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Bekhterev, V. M.

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Without Abstract

Bekhterev (1857–1927) was born in Vyatskaya, Russia. He died as a resident of St. Petersburg but in Moscow under mysterious circumstances (see below). Bekhterev earned a medical doctorate in 1881 from the Military Medical Institute in St. Petersburg. After further study with leading physiologists and psychiatrists in Europe, and based on his growing research reputation, he was appointed professor of psychiatry at the University Kazan (1885). There he founded Russia's first psychophysiological laboratory and its first institute for brain research associated with mental disease. As reflected in many ways including his approximately 600 publications and numerous institutes that he founded, Bekhterev showed expertise in anatomy, hypnosis, neurology, neuropathology, neurophysiology, neuropsychology, psychiatry, and psychology. Diseases and neuroanatomical structures associated with his research bore his name before eponyms began to be replaced by more intrinsically informative names (e.g., Bekhterev's nucleus is now better known as the superior vestibular nucleus).

In psychology, Bekhterev founded *Review of Psychiatry, Neuropathology, and Experimental Psychology* (1896), the first journal to include “experimental psychology” in its title. His three-volume *Objective Psychology* (1907) presented methodology that went well beyond Pavlov's salivary conditioning and that included both instrumental and operant conditioning. However, instead of Pavlov's term “conditioned reflex” (Pavlov used the Russian word for *conditional* but the mistranslation has endured), Bekhterev preferred “association reflex” which arguably embodied a superior heuristic for both men's interests.

Deeming “psychology” too subjective, Bekhterev replaced it with “reflexology” which, nevertheless, encompassed nearly as broad a range as had psychology (Schniermann 1930). For example, Bekhterev's Reflexological Institute had five divisions: *General reflexology*, mostly physiological psychology; *Individual reflexology*, individual differences personality, etc.; *Age*

reflexology dealt with physical and psychological abnormalities associated with child development; *Collective reflexology* was social psychology including genetic and evolutionary influences; and *Genetic reflexology* addressed developmental psychology from the onto- and phylogenetic standpoints. Bekhterev has been described as being one of the first experimental social psychologists (Strickland 1991).

Despite Pavlov's Nobel prize, arguably, Bekhterev was far more influential during his lifetime than Pavlov, and Bekhterev's historical importance might have received greater recognition internationally had not his works been suppressed by the Soviet authorities. Thus, it is highly relevant to Bekhterev's legacy to report on his death and its consequences (Shereshevskii 1991).

While visiting Moscow for scholarly purposes and as Russia's premier neuropathologist, Bekhterev, who had earlier treated Lenin, was summoned to examine Stalin's dysfunctional arm. Explaining his tardiness at a subsequent meeting with colleagues, Bekhterev stated, "I was examining a paranoiac with a withered arm." That came to the attention of the Soviet authorities. That evening, during intermission of the Bolshoi Ballet, strangers approached Bekhterev, conversed with him, and gave him something to eat (possibly ice cream). Despite being in good health, he died that same evening after complaining of gastric pain. A hastily arranged autopsy by the authorities and questionably limited to the brain, an equally hasty cremation despite family members' objections, and other emerging evidence contribute to the suspicion that Bekhterev was assassinated by poisoning.

Although Bekhterev was among Russia's most accomplished scientists, his works were suppressed by the Soviet authorities until *glasnost* in 1989. One result was that his work was poorly known by American psychologists. However, John B. Watson, father of behaviorism, was greatly influenced by Bekhterev's *Objective Psychology* (1907; never translated into English and available to Watson only in French translation). Watson used it to co-teach with his protégé, Karl Lashley, a winter seminar at Johns Hopkins in 1914–1915, and Lashley was to have studied methods in Bekhterev's laboratory but WWI prevented it. Although Watson's behaviorist methodology closely resembled Bekhterev's, Watson adopted Pavlov's terminology, thus, obscuring Bekhterev's influence. An abbreviated version of *Objective Psychology* published in English translation as *General Principles of Reflexology* (1932; original 1928) was Bekhterev's only book to be translated into English until *Collective Reflexology: The complete edition* (2000).

Further contributing to the disregard for Bekhterev's work was Pavlov's intense dislike of Bekhterev. One can only speculate at motive. Please see "Pavlov's Controversy with Bekhterev" in Babkin's *Pavlov: A biography*. As more of Bekhterev's work becomes available to Western psychologists, undoubtedly his reputation and the value of his theoretical ideas will be increasingly recognized.

See Also

Lashley, Carl

Watson, John Broadus

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