

## Vasily Dmitrievich Shervinskiy (1850–1941) and Russian medicine in the first third of the 20th century

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The article is based on an analysis of numerous literature sources and materials from V.D. Shervinskiy’s personal archive and the Central Historical Archives of Moscow. The work reconstructs the multifaceted personality of the outstanding Russian physician V.D. Shervinskiy – a pathologist, therapist and endocrinologist. It demonstrates his exceptionally high level of activity in the scientific and public life of the country’s therapists, in conducting medical congresses, and his role in creating the largest scientific clinical school at Imperial Moscow University: the Shervinskiy-Golubinin school at the Faculty of therapeutic clinical practice. Four major fields are distinguished in the creative legacy of V.D. Shervinskiy as a doctor, researcher and public figure. The authors come to the conclusion that under V.D. Shervinskiy and L.E. Golubinin, the Faculty of therapeutic clinical practice (1899–1912) experienced a heyday (its third peak after A.I. Over in the mid-1800s and G.A. Zakharyin in the 1860s and 1870s), and that in the first decades of the 20th century V.D. Shervinskiy, along with V.N. Sirotinin (Saint Petersburg) and V.P. Obratsov (Kiev) as well as S.S. Botkin and M.V. Yanovsky (Saint Petersburg), F.G. Yanovsky (Kiev) and L.E. Golubinin (Moscow), led domestic clinical practice on internal diseases, following the path set out by S.P. Botkin.

**Keywords:** *V.D. Shervinskiy, Moscow University, medical congresses, scientific school, therapeutic elite*

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For Russian clinical studies of internal medicine, the 19th century ended with a scandalous confrontation, which captured

both the professional and the general press, between two leading therapeutic schools – that of S.P. Botkin at the Military Medical Academy (MMA; Saint Petersburg) and that of G.A. Zakharyin at Imperial Moscow University (IMU) [1–3]. The question was put bluntly: should medicine in the 20th century go Botkin

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or Zakharyin's way? With the recognized leaders – S.P. Botkin, G.A. Zakharyin and A.A. Ostroumov – having departed the scene, clinical medicine in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century seemed decapitated. At this stage, the decisive role in choosing its future path of development was played by scientific societies and congresses of Russian physicians [4; 5, p. 43]: in the absence of any systemic organization of medical science (in the field of clinical medicine there were neither research institutions – and of course no the Academy of Medical Sciences to unify them – nor a system of specialized academic boards and scientific journals), scientific societies and congresses comprised the main form of medical social life, serving as a platform for the discussion of critical problems in the development of clinical thinking, for the convergence of different clinicians' visions and the development of regulatory systems for sensitive diagnostic and clinical issues and for growth points in therapeutic science.

These issues created the conditions for the further development of therapeutic clinical studies in Russia, which went Botkin's way.

The materials of congresses and memoirs of contemporaries preserve the names of the few doctors who led the academic and social movement of Russian physicians in the early decades of the 20th century: V.D. Shervinsky and L.E. Golubinin (IMU); V.N. Sirotinin, S.S. Botkin and M.V. Yanovskiy (MMA, Saint Petersburg) and V.P. Obratsov and F.G. Yanovskiy (the University of St. Vladimir, Kiev). They were the organizers and chairmen of the first five congresses of Russian physicians (1909–1913) and were keynote speakers. The congresses were held annually before the First World War began in 1914. V.N. Sirotinin, S.S. Botkin and M.V. Yanovskiy were disciples of S.P. Botkin; V.P. Obratsov and other

outstanding clinicians mentioned above were his staunch followers. Their eminence is the main reason why the clinical studies of internal medicine in Russia continued to develop in the direction intended by S.P. Botkin [6, pp. 337–365]. A prominent role in this development was played by the close cooperation of the three main leaders – V.D. Shervinsky, V.N. Sirotinin and V.P. Obratsov, who led the therapeutic elite of Russia.



Fig. 1. V.D. Shervinsky (1890s).  
From V.I. Borodulin's  
personal archive.

The creation of the Russian Physician Congresses Society was initiated by V.D. Shervinsky. In his personal archive<sup>1</sup> is the following letter, which he received in March 1900 from the Organizing Committee in preparing the 8th Pirogov Medical Congress in Moscow: “Dear Sir Vasily Dmitrievich, the Organizing Committee of the 8th Congress of the Society of Russian Physicians in memory of N.I. Pirogov, about to take place in Moscow in December 1901, would like to address you with a humble request to assume the title and duties of

the Internal Medicine section chairman, along with prof. A.A. Ostroumov. Please deign to notify the Committee (addressed to the Board of the Society) of your agreement as soon as possible, not later than 28 March of this year, then kindly inform us of the persons appointed by you as the secretaries of the section headed by you”.<sup>2</sup> Note that the names of A.A. Ostroumov and V.D. Shervinsky are placed side by side, and Ostroumov is appended by hand into the typescript. Undoubtedly, at the turn of the century they were perceived as universally recognized leaders of the clinical academic community. Due to his sickness, A.A. Ostroumov had already

<sup>1</sup> V.D. Shervinsky's archive is located in the department of the history of medicine of the National Research Institute of Public Health, named after N.A. Semashko.

<sup>2</sup> Shervinsky's archive. F. 28. Op. 8. D. 1. L. 1.

moved away from the university affairs; he retired, and the remaining years of his life (1900–1908) he spent in Sukhumi.

In 1902, during the congress (the date of which had been changed), V.D. Shervinsky, as chairman of the Section of Internal Medicine, proposed to hold special congresses on internal medicine, regardless of the Pirogov congresses. With the support of his colleagues, he tried to get permission to hold the congress, but failed to get a positive response. He made a second attempt at the end of 1908 (the State Duma and the Council of Ministers, headed by Sergei Witte and later by P.A. Stolypin, were already operative in the country and there were signs of a speedy economic recovery), which was successful: they obtained a conditional approval to host in December 1909 in Moscow the first congress of Russian physicians (GPs). Further development of the internal medicine clinic confirmed the timeliness and value of the initiative. V.D. Shervinsky was elected chairman of the board of the society and chairman of the congresses organizing committee.

Vasily Dmitrievich Shervinsky was born December 31, 1849, in Tomsk. He was the illegitimate son of a minor official (a Polish doctor, who moved to Russia) and a Russian noblewoman; he lost his father<sup>3</sup> and from the age of three was brought up in Moscow at the Alexandra orphanage, under the care of his aunt (his father's sister), who worked as the orphanage caretaker [7, pp. 57–60]. In his school years, he was interested in physics, mathematics and chemistry (he even equipped a small chemical laboratory at his home). His interests in natural science were noted by his teachers: on his transition to the fourth grade, he was awarded a book on human and animal physiology [8, p. 5]. After graduating in 1868 with a gold medal from

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<sup>3</sup> These complex circumstances of early childhood, apparently, explain the absence of Shervinsky's birth certificate in the archive of IMU, instead of which there appears his repeated promise to provide the certificate and the resolution of the official concerned: from the presented documents "it follows that Shervinsky was born on December 31, 1849". The case of the IMU Council on Vasily Shervinsky's admission as a student. Central Historical Archives of Moscow (CIAM). F. 418. Op. 37. D. 608. L. 3 ob.

the Third Moscow Classical Gymnasium [9], he entered the Medical Faculty of IMU, where, after graduating (1873), he remained to work as an assistant dissector, assistant professor (1880) and an "extraordinary professor" (1884) at the Department of Pathological Anatomy, which was led by the outstanding domestic pathologist I.F. Klein. At the same time V.D. Shervinsky attended the hospital therapeutic clinic of A.A. Ostroumov, worked as a physician at the Old Catherine's Hospital from 1875 and then at the Sheremetyev Hospital and read the university course of private pathology and therapy with patient case analysis. In 1879, V.D. Shervinsky defended his thesis on "The fat embolism." From 1881–1882, he trained at the laboratories and clinics in Germany and France, studying under the leading European experts in the field of medicine, including pathologist Julius Friedrich Cohnheim, physicians Adolf von Strumpell and Carl Pierre Edouard Potain and neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot.

V.D. Shervinsky became a professor of internal medicine in 1894, when he was moved as a "professor extraordinaire" to the department of special pathology and therapy; from 1897 he was a full professor and at the same time (from 1896) director of the general outpatient clinic named after V.A. Alekseev (who donated the funds necessary for its construction) [10, pp. 98–104], established at the department on his initiative. A new stage of his career in IMU began in 1899, when he was elected professor of the Faculty Therapy Department and director of the Faculty Therapeutic Clinic (FTC).

Along with V.D. Shervinsky, his closest collaborator and associate L.E. Golubinin joined the FTC department as an assistant. Their joint work in the clinic continued after 1907 as well, when V.D. Shervinsky, a professor emeritus (1905), resigned as a professor of the department and the clinic director<sup>4</sup> for the length of service, but remained its honorary director, conducted clinical rounds and conferences and lectured on the diseases of the endocrine glands.

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<sup>4</sup> Letter from the Dean of the Medical Faculty D.N. Zernov, from September 24, 1907, to A.A. Manuilov, the rector of Imperial Medical University. CIAM. F. 418. Op. 85. D. 567. L. 1.

By V.D. Shervinsky's recommendation, and with the assistance of influential professors A.B. Focht and P.I. Dyakonov, L.E. Golubinin was elected to the department.<sup>5</sup> The joint activities of V.D. Shervinsky and L.E. Golubinin in the clinic and at the Moscow Therapeutic Society continued, according to common opinion [11], until 1911, when a group of prominent professors and teachers of IMU, among them V.D. Shervinsky, left the university, protesting the policy of the Minister of Education L.A. Casso. V.D. Shervinsky "after that did not... make use of his right, granted to him as an emeritus professor, to serve as a member of the medical faculty and the university council" [12].

However, the point of view presented above ignores the interesting fact that, according to the university report [13, pp. 18–19], even in 1912 distinguished full professor V.D. Shervinsky went on to receive "support" in the form of a pension of 3,000 rubles per year (one and a half times the salary, along with room and board wages, of Extraordinary FTC Professor L.E. Golubinin). The surgeon F.A. Rein, neurologist V.K. Roth and psychiatrist V.P. Serbsky – prominent figures who took part in this collective protest – are not on the list as beneficiaries [14]. The university reports provide information about the ongoing activities of Professor V.D. Shervinsky as a member of the medical faculty. Apparently, the joint work of two prominent Moscow clinicians was completed not in 1911, but in 1912, and for a different reason – because of the illness and premature death of L.E. Golubinin. During those years (1899–1912) the FTC again (as in the 1860–1870s, when A.I. Over and the young professor-reformer G.A. Zakharyin worked at the therapeutic department) had risen to be one of the leading therapeutic departments of Russia.

Thus was formed the Shervinsky-Golubinin school, the largest therapeutic school of IMU.

However, we should note the exceptionally difficult educational conditions in IMU during the late 19th and early 20th century, which had to do with the aggravation of the conflict

between students and the authorities, the latter relying on a punitive policy and restricting the university's autonomy. In V.D. Shervinsky's archive is a folder he received as a professor of the university between 1887 and 1905, containing official documents concerning student unrest. Documents show an almost constant struggle between authorities and student organizations, escalating to the level of strikes and lockouts, which covers various issues related to education, the rights of individuals and university autonomy and political demands. As a result of this confrontation, lectures and classes were repeatedly stopped for a period of time, and students were barred from the university building. More repressive measures followed. For example, the statement attached to the letter of the trustee of the Moscow school district (December 1887) mentions fines received by 218 people for participating in the riots that took place in late November of the same year: 93 people were expelled from the University, 38 incarcerated in detention and 87 officially reprimanded.<sup>6</sup>

After the revolutionary events of 1917 and the establishment of the Soviet regime, State Councilor and Professor Emeritus V.D. Shervinsky was among those medical professors who started actively collaborating with the new government. He was made a member of the Academic Medical Council of the People's Health Commissariat of the Russian Republic. In 1922, he was an active participant in the creation of an exclusive medical center of the Central Commission for Improving the Academician Lifestyle at the Commissars Council of the RSFSR (Russian Republic). From 1919, he was the scientific supervisor and director of the Thyroidectomized Goats Lab; on this basis, he founded in 1923 the National Institute of Organo-Therapeutic Products, which in 1925 became the Institute of Experimental Endocrinology (now the Endocrinology Research Center). He was its director until 1929, and from then until the end of his life the academic adviser of its clinical department [15]. In 1928, V.D. Shervinsky was

<sup>5</sup> The case of declaring a tender for the department chairman vacancy of the Faculty Therapeutic Clinic. L. 13, 72 and 75 – 75 ob. CIAM. F. 418. Op. 84. D. 43.

<sup>6</sup> V.D. Shervinsky's archive. The folder "Materials related to student unrest at the Moscow University" (contains 66 pages, plus reverse sides). L. 3.



Fig. 2. Portrait of V.D. Shervinsky.  
*IMU Alumni Album (1910).*

among the first Soviet doctors to be awarded the title of Honored Scientist of the RSFSR.

At the beginning of the 20th century V.D. Shervinsky (after S.P. Botkin, G.A. Zakharin and A.A. Ostroumov) was one of the leaders of the nation's therapeutic elite. By the early 1930s he was already deemed "the first therapist, the head and chief of internal medicine in all of the Soviet Union" [12]. The exceptionally high esteem of his colleagues is evident in Shervinsky's correspondence with G.F. Lang – another pillar of Soviet internal medicine, a man reserved, laconic, "dryish". G.F. Lang wrote: "Dear Vasily Dmitrievich, ...the Organizing Committee instructed me to ask you to be chairman of the 10th All-Union Internal Medics Congress, that you have to be the chairman of the anniversary congress – it is quite obvious to everyone and, of course, does not require any arguments. In order not to overcharge you, we will choose a deputy for you (we think about F.G. Yanovskiy). We strongly hope that you will not refuse. Excuse my resolute tone – it stems from a deep conviction that the Congress would be unsuccessful if you do not do us this honor and this pleasure. Sincerely

devoted and deeply respecting you Mr. Lang. 5/IV 1928".

Shervinsky replied: "Moscow. 1928, April 17. Dear Georgy Fedorovich, I could not and would not respond to the desire of the Organizing Committee to elect me chairman of the upcoming 10th All-Union Internal Medics Congress in any other way than with consent and deep gratitude. And could I ever act differently after your letter that was written in such a resolute and at the same time very flattering manner. However, I am well aware that it is not my insignificant achievements that cause this high honor towards me, but rather my chronological significance, both for the congresses and age-wise. I'll deliver to you the abstract of my inextensive paper any day now. Shaking your hand, yours, V. Shervinsky".<sup>7</sup>

V.D. Shervinsky was over ninety when he died on November 12 of the tragic 1941, during the German offensive on Moscow. The cause of his death was congestive heart failure resulting from lobar pneumonia. He died in his mansion "Starki" in Cherkizovo village near Kolomna,<sup>8</sup> where he lived with his family<sup>9</sup> and for many years had treated for free the villagers who turned to him for medical help. Later his remains were transferred to Moscow's Novodevichy Cemetery.

In the creative heritage of Shervinsky the doctor, the researcher and the public figure, we can identify four major areas. The first was his academic contribution to the development of pathology and the clinical studies of internal and surgical diseases. He began his career in research as a pathologist and a clinician, but soon appeared as a bright representative of a functional, clinical-physiological approach to pathology. The subject of his research and publications is very wide. His first studies are devoted to pathological anatomy issues, starting with the paper "Four cases of complex saccular ovarian tumors" ("Moscow

<sup>7</sup> Shervinsky's archive. F. 28. Op. 8. D. 3. L. 277 and 278.

<sup>8</sup> The outbuilding of the Cherkassky princely estate in the Starki churchyard was bought by Shervinsky in 1892, and in the Soviet era was assigned to him through a special protective letter of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee.

<sup>9</sup> The eldest son of V.D. Shervinsky, Evgeny, was a famous Moscow architect; the youngest – Sergei – is widely known as a poet-translator.

Medical Bulletin”, 1874). His doctoral thesis on fat embolism (1879) is undoubtedly a pioneering work of great depth. As an associate professor of the University (from 1880), he lectured on pathological anatomy and published his lectures in 1883.

The next series of Shervinsky’s papers is of a generally clinical nature: papers on multiple liver angioma (1887, attracting G.A. Zakharyin’s attention for its clinical significance [15]); on the obstruction of the intestines (1889); on low-grade fever of non-infectious origin (1894, employing the concept of nervous fever, which was ahead of its time); on the treatment of gallstones and on the surgical treatment of abdominal dropsy during liver cirrhosis (1900); on diagnosing and treating the inflammation of the appendix (1901); on the first case of Vaquez disease, or erythremia, reported in Russia (1902, at Pirogov Congress); on tuberculosis nomenclature (1904); on “Low doses and homeopathy” (1926) and “Angioedema” (1937) with a hypothesis of its neurohumoral nature. A characteristic feature of his work is his constant focus on the interaction of internal and external factors that determine a variety of clinical manifestations of the same disease (tuberculosis, rheumatism, etc.).

The second major area of Shervinsky’s creative heritage was his fundamental contribution to the formation of domestic experimental and clinical endocrinology. Endocrine gland diseases became the focus of Shervinsky’s works in 1910, when he spoke at the Moscow therapeutic society. “On the internal secretion and its clinical significance” summarizes the achievements of endocrinology as a new scientific direction in experimental and clinical medicine, and outlines a program of further research. In this report, he notes in particular the role of the adrenal glands in the body’s protective and adaptive reactions. His other pivotal papers, presented at the therapist congresses, include “Pathogenesis and treatment of Graves’ disease” (2nd Congress, 1910), “On the role of the adrenal glands in pathology” (3rd Congress, 1911) and “On the treatment of Graves’ disease from the therapeutic standpoint” (10th Congress, featuring surgeons, 1928). Shervinsky was attracted to problems of the physiology and pathology of the thyroid gland,

especially Graves’ disease and distyrosis. In 1912, he observed the retarding effect of thyroid hormones on the development of atherosclerosis. A number of his papers are dedicated to the pathogenesis and clinical course of acromegaly, thymus dysfunction. He emphasized the close relationship and interaction of neural and humoral regulation, the hypothalamic-pituitary relationships and the importance of the nervous system in changing the reactivity of organs and tissues, including diabetes cases. In 1892, he noted the possibility of the onset of symptoms of diabetes mellitus and diabetes insipidus after influenza.

V.D. Shervinsky played a prominent role in the development of hormonal drug manufacturing in Russia, in the training of endocrinologists and in the organization of statistical accounting of morbidity in the field. He was one of the founders (1924) and a chairman of Russia’s first academic endocrinological society and the founder of “Journal of Endocrinology” (1925). Thus, there is every reason to consider V.D. Shervinsky to be the founder of the national experimental and clinical endocrinology as an independent scientific discipline.

The third area of Shervinsky’s heritage was his academic and social activities, which were of exceptional breadth of interests, intensity and effectiveness. Public health attracted his attention early in the course of his medical career. Thus, in 1879 during the threat of plague in Moscow in connection with the Vetlyansk plague epidemic, he acted as a sanitary doctor with the Sushchevsk military unit, and 20 years later became a member of the Kolomna zemstvo, where he helped improve sanitary conditions. As a board member of the Society of Russian doctors in memory of N.I. Pirogov, in 1896 at the Society congress in Kazan, he initiated the creation of a permanent committee on tuberculosis research and was elected its chairman (in 1909 this committee was transformed into the All-Russian League Against Tuberculosis, of which he became an active figure). At the Pirogov Society, he was also the chairman of the committee on the development of disease nomenclature. From 1880–1891, he worked as a doctor at the Board of the Ryazan-Kozlovsk Railroad Society and was one of the organizers of railway medicine in Russia and

one of the initiators of the Congress of Railway Doctors.<sup>10</sup> In 1905 the Moscow Society of Public Universities was established, and for 10 years Shervinsky was its chairman [16, pp. 7–18]. He played a prominent role in organizing and holding the first All-Russian Anti-Alcohol Congress (1910).

In 1876, as a young doctor, V.D. Shervinsky was among the founding members of the Moscow Society of Medicine, and from 1894–1895 its comrade (deputy) chairman. In 1895, it was transformed into the Moscow Therapeutic Society, and starting in 1899 consistently, over a quarter of a century, Shervinsky was elected its chairman. In performing his duties he constantly demonstrated both in-depth understanding of the research problems the society faced, as well as organizational skills and amazing performance abilities. Problems of the border areas of clinical medicine (appendicitis, peptic ulcer, pregnancy, internal diseases, the development of health resorts in Russia, etc.) were discussed at the meetings and specialized conferences with the participation of prominent representatives of other medical fields. The society employed special committees with the purpose of studying the sanitary conditions of urban neighborhoods and surveying the factories, bakeries, etc., on water and sanitation and on anti-alcoholism measures [17].

The fourth area of Shervinsky's heritage was the formation of a large scientific school at the FTC. The long-term joint activities of V.D. Shervinsky and his closest collaborator, assistant, and then head of the department L.E. Golubinin (1858–1912) – at the department, in the Moscow Therapeutic Society (of which Shervinsky was chairman and L.E. Golubinin deputy chairman) and at the congresses of Russian internists – led to the creation of a single Shervinsky-Golubinin school of internal medicine. Its best-known representatives are M.I. Wiechert, M.P. Konchalovsky and V.N. Vinogradov, who sequentially directed the FTC for 40 years (1924–1964); E.E. Fromgold, who for 20 years was in charge of the department of internal medicine propaedeutics (from Imperial Medical University to the 1st Moscow Medical

Institute; 1920–1941) and M.I. Pevsner, one of the founders of gastroenterology and clinical nutrition in the USSR. D.D. Pletnev, who was an intern, an assistant and assistant professor at the FTC, and from 1917–1924, was the head of the clinic, can not be unequivocally attributed to the Shervinsky-Golubinin school, as his development as a physician and researcher at IMU was decisively influenced by A.A. Ostroumov, K.M. Pavlinov A.B. Vogt and F. Kraus (Berlin).

The Shervinsky-Golubinin school was characterized by a functional direction and a combination of clinical-anatomical and experimental techniques; predominant issues in research related to gastroenterology, physiology and pathology of the metabolic system and endocrine glands (diabetes, Graves' disease, the role of the adrenal glands, etc.), blood and kidneys, as well as the development of functional diagnostics of cardiovascular system diseases. The outstanding lineup of the school itself is strong evidence that it was the most productive in the formation of the Soviet therapeutic elite and made the most significant contribution to the establishment of internal medicine in the Soviet Union, which continued to develop the direction and traditions of Botkin.

When comparing personal characteristics of V.P. Obratsov, V.N. Sirotinin and V.D. Shervinsky – three leaders of Russian internal medicine at the beginning of the 20th century – what draws one's attention is the obvious ideological differences among these outstanding physicians. V.P. Obratsov was a revolutionary democrat: both for the Tsarist secret police and for the Soviet punitive agencies he was "unreliable". V.N. Sirotinin was a monarchist and a patriot of Orthodox Russia by birth, upbringing and beliefs. V.D. Shervinsky was completely apolitical and able to do what he liked in any conditions, including the unfavorable political situation. In the eyes of the medical community, each of them was categorized as a "decent person". They were united by their dedication to the doctor's cause, the breadth of their scientific views, their understanding of the future path of domestic medicine and their collaboration to unite Russian physicians. They had joint publications plans which never came to pass.

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<sup>10</sup> V.D. Shervinsky's archives. D. 2. L. 7–13 ob.

The turning point in the country's life – the year 1917, which marked the beginning of a new era – made the fates of these three prominent doctors very different. V.P. Obratsov, who could not accept the new regime, died lonely, sick and broke in 1920, in cold and hungry Kiev. V.N. Sirotin participated in the White (anti-

bolshevik) movement and ended his émigré life as a Knight of the Legion of Honor in Paris (1934). V.D. Shervinsky became an active figure in Soviet healthcare. In the 20th century it was rightly observed that their fates reflected the “three roads of the Russian intelligentsia, which opened at a crossroads in 1918” [18].

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