskii, among others.²⁰

The process of casting a death mask has remained more or less the same since Verrocchio's day. The sooner they are taken after death, the better, as rigor mortis begins to stiffen the features

13 In *Night of Stone*, for example, there is a brief, single reference to Lenin's death mask on p. 189, and no mention of any others.

14 Cleo Bell Hendricks, *A History of the Death Mask* (Master's Thesis, San Francisco State College, 1972), 1.

15 Ernest Benard, *Undying Faces: A Collection of Death Masks*, trans. Margaret M. Green (London: Hogarth Press, 1929), 18-24.

16 Dmitry Shlenskii and Pavel Globa, *Posmertnaia maska* (Moskva: Tsentr Evropy, 2004), 13.

17 David Meschutt, Mark L. Taff, and Lauren R. Boglioli, "Life Masks and Death Masks," *The American Journal of Forensic Medicine and Pathology* 13(4):315-19, 1992, 315.

18 *Le Dernier Portrait*, 35.

19 Meschutt, Taff, and Boglioli, "Life Masks," 316.

20 Shlenskii and Globa, *Posmertnaia maska*, 13-14.

within four or five hours. Depending on the temperature and humidity, the typical maximum window for casting is three days. With the corpse lying flat, chin tilted back, the artist applies a small amount of oil to the face, plugs the ears and nose with cotton, and sometimes lays a thin layer of paper over the hair. A thread is laid down the middle of the face from forehead to chin, and a layer of plaster poured on top. Once the plaster has set, the thread is used to break the mask in two and lift it off the face, and the two pieces are fit together again. This initial cast, sometimes referred to as “the negative,” is then filled in with plaster to create the finished, three-dimensional mask. The first masks made from this cast, which often contain hairs from the deceased, are considered to be “originals.” Within these general guidelines, there are many variations; for example, some sculptors cast the entire head, which was Merкуроv’s trademark, while others do only the face. Flaws might be retouched, and details such as hair or a shirt collar can be added in, though some consider this to be sacrilege.²¹

In the first half of the twentieth century, death masks continued to be made of celebrities and politicians. This extended to Nazi Germany, where a death mask was made of Heidrich Himmler, and Reinhard Heydrich’s mask even appeared on a Third Reich postage stamp.²² By mid-century, however, the tradition of death masks was fading into obscurity in both Europe and the United States. The explanation usually given for its demise is the rise of photography, which supplanted paintings and masks as a way of memorializing the deceased.²³ Changing attitudes towards death and the body were also a factor. Death became increasingly removed from the social setting of the home to the closed-off arena of the hospital, with artists replaced by doctors.²⁴ The body gradually began to be seen as a static and bounded object, and the corpse itself as distasteful and unhygienic.²⁵ The Soviet context, however, confounds this narrative of gradual disappearance. Rather than dying out, death masks were made in greater numbers than ever before, and of a remarkably wide array of people. Soviet ideology needed a new breed of saints to replace the old, and the death mask became one of the key means of canonization. At the same time, it became part of popular fashion, a way of mourning and venerating prominent citizens within an ideologically

21 This description of the casting process is taken primarily from German sculptor George Kolbe’s account in Benkard, *Undying Faces*, 43-45. Kolbe writes that while the muscles are still warm, “the face is transfigured as if in a final glow of youth,” but the death mask is often taken when the muscles have already stiffened, and “consequently the image obtained is one of life distorted.” Kolbe takes umbrage at sculptors who add “hair and other adornments,” which he calls “a violation and a false counterfeit of life” (45). For another explanation of casting, see Malvina Hoffman, *Sculpture Inside and Out* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1939), 99.

22 Valerii Bochkov, “Berlinskaia latun’,” *Oktiabr’*, March 31, 2014, 14-83, 68.

23 *Le Dernier Portrait*, 14.

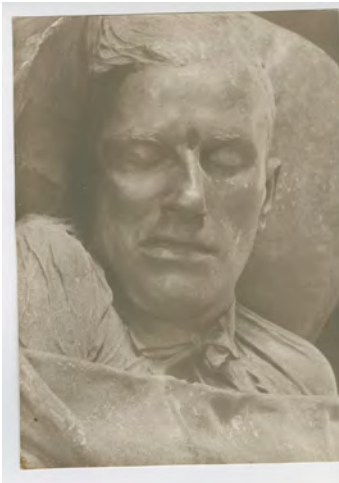
24 John McManners, “Death and the French Historians” in *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death*, ed. Joachim Whaley (London: Europa Publications, 1981), 120.

25 Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey. *Death, Memory, and Material Culture* (Providence, RI: Berg, 2001), 153. Hallam and Hockey trace the near-total disappearance of deathbed photography and relic jewelry in North America and Britain in the mid-twentieth century, which they connect with an emergent view of the dead body as distasteful and an attendant shift in emphasis toward the living, mourning body.

acceptable framework. In effect, pre-revolutionary tradition fused with official policy to revitalize an art form that was increasingly dying off in the rest of Europe.

The most important death mask commissions went through the Central Committee, but the imperative to cast as soon as possible left little time for meetings or protocols.²⁶ In most cases, a phone call was simply placed to an established sculptor—ideally, “sculptor number one.”²⁷ With some members of the intelligentsia, such as Anna Akhmatova and Andrei Sakharov, family and friends took the initiative in commissioning a mask. The sculptor was usually acquainted with the deceased, which may have been a factor in who was chosen for the commission; for example, the sculptor Nikolai Nikogosian, who made Dmitri Shostakovich’s death mask in 1975, was a longtime friend of the family.²⁸

Especially from the late 1950s, when the Soviet art world became less centralized, loved ones might approach a sculptor who knew the deceased, regardless of whether they were established in Moscow. In 1970, for example, the death mask of the poet Nikolai Rubtsov was made by Valentin Malygin, a little-known artist friend from Vologda.²⁹ In at least one instance, a Soviet celebrity even arranged for a death mask himself. Maiakovskii broached the topic with Merkurov in their last meeting before his suicide in 1930. “Sergei, if you die before me, I’ll make you a monument in poetry—I’ll write a poem about you and shout it from the rooftops,” Maiakovskii said. “If I die first, promise me you’ll make me the best mask you’ve ever made.”³⁰



Vladimir Maiakovskii, 1930

Despite Communist claims to women’s liberation, Soviet death masks largely adhered to the “great man” formula of the nineteenth century. Though masks were awarded to representatives of a highly diverse array of professions, only a handful of them were women. The most important commissions were of Party heads and their families—the Soviet equivalent of the royal court. Lenin’s wife and sisters all had death masks, for example, as did Stalin’s wife and father-in-law. Death masks were also made of high Party officials, such as Mikhail Kalinin, the longtime Central Executive Committee chairman of the Russian Congress of Soviets, and atheist ideologue Emel’ian Iaroslavskii, the *Bezbozhnik* editor and enthusiastic Stalin

26 Interview with Dmitrii Shlenskii in Kiev, February 8, 2014.

27 Sergei Rogoshkin, “Posmertnaia Maska,” *Komsomolskaia pravda*, December 14, 1998, accessed September 22, 2014, <http://www.mk.ru/old/article/1998/12/14/129665-posmertnaya-maska.html>

28 Interview with Nikolai Nikogosian in Moscow, September 25, 2013.

29 Aleksandr Bobrov, “Pust’ dusha ostanetsia chista,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, January 18-24, 2006, 7.

30 Merkurov, *Vospominaniia*, 512.

hagiographer nicknamed “the Soviet pope.” Though Iaroslavskii mocked the concept of an afterlife, his obituaries fit a Christ-like view of immortality into a Bolshevik framework: “When people such as Emel’ian Mikhailovich die, do they really leave this life?” asked his obituary in *Pravdist*. “No, they remain with us. For Emel’ian Mikhailovich left us a great legacy... the legacy of his life, his embodiment of the true Bolshevik, which we must keep sacred and embody in our own lives.”³¹ Merkurov’s death mask of Iaroslavskii, made in 1943, is frozen in a pained whimper. Andrei Zhdanov, Stalin’s chief post-war ideologue, received a mask that includes his shirt collar and tie, a reflection of the business-like style popular among officials after the war.



Emel’ian Iaroslavskii, 1943

Leading foreign communists also received death masks, including German socialist and International Women’s Day founder Clara Zetkin and Grigorii Dimitrov, the first Communist head of Bulgaria. Khorloogiin Choibalsan, the Stalin-esque Prime Minister of the Mongolian People’s Republic, became Merkurov’s last mask before his own death in 1952. The famed sculptor’s death mask was made by his pupils.³² Death masks were made of secret police heads including OGPU founder Feliks Dzerzhinskii and his successor Viacheslav Menzhinskii. During and after World War II, death masks were increasingly made of military commanders, including Pavel Rybalko, Boris Shaposhnikov, and Fedor Tolbukhin.³³

In the Party hierarchy, what mattered was not only who received a death mask, but who did not. For political elites, the mask was a token of inclusion in the Bolshevik pantheon, but it was also a sign of exclusion or excommunication for those left outside it. Khrushchev, who had been deposed from the post of general secretary seven years before his death, is the only Soviet leader who did not receive a death mask.³⁴ Among collectors, there is a legend that death masks were made of Nikolai Bukharin and other top figures murdered in Stalin’s terror, evidence of which is located in the Federal Security Service’s closed archives.³⁵ If so, this would be in keeping with the French Revolution, when a young woman named Marie Grosholtz made death masks of the guillotined heads of figures including Robespierre. She would



Clara Zetkin, 1933

31 Merkurov, *Vospominaniia*, 271.

32 Merkurov’s mask and hand casts can be seen at his house museum in Giumri, Armenia, along with many of the death masks he created.

33 The above masks were all made by Merkurov. Shlenskii, *Posmertnaia maska*, 18-19.

34 Andrei Veimarn, “Litsa ushedshei epokhi,” *Politicheskii zhurnal*, September 17, 2007, accessed September 25, 2014, <http://www.politjournal.ru/index.php?action=Articles&issue=201&tek=7299&dirid=57>

35 Interview with Dmitri Shlenskii, February 8, 2014.

later become known as Madame Tussaud, and exhibit the death masks at her eponymous wax museum in London.³⁶

As in Pushkin's day, friends and family commissioned death masks of cultural luminaries. They included auteur Sergei Eisenstein, theater director Konstantin Stanislavskii, *Doctor Zhivago* author Boris Pasternak, satirist Il'ia Ilf, circus clown Vladimir Durov, Lenin impersonator Boris Shchukin, and Brezhnev-era movie star Andrei Mironov, among many others. Death masks were also made of leaders in various fields, such as mathematician Andrei Kostikov, aircraft designer Andrei Tupolev, and polar aviator Valerii Chkalov.³⁷ Aleksei Oreshnikov, a numismatist at the State Historical Museum who specialized in ancient Russian coins, had a mask made by Merкуроv



Aleksei Oreshnikov, 1933

after his death from cancer in 1933. Oreshnikov oversaw the Bolsheviks' mass export of Russia's ancient artworks in exchange for hard currency, which he tried to prevent as best he could. In a May 1930 diary entry, he described how he "hid... all of the items (textiles and silver) from Aleksandrov, so that the 'brigades' wouldn't see them."³⁸ In 1972, a death mask was made of paleontologist and geologist Ivan Efremov. Though he pioneered taphonomy, the study of fossilization, Efremov was perhaps best known as the author of the 1957 fantasy novel *Andromeda Nebula*.³⁹ Death masks were also made of leading doctors and scientists, including neurologist Mikhail Krol, forestry specialist Nikolai Nesterov, and Sergei Spasokukotskii, a surgeon and expert on blood transfusion.⁴⁰

Competition among artists

Death masks were as important for their creators as they were for their subjects. They were a key part of the struggle for supremacy in the Soviet art hierarchy, a world with all the insular competition of Europe's royal courts. Under Stalin, a handful of powerful sculptors controlled the committees that handled commissions, which they usually assigned to themselves. After Stalin's death, the Soviet art system decentralized somewhat, opening up commissions to a wider array of artists. However, making death masks remained an important gateway to achieving prominence as a sculptor.⁴¹ Throughout the Soviet era, the sculptor who made the death mask was usually

36 Shlenskii, *Posmertnaia maska*, 8-9.

37 Shlenskii, *Posmertnaia maska*, 18-21; Tupolev, interview with Nikogosian.

38 P.G. Gaidukov, ed. *Aleksei Vasil'evich Oreshnikov. Dnevnik 1915-1933, kniga 1* (Moskva: Nauka, 2010), 8.

39 P.K. Chudnikov, *Ivan Antonovich Efremov* (Moskva: Nauka, 1987), 5. Mask mentioned in Iu. Shvedovaia, "Panorama pečati," *Nauchnaia kniga*, July 1, 2001, 65.

40 Shlenskii and Globa, *Posmertnaia maska*, 18-19.

41 For more on the commissions system in the Stalinist and post-Stalinist era, see Sergei Kruk, "Semiotics of

awarded subsequent commissions for sculptures of the deceased.⁴² In 1936, for example, sculptor Matvei Manizer, who after the war became the founding Vice President of the all-powerful USSR Academy of Arts, cast the death mask of physiologist Ivan Pavlov. In the same year he created a bust of Pavlov for the All-Union Institute of Experimental Medicine (VIEM), followed in 1949 by a full-size sculpture for the city of Riazan'.⁴³

Beyond their promise of future commissions, death masks provided a general entrée into the ranks of the Party elite, sealing relationships with people in power. Merкуроv's career arc is



Sergei Merкуроv in the 1920s

indicative of how a death mask could open the door to success. In 1924, Merкуроv was one of many sculptors competing for state commissions; early designs such as a statue of Marx standing astride four elephants were rejected.⁴⁴ Merкуроv got the call to cast Lenin's mask because he had received acclaim for his mask of Tolstoi, which was cast at Astapovo in 1910 and displayed at the Tolstoi exhibition in Moscow the following year.⁴⁵ After completing Lenin's mask, Merкуроv received commissions to create Lenin sculptures for some of the central halls of power, including the Presidium of the Council of Soviets. As the number of his death mask commissions grew—Merкуроv made seven masks in 1934 alone—so too did his status in the art establishment.⁴⁶

After creating monumental Lenin and Stalin statues for the Volga Canal, the All-Russian Exhibition Center, and the 1937 World's Fair, Merкуроv got the biggest prize of all: the right to design the 100-meter-tall Lenin atop the Palace of Soviets. Like his creations, Merкуроv was a colossus—"a huge man with a black, very black beard, a beard as black as night, a beard brimful of stars."⁴⁷ In 1948, the sculptor claimed that there were a staggering two million Lenin and Stalin busts of his design across the Soviet Union. He is known to have made at least one hundred nineteen death masks. As Merкуроv put it with no small amount of pride: "I made the death mask of almost every revolutionary."⁴⁸

Making death masks may have been unpleasant, as we will see, but the rewards were worth it.⁴⁹ After ascending to the top of the hierarchy with the help of mask commissions, important

Visual Iconicity" in *Visual Communication* 7, no.1 (2010) and Kruk, "Profit Rather Than Politics: The Production of Lenin Monuments in Soviet Latvia" in *Social Semiotics* 20:3 (June 2010).

42 Interview with Nikogosian.

43 M. Manizer, *Skul'ptor o svoei rabote* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1952), 26-27.

44 Merкуроv, *Vospominaniia*, 245.

45 Ibid, 141.

46 Shlenskii, *Posmertnaia maska*, 18-19.

47 Yuri Olesha, *No Day without a Line*, trans. Judson Rosengrant (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 119.

48 OR GMII, f. 81 o. 1 e.kh. 1

49 In Nikogosian's words, "money makes people dance" ("za den'gi mozhesh' tantsevat"). Interview with Nikogosian.

sculptors became Party members. They were given cars with drivers, spacious dachas in prized locations, access to special food stores, and the right to travel abroad. When they got sick, they were treated in the Kremlin hospital, nicknamed the “Kremlevka.” Official sculptors’ privileged status contrasted sharply with that of their *pomoshchniki* (assistants), the men who did the bulk of physical labor that goes into making sculpture, including death masks. In memoirs, these assistants are rarely mentioned by name, and if they are, it might be with a shortened form of their last name (i.e., “Nikifor”), rather than the more respectful name and patronymic.⁵⁰ Young art school students had a chance to join the elite by apprenticing with a prominent sculptor.⁵¹ However, these students had a higher status than the *pomoshchniki*. While the relationship between sculptors and their *pomoshchniki* could be affectionate, the latter were ordinary workers, firmly outside the upper echelons of the system.



Ivan Shadr

The “bloody battle for the pie” (“*krovavaia bor’ba za pirog*”), as the dissident sculptor Ernst Neizvestnyi referred to the Soviet commissions system, could lead to long-running feuds.⁵² Merкуроv’s main rival was the sculptor Ivan Shadr. The son of a carpenter, Shadr (born Ivanov in 1887) grew up in the Urals. Before enrolling in art school, he worked various odd jobs, including as a street cleaner and shoe shiner; at one point, he considered suicide.⁵³ Though he lacked Merкуроv’s refinement, Shadr was handsome and musically gifted, winning comparisons to Fedor Chaliapin.⁵⁴ In 1924, Shadr scorned Merкуроv’s death mask of Lenin as “mechanical.”⁵⁵ Merкуроv had his revenge in 1938, when according to Shadr’s biographer he had the latter’s statue of Sergo Ordzhonikidze removed from an exhibition in the middle of the night and destroyed.⁵⁶ Shadr’s life was cut short by stomach cancer in 1941.⁵⁷

50 Merкуроv, *Vospominaniia*, 307.

51 For example, Ernst Neizvestnyi worked in the studios of several top sculptors, including Merкуроv and Tomskii, before becoming established in his own right. Neizvestnyi, *Govorit Neizvestnyi* (Frankfurt: Pozev, 1984), 86.

52 Ibid, 6. Neizvestnyi was born in 1925 and emigrated to New York in 1976. He perhaps remains best-known for his face-off with Khrushchev during the 1962 contemporary art exhibition at Moscow’s Manezh.

53 O. Voronova, ed., Shadr. *Literaturnoie nasledie. Perepiska. Vospominaniia o skul’ptore* (Moskva: Izobrazitel’noie iskusstvo, 1978), 48-50.

54 Ibid, 6.

55 O. Kitashova and T. Koloskova, *Mif o liubimom vozhdе* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennyi Istoricheskii’ Muzei’, 2014), 20.

56 L. Osintsev, *Neizvestnyi Shadr* (Shadrinsk: Iset’, 1995), 112.

57 Ibid, 94.



Iulian Rukavishnikov

There was also little love lost between Merkurov and Manizer, who hailed from a family of academic artists.⁵⁸ Merkurov complained that Manizer deliberately skipped town to avoid his seventieth birthday celebrations in 1951, which were hosted by the Presidium of the Academy of Arts in Moscow.⁵⁹ Merkurov passed away on June 8, 1952, missing the chance to immortalize Stalin, who died the following year. The commission went to Manizer, who after Merkurov's death became the leading death mask sculptor and executed dozens of statues of Party figures. When Manizer died in 1966, the baton passed to Iulian Rukavishnikov, who remained the most powerful death mask sculptor for the rest of the Soviet era. Rukavishnikov made death masks and sculptures of the top officials of the late Soviet period, including Leonid Brezhnev, Mikhail Suslov, and Iurii Andropov.⁶⁰ While these three men cast the majority of the Soviet Union's death masks, a handful of other sculptors were also called in, including Nikolai Tomskii, Lev Kerbel, Viktor Tsigal', and Nikogosian. The big commissions, however, always went to "sculptor number one."

Making the mask

The moment of the death mask's creation was highly charged. Even for sculptors who made dozens of masks, it always came as a shock. According to Merkurov's son Gennadi, "every mask was a very difficult experience for him, especially when it was someone he'd been close to." When he returned from a commission, he was always "as pale as a ghost" ("*na nem bukval'no 'litsa ne bylo*").⁶¹ "It was always terrible," Nikogosian said. "When someone dies, you don't want to disturb their soul."⁶² Rukavishnikov said that death masks reflect a person's precarious emotional state at the time of death: "I've seen the masks of great people imprinted with spiritual and physical torments."⁶³

The circumstances under which masks were made could be frightening. In 1926, Merkurov got a 3 a.m. phone call from the wife of the industrialist A.K. Zorgagen. She knew that he had made Tolstoi and Lenin's death masks, and begged him to cast one of her husband: "Only your hands can touch the sweetest and most precious thing I had." Merkurov eventually relented, but

58 Shlenskii, *Posmertnaia maska*, 20.

59 Merkurov, *Vospominaniia*, 291.

60 Shlenskii, *Posmertnaia maska*, 20.

61 Merkurov, *Vospominaniia*, 510.

62 Interview with Nikogosian.

63 Tatiana Kharlamova, "Poslednee litso," Accessed September 28, 2014, <https://sites.google.com/site/echernosvitov/deathf/aif>

asked if he could wait and come early the next morning. “Did he die just now?” the sculptor asked. “No,” she replied, “he died 12 days ago.” “That intrigued me,” Merkurov wrote. In the morning, he arrived at the mansion, bringing two assistants with him “just in case.” Inside, everything was in disarray. It was freezing—the water in the sink was frozen—and Zorgagen’s wife was wrapped in a man’s fur coat. Her husband’s body lay on their bed, throat cut. There was still an indentation on the covers where she had just been lying beside him. “I embalmed him myself,” she said. “When people come, I tell them that he’s sick and sleeping.” “I wanted to run away,” Merkurov recalled,



Anna Akhmatova, 1966

but he maintained a professional demeanor. After the mask was done, she begged him not to tell anyone of her husband’s demise: “Otherwise they’ll take him away from me, and I’ll never forgive you.”⁶⁴

While making a death mask could be unnerving, it could also be ennobling. Late on the night of March 5, 1966, sculptor Zoia Maslenikova received a phone call from the writer Viktor Arlov, who asked her to make a death mask of his friend Anna Akhmatova. Arriving at the hospital morgue the next morning, Maslenikova and her assistant saw the poet’s body lying naked in an empty white room. Her hair grayed and her frame heavy, Akhmatova was barely recognizable as the willowy, haunted woman who had once posed for Modigliani and Altman. Maslenikova imagined her

death as a triumphant ascension from a life of torments: “I stood before the dead Akhmatova, gazing at her regal face full of quiet triumph, and thought: no, death doesn’t lie. Her strong spirit has conquered the era, the humiliations, the suffering, the loneliness.” Though Akhmatova’s body had been “deformed” by death, the sculptor saw not a corpse, but a deity: “Before me was Nike, the goddess of Victory.” Before she and her assistant got to work, Maslenikova spent an hour and a half sitting quietly with Akhmatova and tenderly combing her hair. Though this was her first death mask, Maslenikova wrote, she “somehow knew what to do.” She used the resulting mask as the basis for a regal sculpture.⁶⁵ While death masks often reified privilege, they could also resurrect the dignity of someone who had suffered exclusion.

Sculptors making powerful figures’ death masks were often plagued by nerves, especially when surrounded by top officials. As he prepared to make Lenin’s mask, Merkurov considered the significance of his mission: “I must preserve Il’ich’s features on his deathbed for the ages.” He placed his hands on Lenin’s head, which was still warm to the touch, but immediately drew

⁶⁴ Merkurov, *Vospominaniia*, 170-1.

⁶⁵ Zoia Maslenikova, *Portret Borisa Pasternaka* (Moskva: Pristsel’s, 1995), 375-76.

back after feeling a pulse. Frantic, he asked Krupskaiia to summon the doctor. The latter, upon seeing Merkuurov's terrified face, took his hand and laid it on the table. "Comrade, don't worry—it wasn't Lenin's pulse you felt, but your own fingers," the doctor said.⁶⁶ Merkuurov's fear that Lenin was still alive testifies to the pressure artists felt in immortalizing the bodies of heads of state. When Stalin died, four sculptors were brought in, with Manizer's mask ultimately chosen for reproduction. "We worked under pressure all night. Of course we were worried," recalled one of the artists, Viktor Tsigal'. "Important people were coming in and out: Khrushchev, Kaganovich, Mikoian. Even Beria, his glasses sparkling over my shoulder, stopped in to check how my work was going."⁶⁷



Josef Stalin, 1953

In 1989, the young sculptor Daniel Mitlianskii felt a similar panic when Andrei Sakharov's widow Elena Bonner asked him to make the physicist's mask. Worried about his inexperience, Mitlianskii tried to interest more prominent sculptors in helping him, but they all refused. He arrived at the Kremlin morgue in the company of another young sculptor, Andrei Aser'iants. "We got started, and our hands were shaking," Mitlianskii recalled. "I had only one wish—not to screw up. I'd never done this before." According to Mitlianskii, Soviet sculptors had been relying less on string to remove death masks: "the string had gotten shitty, and if it breaks, then you're screwed." He proceeded without it—an oversight immediately noticed by the officials watching. "Where's the string?" they demanded. "When they made Gromyko's mask, they used string." The sculptors explained they didn't have any, and so the Kremlevka procured some "sturdy Kremlin string," along with "a bucket of Vaseline" to oil the face.⁶⁸ Sometimes sculptors had to rely on patient coaxing. When the sculptor Iurii Vasil'ev attempted to lift the hardened plaster from Vysotskii's face, he was alarmed to discover that it wouldn't budge. He appealed to the singer's spirit: "Voloden'ka," he whispered. "Let the mask go (*otпусти masku*)." The mask came off.⁶⁹

For the biggest commissions, the threat of competition with other sculptors was never far. Shadr, perhaps smarting that he was overlooked for the job, criticized Merkuurov's death mask of Lenin: "In spite of its accuracy, it lies," he complained. "It shows the agony of death, not the man's true face."⁷⁰ While it was too late for another mask to be cast, Shadr was allowed to make

⁶⁶ Merkuurov, *Vospominaniia*, 163.

⁶⁷ Veimarn, "Litsa Ushedshei Epokhi."

⁶⁸ Rogoshkin, "Posmertnaia maska."

⁶⁹ Viktor Bakin, *Neizvestnyi Vysotskii. Zhizn' posle smerti* (Moskva: Eksmo, 2011), 12.

⁷⁰ Kitashova and Koloskova, *Mif o liubimom vozhdze*, 20.

a mask-like sculpture of Lenin's head while the body was on display in the Hall of Columns.⁷¹ Shadr described the nervousness he felt at having top bosses such as Dzerzhinskii, not to mention a rotating crowd of hundreds of thousands, watch him work. "From the first second I was seized by panic," he wrote. "SCULPT!... At a time when it was unclear whether the body would be preserved. SCULPT!... Before history, when my work might be the sole document for studying Lenin's portrait. SCULPT! Surrounded by millions of critical eyes, searchingly, jealously comparing my cast with the original. SCULPT!"⁷² Shadr engages in some wishful thinking about his work's importance; Merkurov, of course, had already documented Lenin's features, and Shadr's sculpture never became as widespread as the death mask. His heated description makes it clear that not only historical documentation was at stake, but his reputation as well.

While few sculptors had to cope with the enormous crowds who filed through the Hall of Columns, they often had a sizable audience nonetheless. Friends and family, assistants, doctors, artists, photographers, secret policemen, and curious members of the public were among those who might be on hand for the casting. Following Esenin's suicide at the Hotel Angleterre on December 28, 1926, sculptor Isidor Zolotarevskii and his assistants made the poet's death mask while his body was on display at the Writers' Union. The writer Pavel Luknitskii described the scene:

"A large crowd accumulated, eagerly observing the interesting (!) process of casting a mask. The assistant got down to work, smiling and merrily poking Esenin's face with his finger while explaining something to his comrade. Esenin's wife sat with [poet and journalist] Maria Shkapskaia in the corner... When they put plaster on his face, she started to cry."⁷³

As the public craned their necks to watch, Esenin's close friends looked away. "Tikhonov sat in the opposite corner, alone in a chair, lowering his head and surveying the public with unseeing eyes. Some flunky from *Krasnaia gazeta* came up to him demanding an interview: 'A few words, Comrade Tikhonov, just a few words.'" The casting of Esenin's face and hands was followed by a round of picture-taking around the tomb, with various members of Moscow's literary elite jostling to be photographed closest to the coffin.⁷⁴

Like many witnesses to death mask castings, Luknitskii wrote that the deceased "barely looked like himself": "During the autopsy they touched up his face as best they could, but nevertheless his forehead was marred by a large red spot, there was a bulge in the upper corner of his right eye, a scratch on the bridge of his nose, and his left eye had popped out."⁷⁵ While in Esenin's case, this sense of disassociation was primarily caused by injuries and bad makeup, the face's appearance is also distorted by death itself. The medical term *facies hippocratica* (the

71 Kitashova and Koloskova, *Mif o liubimom vozhdе*, 22.

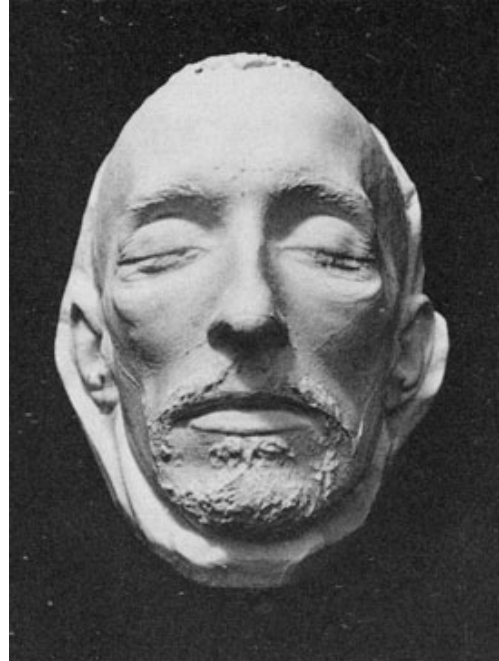
72 Voronova, Shadr. *Literaturnoe nasledie*, 78.

73 Pavel Luknitskii, *Acumania: vstrechi s Annoi Akhmatavoi*, v. 1 (Paris: YMCA, 1991), 315.

74 Ibid, 315-16.

75 Ibid, 314.

Hippocratic face) refers to the characteristic changes to the facial features that are the surest sign of death. They can include sunken temples, hollow eyes, a sharpened nose, pointy ears, and a yellowish expression.⁷⁶ As one observer recalled of Blok's body: "He no longer resembles the portraits I keep in books... The hair has become dark and thin, the cheeks emaciated, the eyes have sunk. The face is overgrown with a dark and thin beard, the nose has become sharper and more prominent. Nothing remains, nothing. An 'unknown corpse' lies there."⁷⁷ This alien appearance can be exacerbated by deprivation. Friends of the avant-garde artist Pavel Filonov, who starved to death in the early months of the Leningrad blockade, wished to make him a death mask, but upon seeing his face they thought better of it: "Hunger and unhappiness had rendered his face unrecognizable. It was incompatible with this person's essence, his being; it had erased any resemblance."⁷⁸ With their features thus exaggerated, the deceased can seem like caricatures of their former selves. This often produces a feeling of the uncanny among observers: the face is at once familiar and foreign, living and dead.⁷⁹



Alexander Blok, 1921

This sense of caricature fed into the dark humor that suffuses many accounts of death mask castings. The comic disjuncture between the sacred ritual and the profane corpse furthered the feeling of slapstick. Amidst the gleaming marble of the Kremlin hospital, Mitlianskii was taken aback by the dead Sakharov's appearance. The Nobel Prize-winning physicist was dressed "like a street cleaner (*dvornik*)," in a cheap tank top, underwear, and graying socks, "the kind they don't sell in pairs, but in packs," and had "ordinary" hands complete with hangnails.⁸⁰ Some death mask castings, like Esenin's, took place during the lying-in-state, turning the casting into a dark comedy with an audience. In 1934, the writer Iurii Olesha watched Andrei Bely's death mask being made while the writer's body was on display in a reception hall at the Writers' Club: "We were crowded round a coffin in which the poet lay—lay disfigured, it seemed to me, and even humiliated by the plaster that covered his face, turning it into a white, rather high mound." Olesha described how Merkurov, dressed in a white gown and his hands stained white with plaster, chatted with the

76 Davide Stimilli, *The Face of Immortality: Physiognomy and Criticism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), 37.

77 Quoted in Victoria Smolkin, "The Voices of Silence: The Death and Funeral of Alexander Blok" in *Petersburg: Novel and City, 1900-1921*, ed. Olga Matich (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 315.

78 Aleksandr Basinskii, "Litsom k svetu," *Izvestiia*, October 15, 1988, 2.

79 Stimilli, *Physiognomy*, 37.

80 Rogoshkin, "Posmertnaia Maska."

crowd while periodically checking his watch. Finally, when the plaster had hardened, he tapped it, “causing it to resonate,” and shouted for his assistant Fedor to remove it. “It came off easily,” Olesha wrote, “as if he were removing the cover of a box.” The crowd looked on:

‘Here’s the mask,’ Merkurov said. It was still on the inside of the plaster, still in its negative form, so to speak, and we understood nothing of what the sculptor understood as he peered in to the concavity of that piece of plaster much as one might gaze into a basin. “You also took Lev Tolstoy’s mask, didn’t you?” someone asked. “I did.” “Well, what was it like?” the questioner blurted out. “His beard got stuck.”⁸¹

While Olesha found a surreal humor in seeing his friend’s face under Merkurov’s “white mound,” the sight of the apparent desecration of the corpse could produce visceral shock. When Vysotskii’s mother Nina saw Vasil’ev and Vysotskii’s widow Marina working on the singer’s mask, dirty rags lying everywhere, she “felt ill.” One of Vysotskii’s friends ran up to her: “‘We’re about to clean this all up! We’ll clean it all up!’”⁸²

When the masks of top officials were complete, copies were distributed to officials, relatives, and artists. In a letter dated February 26, 1924, Merkurov wrote to the Commission for Lenin’s Funeral about the distribution of the leader’s death mask. In the months after Lenin’s death, the commission reported a large volume of requests for copies of the mask.⁸³ Lev Kamenev had requested that Merkurov create copies for the 20 most powerful people in the Bolshevik hierarchy, including Dzerzhinskii, Stalin, Molotov, Trotsky, Bukharin, Rykov and Zinov’iev.⁸⁴ While owning Lenin’s death mask may have been a token of membership in the Party elite, that membership could be easily revoked: the last four men would eventually be murdered on Stalin’s orders.

In most cases, fewer copies of the mask were made, and they were distributed to family, friends, and colleagues rather than to heads of the Party and secret police. When Vysotskii died, for example, Vasil’ev made three plaster copies and three bronze copies, which were distributed to Vysotskii’s friends, widow, and director at the Taganka Theater. In contrast to the funeral’s stiff theatrics, presenting the death mask could feel like a ritual that retained an emotional connection to the deceased. Mitlianskii described Sakharov’s lying-in-state as a grandiose charade: “The authorities worked out a tidy little program for themselves. After the autopsy, Sakharov’s body was carted around town like an object in an exhibition, first to the Presidium of the Academy of Sciences, which is where Gorbachev bid him farewell, then to the Physics Institute of the Academy of Sciences—why didn’t they fly him to the secret city of Saratov as well, since the physicist worked there for many years?—and then to the Palace of Youth.”⁸⁵ When he gave the mask to

81 Olesha, *No Day without a Line*, 119-120.

82 Perevozchikov, *Pravda smertnogo chasa*, 247.

83 Kitashova and Koloskova, *Mif o liubimom vozhdze*, 12.

84 Merkurov, *Vospominaniia*, 251.

85 Rogoshkin, “Posmertnaia maska.”

Bonner after the funeral, however, the sculptor “broke down in tears and couldn’t speak.” After the official pageantry of mourning, giving the death mask to the dead man’s widow felt like a moment of genuine remembrance.

Using the mask

When creating sculptures or portraits of Soviet celebrities, artists were often given a copy of the death mask to use as source material, along with photographs, film clips, and personal items of the deceased. After Gor’kii’s death, sculptors were encouraged to study the writer’s death mask as inspiration for new statues.⁸⁶ While creating a statue of Michurin in 1950, Manizer drew on the agronomist’s death mask (made by the sculptor in 1935), as well as his hat, jacket, and pants, which provided a sense of his proportions.⁸⁷ “The most valuable material for a sculptor is indisputably the death mask,” Manizer wrote. “The mask gives a fairly accurate impression of the structure of the skull, the forehead, the nose (in its upper bone structure), the cheekbones, and in some cases the cheeks and chin,” as well as the position of the ears, though “their shape is deformed by the weight of the plaster.” “In my experience,” he concluded, “there have been many occasions when only the mask could explain the construction of the facial features and the nuances of the structure of the head, which in photographs remained unclear.”⁸⁸ Nikolai Tomskii used Manizer’s death mask of Kirov, as well as the film *Kirov* and his personal memories of Kirov’s “simple, open face,” while creating a statue of the slain Leningrad boss.⁸⁹ The death mask was particularly helpful to sculptors who had never seen their subject in person. In 1957, over two decades after Esenin’s death, Nikolai Selianov relied on the poet’s death mask while making a statue.⁹⁰ Painters also drew on death masks. For example, Igor Grabar used Lenin’s mask while painting “Lenin at the Direct Line.”⁹¹ Obsessed with getting his portrayal just right, Grabar went so far as to create a reconstruction of Lenin’s head.⁹²

Death masks were also worshipped as sacred objects in their own right. Russian Orthodoxy has a rich tradition of relics, which the Bolsheviks attempted to dismantle in the anti-religious campaigns of the 1920s.⁹³ The Soviet state hijacked Orthodox tradition, attempting to transfer old habits to the new regime. The traditional “red corner” of the home, where icons were venerated, was to be replaced by Communist red corners with revolutionaries’ portraits and death masks.⁹⁴

86 “Skul’ptury v muzee A.M. Gor’kogo,” *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, January 22, 1928, 4.

87 Manizer, *Skul’ptor o svoei rabote*, 26.

88 *Ibid.*, 43.

89 Nikolai Tomskii, *Zametki skul’ptora* (Moskva: Molodaia gvardia, 1965), 94.

90 Valeriia Oliunina, “Legkikh vremen ne byvaet,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, September 30, 2009

91 Nikolai Musienko, “Il’ich na boevom postu,” *Pravda*, April 20, 2012, 8.

92 Kitashova and Koloskova, *Mif o liubimom vozhdde*, 66.

93 Greene, *Bodies*, 6. While the Church positioned saints’ relics as reminders of their virtuousness, most believers focused on their purported power to work miracles.

94 Kruk, “Semiotics of Visual Iconicity,” 33.

In 1924, for example, a red corner opened for the departed revolutionary Iakov Sverdlov at the Historical Revolutionary Museum. The death mask was the centerpiece of an exhibit that also included Sverdlov's chair, desk, writings, and portraits.⁹⁵

In the Orthodox tradition, the intact body is considered the most holy relic, followed by parts of the body including bones and hair. Items that the deceased has touched, such as clothing, pillows, or silverware, are considered "proxy relics" which have absorbed the saint's miracle-working power.⁹⁶ In similar fashion, while Soviet saints' clothing and personal possessions were suitable for veneration, their status was lower than that of the death mask, which was often embedded with hairs from the deceased's body. As with all items venerated as relics, from Mohammed's hairs to Marilyn Monroe's dresses, the death mask was thought to embody the person's essence, giving it magical powers to engage with the living. "They're alive, and can react," the sculptor Vasil'ev said. "If you yell, they frown. If you're happy, they'll smile."⁹⁷ To preserve the death mask's sacred status, it was usually kept in a reliquary-like case that protected it from outsiders' profaning touch. If the death mask was stored at home, it might be either displayed in a case, or kept out of sight and revealed only to the family's inner circle.

The practice of displaying death masks in one's home was not entirely new. A.F. Onegin, a prominent collector of Pushkin memorabilia in the late 19th century, kept Pushkin's death mask in a glass case accompanied by fresh flowers.⁹⁸ Owning Pushkin's death mask remained fashionable throughout the Soviet period. Vysotskii and Mikhail Kozakov, another popular Moscow theater actor in the '60s and '70s, both displayed Pushkin's death mask in their homes.⁹⁹ Other pre-revolutionary death masks also enjoyed renewed popularity. Shostakovich's sister Zoia donated black velvet from her concert dress to the Gogol House Museum for the writer's death mask to be displayed on.¹⁰⁰ If having Pushkin's death mask was a sign of culture, displaying Lenin's was a sign of Party devotion, or *partiinnost'*. Stalin kept a copy on his desk in his Kremlin office, an ever-present reminder that he had inherited the dead Lenin's mantle.¹⁰¹ Lenin's close associate Gleb Krzhizhanovskii kept the leader's death mask in his apartment and regarded it as "sacred."¹⁰²

Lenin's mask also served as the centerpiece of mourning displays across the Soviet Union. Groups of workers and students were brought from around the country to visit the Lenin Museum by Red Square. The hall of mourning (*traurnyi zal*) was the final room that visitors entered.

95 "Ugolok Ia. M. Sverdlova," *Pravda*, January 11, 1924, 4.

96 Greene, *Bodies Like Bright Stars*, 52.

97 *Vysotskii: Pravda smertnogo chasa*, 249.

98 Merkuov, *Vospominaniia*, 119.

99 For Vysotskii, see Mikhail Zakharchuk, "Blatar' ili zlatoust?" *Kul'tura*, January 25, 2013, 2; for Kozakov, O. Ulianova, "Rol', Mikhailu Kozakovu ne svoitvennaia," *Iskusstvo kino*, June 30, 1979, 152.

100 Nina Moleva, "Bezumnoe gonenie imeni," *N.G. Ex Libris*, March 4, 1999.

101 B.S. Ilizarov, "Stalin: Shtrikhi k portretu na fone ego biblioteki i arkhiva," *Novaia i novei'shaia istoriia*, May 1, 2000, 200.

102 V. Steklov, "Zhizn'—podvig," *Izvestiia*, January 23, 1962, 4.

Festooned with funeral wreaths and banners, it marked the emotional climax of their progression through the displays. The death mask lay in a glass case in the center of the room, beneath a banner inscribed with Stalin's oath swearing to uphold Lenin's legacy (after Stalin's death, the banner was removed).¹⁰³ This display served as the model for the mourning halls of other Lenin museums around the Soviet Union, such as in Leningrad and Tashkent.¹⁰⁴ Lenin's mask was also displayed in socialist museums abroad, including in East Berlin.¹⁰⁵ While Lenin death masks were always made of plaster, the shrine-like Stalin Museum in the leader's Georgian hometown had a copy of his death mask cast in gleaming bronze. It was (and still is) displayed under a spotlight in the middle of an otherwise empty red-carpeted room.¹⁰⁶

Soviet tourists were encouraged to make pilgrimages across the Soviet Union to visit places connected with Lenin, with the death mask presented as the sentimental climax of the journey. In 1983, *Sovetskaia kul'tura* promoted a Volga cruise focused on "our country's heroic history" that included a stop in Lenin's hometown, Ul'ianovsk. The author wrote rapturously of seeing Lenin's death mask in his childhood home: "The heart wrenches in the mourning hall: the death mask, the hanging banners, a wreath from the workers of Donbass, a pot of coal dust that they gathered in offering... But Lenin's ideas [*Leninskaia mysl'*] live eternal. His gaze towards the future urges us onward."¹⁰⁷ Through this public ritual of veneration and mourning, the death mask was intended to seal Soviet citizens' relationship with the departed leader, inspiring them to embody his principles in their own lives. Like a miracle-working relic, the death mask preserved Lenin's aura, which had the power to offer guidance from beyond the grave.

Although Lenin was the only figure to have a permanent funeral display, other leading Bolsheviks were also honored with temporary mourning exhibitions. For example, Stalin's close associate Ordzhonikidze was the subject of a 1940 exhibition at the Museum of the Revolution on the third anniversary of his death, which was marked by "an evening of remembrance." In the mourning hall, casts of his hands and his death mask, which fully conveyed his resplendent moustache, appeared alongside funerary banners and Gerasimov's painting "Ordzhonikidze in the Tomb," which showed Stalin standing alone by the coffin.¹⁰⁸ While the martyr's death mask was presented for veneration, the ultimate object of worship was Stalin, the godhead.

Death masks also figured as the central relics in house museums, which preserved celebrities' apartments as shrines. After his 1934 murder, Kirov's death mask was displayed in the office of his

103 Interview with Olga Grankina, senior researcher at the State Historical Museum, June 11, 2014.

104 M. Lebedev, "Istoricheskie zametki. Filial muzeia V.I. Lenina v Leningrade," *Istorič-Marksist*, August 31, 1938; Sh. Shakhaliyov, L.Kh. Mosivodova, S.V. El'chibekova, *Tashkent Branch of the V.I. Lenin Museum* (Tashkent: Uzbekistan, 1985), 74.

105 E. Lipinskaia, "Put' na Krasnuiu ploshchad'," *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, September 30, 1969, 4.

106 Seen on personal visit to Stalin Museum in Gori, May 2012.

107 Valentina Zhegis, "Takoi obychnyi reis," *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, July 28, 1983, 3.

108 "Pamiati Sergo," *Izvestiia*, February 18, 1940, 1.

spacious, taxidermy-filled apartment in Leningrad, alongside the bloodstained tunic he had been wearing when he was shot. Portraits of Lenin and Stalin looked on from across the room.¹⁰⁹ To preserve the sacred aura, everything was left as it was on the day the martyr died. At Lenin's house museum in Gorki-Leninskie, time stood still; the clocks were stopped at his time of death (6:50 PM), and their hands have not moved since.¹¹⁰ There were dozens of such house museums across the Soviet Union. Even if most people would never visit them, they could always read about them in the papers, which gave detailed descriptions of their contents.

Masks were also kept in the homes of the deceased's friends and relatives. It usually fell to the deceased's spouse to take care of the mask, which could be a burdensome task. Belyi's wife Klavdia Bugaeva kept his death mask in their apartment and agonized about what to do with it. She wanted to donate it to the Institute of Russian Literature, or Pushkin House, but was unable



Daniil Andreev, 1959

to find anyone who would ferry it to Leningrad. Eventually, she gave it to her friend Dmitrii Maksimov, who kept the mask in a “special spot in a chest of drawers” and “sometimes brought it out in ceremonial fashion.”¹¹¹ After Klavdia's death, the mask was sold to the State Literary Museum. Elena Bulgakova gave her husband Mikhail's mask to his younger sister, and it was eventually donated to the Moscow Art Theater Museum.¹¹² Cult esoteric author Daniil Andreev, whose apocalyptic book *The Rose of the World* heralded the creation of a new universal religion, died in 1959. Several years later, his wife Anna unveiled his death mask to the artist Boris Zykov, who was creating a sculpture of Andreev and wished to photograph it. As Zykov waited in the living room, she brought out the mask, which was “wrapped in

pink fabric.” She explained that the museum where it was on display had been damaged in a fire, darkening it with soot and chipping the nose. Zykov promised to send some putty to fix it.¹¹³

While some families kept the death mask out of sight, others revered it openly. The powerful literary bureaucrat Fedor Panferov died in 1960. When a journalist came to visit Panferov's wife in their apartment at the House of Writers, he was surprised to see his death mask displayed in a miniature crystal sarcophagus, as well as a full-size sculpture of Panferov underway in the living room.¹¹⁴ Maria Fedorova Petrova-Vodkina—the widow of the avant-garde artist Kuzma Petrov-

109 “Komnata Kirova,” *Izvestiia*, November 27, 1935, 4.

110 Interview with Natalia Mushits, head researcher at Gorki-Leninskie, June 3, 2013.

111 M.L. Spivak and E.V. Nasedkina. *Smert' Andreia Belogo (1880-1934)* (Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2013), 880.

112 V.M. Svetlaeva, “Lelia Bulgakova (Elena Afanas'eva Svetlaeva),” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, July 1, 2002, 229.

113 B.N. Zykov, “Zapiski sovremennogo palomnika,” *Sovetskaia Tataria*, February 29, 1992, 7.

114 Iulii Krelin, “Sud'by pisatel'skie. Ia—pomoshchnik zhizn',” *Voprosy literatury*, October 31, 1995, 250.

Vodkin, who died of tuberculosis in 1939—maintained an even grander display. “On the table by the window we saw a glass box and inside it... a head (!), yes, the head of Kuzma Sergeevich,” a friend recalled of visiting her apartment in the 1960s. “It turned out that it was a death mask, but it looked rather unusual—the entire head was skin-colored, and even had imprints from the hairs of the deceased. It made an incredible impression.” Eventually, Maria Fedorova added “green silk curtains that hid the interior.” Petrov-Vodkin’s daughter Elena venerated the mask as sacred: “For a long time after his death, I would go up to this head and pet it. Touching it with my hand, I felt the warmth leave it, and it seemed as if he were still alive.”¹¹⁵ While death masks could be a burden, or a forgotten object in a drawer, they could also be the site of emotional and physical connection.

Death masks were also presented as gifts to foreign guests. For example, the Bengali poet Tagore received a copy of Tolstói’s death mask during his visit to the Soviet Union in 1930.¹¹⁶ In 1932, Merkurov presented the German artist Otto Nagel with a copy of Lenin’s mask. Its subsequent fate in Germany became a mythic story of trial and tribulation, which was told numerous times over the years. According to a 1963 account in *Izvestiia*, the great sculptor told Nagel and his wife the story of Lenin’s death mask while they were visiting his Moscow studio. Nagel modeled the proper response to the relic: “Shaken and awestruck, I looked at the wise features of the great leader, immortalized in plaster.” As they were leaving, Merkurov presented the mask to Nagel as a gift. Claiming it was his only copy, he declared: “Otto, guard this mask like the apple of your eye!” Back in Berlin, Nagel displayed the mask in his apartment, where it became the object of pilgrimages: “Many party comrades, as well as friends who weren’t party members, workers, and members of the intelligentsia, spent hours in my home, standing reverently before Lenin’s mask.”

During the war, Nagel hid the death mask in a neighbor’s basement, where it miraculously survived. “Only a few days before the end of the war, SS officers hunting down deserters from Hitler’s army searched this very basement. But the mask yet again remained unharmed.” The mask’s transcendent power is made explicit: “How symbolic it was! Many millions of people were killed. The war destroyed countless cities and towns... But Lenin’s dear features, preserved in plaster, were before me once again!” After the war, Nagel donated “this priceless relic” to the party congress of East Germany, and it ended up in East Berlin’s Historical Museum. The mask emerges as the icon of the new, socialist Germany: “‘our’ copy of the death mask of Lenin’s face had been in three Germanies: the Germany of 1933, fascist Germany, and today’s German Democratic Republic, where socialism is being built according to Lenin’s oath (*zavet*).”¹¹⁷ Similar versions of this story, which Nagel told a correspondent over the telephone, reappeared in Soviet

115 Elena Petrova-Vodkina, “Prikosnovenie k dushe,” *Zvezda*, September 30, 2007, 139.

116 “Fotoreportazh iz 1930 goda. Tagore v Moskve,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, July 8, 1987, 2.

117 “Vechno zhivie cherty,” *Izvestiia*, January 22, 1963



“In Memory of V.I. Lenin”
F.G. Bogorodskii, 1934

newspapers in 1969 and again in 1985.¹¹⁸ It portrays the death mask as a miracle-working relic, its sacred essence working to build socialism in Germany and inspire the devotion of the masses.

Lenin’s death mask also became the subject of ideological art. “In Memory of V.I. Lenin,” a 1934 still life by Fedor Bogorodskii, used Lenin’s death mask to position Stalin as the inheritor of his mantle. Lenin’s luminous plaster cast occupies the lower right corner of the painting, with Stalin’s tome *Problems of Leninism* to its left. Lenin’s mask lies atop black mourning cloth, while the backdrop for Stalin’s book is a red Soviet flag. The painting’s composition sets up a clear progression from mourning Lenin’s death to struggling to build Communism today. Lenin is no longer a living man, but an abstracted ideal of

partiinost’ preserved in plaster, which only Stalin can interpret. Notably, Bogorodskii altered the painting to fit with Stalin’s rising personality cult; the original 1932 version had the acronym for the Communist party (VKP(b)) on the book’s cover.¹¹⁹

Viewing the mask: from fear to laughter

Death masks could serve as vehicles for ideological messages, but the meanings attached to them were unstable. Their uncertain status on the boundary of life and death made them highly charged objects; however sacred their surroundings, their interpretation was always dependent on the viewer. Some found their expression peaceful. “The sunken, closed eyes and joyful smile gave the impression that the person hadn’t died, but had simply passed on to another world,” Zykov wrote of Andreev’s mask.¹²⁰ Of Lenin’s death mask it was said that he looked “as if he were asleep.”¹²¹ But masks could also be repulsive. Ekaterina Furtseva, the Minister of Culture under Khrushchev and Brezhnev, was found dead in her bathtub in the midst of a corruption scandal in 1974. A visitor to a sculptor’s studio where the mask was on display recoiled at its “monstrous agony”: “Her face was deformed by inhuman suffering, writhing as if it were in the fires of hell.”¹²²

118 E. Lipinskaia, “Put na Krasniuiu ploshchad’”; V. Kabanov, “Bestsennaia relikvia,” *Pravda*, January 20, 1985, 5.

119 Kitashova and Koloskova, *Mif o liubimom vozhdе*, 150.

120 Zykov, “Zapiski sovremennogo palomnika,” 7.

121 Kruk, “Semiotics of Visual Iconicity,” 34.

122 “Litsa ushedshei epokhi.” For more on Furtseva see Nami Mikoian, *Ekaterina Furtseva. Liubimyi ministr* (Moskva, Algoritm, 2012).

In 1952, Merkurov told Valentin Bulgakov, Tolstoi's former secretary, that he would like to give him the death mask of Tolstoi's son Sergei, along with casts of his leg and hands. Bulgakov viewed the gift with trepidation: "I must confess that I was frightened at the prospect of receiving so many body parts that belonged to my departed friend, the elder son of L.N. Tolstoi, even if they were only casts." Inside Merkurov's studio, Bulgakov saw the sculptor's death mask collection, which was something of a legend among the Moscow intelligentsia.¹²³ The death masks of Lenin, Kalinin, Dzerzhinskii, Sverdlov, Gor'kii, Tolstoi, Maiakovskii, Il'f and many more gazed down at him from the wall: "You can't even count them all!" Bulgakov exclaimed. They had a certain nobility. "Even in death, the individual is strong and beautiful in his own way." But their overall effect was disturbing: "The traces of the final struggle are too apparent on the face." Bulgakov concluded. Perhaps the young could look upon them with less discomfort. "The collection made a huge impression on my 22-year-old daughter," he added, "who still knows little about death." In the end, Bulgakov never had to accept the plaster relics: "Fortunately, it seemed that later S.D. Merkurov simply forgot his promise."¹²⁴ Death masks' sacred status lay firmly in the eye of the beholder, who might be young or old, fearful or entranced.

Death masks could also be frightening for family members. In 1974, the highly popular short story writer and actor Vasilii Shukshin died at age 45 on the set of the film "They Fought For Their Country." Several years later, a friend of Shukshin's visited his widow Lidia Fedoseeva-Shukshina to retrieve the death mask, which was to be put on display in a museum. After setting out some vodka, Fedoseeva-Shukshina fished the death mask out of the box that Shukshin's mother had made for it. "I'm afraid to look at it," she said. "Ever since Nikogosian [who made the mask with Boris Markov at Moscow's Sklifosovskii Institute] gave it to me, it's stayed in the same newspaper he wrapped it in. Take it." Shukshin's friend was puzzled to discover that Nikogosian had wrapped the death mask in Furtseva's obituary. After Shukshin's death, the culture minister had refused to secure him a plot in Novodevich'e Cemetery.¹²⁵

Death masks' uncanny aura made them a ripe target for pranks. One night, Merkurov got a call to make the death mask of an actor friend of his who had just died. When he arrived, the house was full of mourners, and the deceased was lying on a table under a sheet. As Merkurov began to lift the sheet, his dead friend sat up and offered him a glass of champagne. "We knew that otherwise we'd never be able to drag you away from Izmailovo at this hour!" he declared.¹²⁶ Death masks' aura of solemnity and power was easily punctured by laughter. The poet Evgeny

123 For example, see Olesha, *No Day Without a Line*, 120: "A whole wall of Merkurov's studio was hung with copies of the masks he had taken from famous people."

124 Merkurov, *Vospominaniia*, 457-64.

125 Anatolii Zabolotskii, "Kritika. Vse otpechatano v dushe..." *Nash sovremennik*, June 30, 2005, 263.

126 Merkurov, *Vospominaniia*, 510. Merkurov was a great lover of practical jokes. He once fooled Pasternak into thinking that the cabaret actor Alexander Vertinskii, next to whom he was seated at a state dinner, was the prosecutor Andrei Vyshinskii (*Vospominaniia*, 508).

Rein recounted a story that took place in Leningrad in 1963. The writer Il'ia Dvorkin and his friend Fedia, a sculptor, were enjoying "a bachelor lifestyle" while Dvorkin's wife was out of town. After buying some vodka, Fedia came up with a suggestion: "How about I make you a death mask in advance, and afterwards you can live as long as you want? Just in case." Dvorkin agreed, and lay down on the couch while Fedia poured plaster on his face.

It just so happened that Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir were visiting Leningrad on the same day. Sartre declared to the Leningrad Writers' Union that he would like to meet "a young revolutionary writer" and present him with a gift from Paris. After some nervous deliberation among the literary bosses, they were taken to Dvorkin's house. Seeing Dvorkin lying on the couch, his face covered in plaster, Sartre concluded that the writer had just died. "What a tragedy!" he cried. "What a loss for world literature!" "It's no big deal," Fedia replied. "The mask will be ready in a half hour. In the meantime, sit down and we'll have some vodka." While Sartre continued pontificating about "treacherous death," de Beauvoir asked "with feminine tact" if there might be a living writer to whom they could give the present.

Dvorkin, overhearing from the couch, was "unwilling to give up the package from Paris for anything." He knew he had to act quickly, so he got up and approached Sartre. "Of course, he wanted to eloquently and clearly explain everything," Rein wrote, "but due to the plaster death mask, he was unable." The horrified Sartre backed away from "the resurrected Dvorkin" and made for the door. Dvorkin, desperate, ripped the gift out of Sartre's hand. After the French writers had hurried off, Fedia removed the death mask, and together they eagerly tore open the package. Inside were six packets of freeze-dried pea soup, shaving cream, and a plaid scarf. "And rightly so," Rein concluded wryly, "for while the future belonged to the world revolution, the present belonged to other people."¹²⁷ In this vignette, the death mask functions as a metonymic device for Soviet culture as a whole. In a world where men can while away the day drinking vodka and watching plaster set, the boundary between life and death begins to blur: notably, Rein and Fedia both use the word "death mask," rather than the more appropriate "life mask." The flow of time is reversed: just as Soviet society is premised on a world revolution that will be realized at some future date, so the living can be resurrected as the dead. Combining mourning with clowning, these parodic scenes undermined death masks' sacred status while poking fun at the absurdities of Soviet life.

Death masks' satirical blurring of the boundary between life and death was a recurring theme across genres. In the song "Monument" ("Pamiatnik"), Vysotskii imagined his own death mask being made. Having relinquished control of his body (which "in life was lean and muscled"), he is dead yet somehow alive to bear witness to the mask's creation "right here in the bathroom." The song's lyrics are a wickedly funny premonition of the scene that would take place after his

127 Evgenii Rein, "Maska," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, January 17, 1996, 3.

death: “And when I got around to dying/My clever family members/Made a death mask of the living me/I don’t know who gave them the idea/But the plaster chiseled/My Asiatic cheekbones.” Vysotskii continues: “It never occurred to me, I never dreamed/I didn’t think I wasn’t in danger/Of ending up the deadest of the dead/But the mask’s surface gleamed/And the grave’s boredom shone through/My toothless smile.” The death mask is turned into a granite monument which Vysotskii is trapped inside, forced to endure a pompous unveiling ceremony in his honor. At the end of the song, he bursts free, “shaking off the stone” with his legs.¹²⁸

The hagiography parodied in the song would come true: Vysotskii statues have been erected across the former Soviet Union from Odessa to Magadan. “Pamiatnik” shares some features with the Merkurov and Rein stories, in which a mask is made of a living man who is thought to be dead. On one level, it represents the culmination of a recurring theme in Vysotskii’s songs, in which he imagines himself to be encircled or entrapped. On another, it suggests how death masks had become a cliché, the centerpiece of the stale memorialization characteristic of official culture. By altering its tropes to absurd effect, such stories and songs chipped away at death masks’ power, and that of the pantheon they composed.

The death mask also figures as a symbol of the calcified nature of Soviet culture in Andrei Bitov’s novel *Pushkinskii Dom* (Pushkin House). The story, written from 1964 to 1971 and published during perestroika, is centered on Leva Odoevtsev, a Leningrad philologist of the Thaw generation who works at the Institute of Russian Literature. Towards the end of the novel, Leva gets in a fight with his friend Mitishat’ev, in a parodic simulacrum of the duel that claimed Pushkin’s life. In the heat of the moment, Mitishat’ev fishes Pushkin’s death mask out of a cabinet, where it has been gathering dust beneath dissertations: “Mitishat’ev jumped out with Pushkin’s death mask in hand.” The effect is far from grand: “It was small,” the narrator laconically notes. Mitishat’ev tries to place it over his own face, to no avail. “‘It doesn’t fit,’ Mitishat’ev said, surprised.” Leva jumps on him, demanding he give it up, and the two scuffle until “they stood silently over broken white shards.”¹²⁹

Reproduced in countless copies, Pushkin’s death mask emblemizes how the poet’s memory had become a mass-produced platitude. Russian literature is in a sorry state, with Mitishat’ev serving as an ironic double for the famed poet; he tries to take on the role, but his features literally do not fit Pushkin’s face. In the end, the mask is not a sacred relic, but an ordinary piece of plaster that breaks when it is dropped. Such reduction of the death mask to mere object, a sign with no signified, is reminiscent of the Bolsheviks’ triumphant unveiling of Orthodox saints’ relics. Yet while the latter managed to retain their power in popular belief, death masks, it seemed, might not.

128 Lyrics accessed at <http://www.kulichki.com/vv/pesni/ya-pri-zhizni-by.html>, November 1, 2014.

129 Andrei Bitov, *Pushkinskii Dom* (Sankt-Peterburg: Izdatel’stvo Ivana Limbakha, 1989), 308-9.

Top Bolsheviks' death masks did not succeed in supplanting the relics that had been venerated in Russia for centuries, which remained immensely popular¹³⁰; the meanings tied to them were too contradictory and unstable. However, they were important currency for the artists who used them to build successful careers, as well as for the officials who vied to receive copies. While death masks fell out of fashion in most of Europe, they retained and even increased their popularity in Soviet culture, as luminaries' friends, families, and followers embraced them as an ideologically acceptable way to retain an emotional connection to the deceased.

In the end, masks' power, like that of their recipients, was not immutable. They were embedded in specific contexts of creation and display, and tied to personal conflicts and memories. Observers variously feared, loathed, embraced, and ignored them. They could appear to be meaningful prosthetic memories of the deceased, but also the totems of a dead culture. Today, death masks have largely faded into obscurity, though the tradition did not completely die along with the Soviet Union. There are still sculptors who make death masks on commission; collectors claim that Boris El'tsin had one, though his family denies it.¹³¹ Perhaps Valentin Bulgakov's assessment of Merkurov's death masks still holds true: "Only people with strong nerves, or faith in the indestructability of the spirit, can view and study such a collection."¹³²

130 Greene, *Bodies like Bright Stars*, 16.

131 Interview with Shlenskii.

132 Merkurov, *Vospominaniia*, 464.

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