

# Will he rest in peace?

Lenin is surely looking through his glass case darkly, writes **Gabi Mocatta**, at plans to bury him.

**S**OME claim it is a wax dummy; some a well-touched plaster model. Professor Yuri Alexeiyevich Romakov, of Moscow's Biomedical Research Institute, knows otherwise. For 40 years he has been in charge of a unique experiment: preserving the earthly remains of V. I. Lenin.

Once Romakov worked under threat of Siberian exile for any divulgence of embalming secrets, any unfortunate slips of the scalpel. Now, with public debate about the fate of the body reinvigorated, Romakov's future is again imperilled by those who would bury the body, and with it 74 years of Russia's history.

When Lenin's body first underwent the embalming process, it hardly seemed that in just 68 years his vision of a great socialist Russia would be dead. Soviet science, sustained by a utopian self-assuredness, and capable of all things, would preserve it, lifelike, for posterity.

The diminutive form housed in its stern, red marble mausoleum on Red Square would be a place of solemn pilgrimage for generations of party faithful. The body of the father of the revolution would become the holy relic of the new and compulsory ideology.

Yet eight years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the return to religion that the Bolsheviks sought to destroy is not the only reason for the revival of contention surrounding the body.

Perhaps prompted by the Orthodox burial in July last year of the supposed remains of Russia's last tsar and his family, many of the country's leaders now publicly declare themselves pro-burial for Lenin, too. Only Gennady Zuganov, the Communist Party leader, would rather keep Lenin in his glass case in the Red Square mausoleum.

But those who believe he should finally be laid to rest are accused by their opponents of attempting to deny their past. They argue that 74 years of socialism cannot be expunged by just eight years of incomplete democracy.

For Romakov, removal of the body would be "an act of vandalism", comparable with the Bolshevik defilement of places of worship in the 1930s. It would also be a great loss to science, for nowhere is there a case of similar preservation that has proved so successful over

three-quarters of a century.

Romakov and his team have been working effectively unpaid for years. The twice-weekly undressing and anointing of the body, the painstaking monitoring for any changes and the annual bathing in embalming fluid all continue out of a sense of scientific and historical duty.

But the latest trend among "new Russians" — the rich and flamboyant millionaire minority who have profited from Russia's transition to a market economy — may be about to change this.

For this money-is-no-object elite, preservation of one's mortal remains is now the ultimate extravagance. To answer demand, ornate marble sarcophagi with peepholes of reinforced glass have sprung up in Moscow's most exclusive cemeteries.

Whether or not these seek to upstage Lenin, it is clear that his monument, which once enjoyed such solemn honours, now commands only dwindling respect. Today the queues of socialist believers waiting reverently to pay homage have all but disappeared and foreign tourists with a taste for the macabre account for the greatest part of visitors.

In a recent poll by the Institute for Social Analysis, 54 per cent of Russians agreed the body should be laid to rest. Some even explained the urgency of the need for burial: the restlessness of Lenin's soul, they claimed, was the cause of the general malaise afflicting the country.